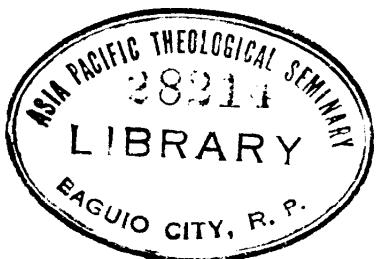


B7  
75 A  
E 74  
1980

# Christian Theology

Millard J. Erickson



**BAKER BOOK HOUSE** Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506

To

**Bernard Ramm,**  
my first theology professor;  
**William E. Hordern,**  
my doctoral mentor;  
**and Wolfhart Pannenberg,**  
whose theological scholarship  
has been an inspiration to me

Copyright 1983, 1984, 1985 by  
Baker Book House Company

ISBN: 0-8010-3433-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 83-071868

Originally published as three volumes: Vol. 1 (Parts 1-4), 1983; Vol. 2 (Parts 5-8),  
1984; Vol. 3 (Parts 9-12), 1985

**Seventh printing, April 1990**

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971, and 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Other versions cited include the King James Version (**KJV**), the New American Standard Bible (**NASB**), and the New International Version (**NIV**).

---

---

# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Preface   | 9   |
| <hr/>   |     |
| <b>PART ONE Studying God</b>  |     |
| <hr/>   |     |
| 1. What Is Theology?  | 17  |
| The Nature of Religion  | 17  |
| The Definition of Theology  | 21  |
| Locating (Systematic) Theology<br>on the Theological Map                                  | 22  |
| The Need for Theology   | 28  |
| The Starting Point of Theology  | 30  |
| Theology as Science   | 33  |
| Why the Bible?  | 36  |
| 2. Theology and Philosophy  | 39  |
| Types of Relationships Between<br>Theology and Philosophy                                 | 40  |
| Some Twentieth-Century<br>Philosophies  | 42  |
| Theology's Use of Philosophy  | 53  |
| 3. The Method of Theology   | 59  |
| The Theological Scene Today   | 59  |
| The Process of Doing Theology   | 66  |
| Degrees of Authority of Theological<br>Statements   | 79  |
| 4. Theology and Critical Study<br>of the Bible  | 81  |
| Form Criticism  | 84  |
| Redaction Criticism   | 95  |
| Guidelines for Evaluating Critical<br>Methods   | 102 |
| 5. Contemporizing the Christian<br>Message  | 105 |
| The Challenge of Obsolescence   | 105 |
| The Locus of Permanence in<br>Christianity  | 107 |
| Two Approaches to Contemporizing<br>Theology  | 112 |
| Criteria of Permanence  | 120 |
| 6. Theology and Its Language  | 127 |
| Theological Language and Verificational<br>Analysis: The Accusation of<br>Meaninglessness | 128 |
| Theological Language and Functional<br>Analysis   | 133 |
| Answers to the Accusation of<br>Meaninglessness   | 135 |

---

**PART TWO Knowing God**

---

|  |     |   |
|--|-----|---|
| 7. God's Universal Revelation                      | 153 | The Extent of Inspiration 210<br>The Intensiveness of Inspiration 212<br>A Model of Inspiration 214   |
| The Nature of Revelation                           | 153 |   |
| The Loci of General Revelation                     | 154 |   |
| The Reality and Efficacy of General Revelation     | 156 |   |
| General Revelation and Human Responsibility        | 171 |   |
| Implications of General Revelation                 | 173 |   |
| 8. God's Particular Revelation                     | 175 | 10. The Dependability of God's Word: Inerrancy 221<br>Various Conceptions of Inerrancy 222<br>The Importance of Inerrancy 225<br>Inerrancy and Phenomena 229<br>Defining Inerrancy 233<br>Ancillary Issues 238  |
| The Definition and Necessity of Special Revelation | 175 |   |
| The Style of Special Revelation                    | 177 |   |
| The Modes of Special Revelation                    | 181 |   |
| Special Revelation: Propositional or Personal?     | 191 |   |
| Scripture as Revelation                            | 196 |   |
| 9. The Preservation of the Revelation: Inspiration | 199 | 11. The Power of God's Word: Authority 241<br>Definition of Authority 242<br>Religious Authority 244<br>Establishing the Meaning and Divine Origin of the Bible 246<br>The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit 247<br>Objective and Subjective Components of Authority 251<br>Various Views of Illumination 253<br>The Bible, Reason, and the Spirit 256<br>Tradition and Authority 258<br>Historical and Normative Authoritativeness 258 |
| Definition of Inspiration                          | 199 |   |
| The Fact of Inspiration                            | 200 |   |
| Issues in Formulating a Theory of Inspiration      | 203 |   |
| Theories of Inspiration                            | 206 |   |
| The Method of Formulating a Theory of Inspiration  | 207 |   |

---



---

**PART THREE What God Is Like**

---

|   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| 12. The Greatness of God                        | 263 | 14. God's Nearness and Distance: Immanence and Transcendence 301<br>Immanence 302<br>Transcendence 312  |
| The Nature of Attributes                        | 265 |   |
| Classifications of Attributes                   | 266 |   |
| Attributes of Greatness                         | 267 |   |
| 13. The Goodness of God                         | 283 | 15. God's Three-in-Oneness: The Trinity 321<br>The Biblical Teaching 322<br>Historical Constructions 332<br>Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity 337<br>The Search for Analogies 338 |
| Moral Qualities                                 | 283 |   |
| God's Love and Justice-A Point of Tension?      | 297 |   |
| The Best Mode of Investigating God's Attributes | 299 |   |

---

**PART FOUR What God Does**

---

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| 16. God's Plan                                    | 345  | 18. God's Continuing Work: Providence 387<br>Providence as Preservation 388<br>Providence as Government 394<br>Providence and Prayer 405<br>Providence and Miracles 406 |
| Key Definitions                                   | 345  |   |
| The Biblical Teaching                             | 347  |   |
| The Nature of the Divine Plan                     | 351  |   |
| Logical Priority: God's Plan or Human Action?     | 355  |   |
| A Moderately Calvinistic Model                    | 356  |   |
| Various Understandings of History                 | 362  |   |
| 17. God's Originating Work: Creation              | 36.5 | 19. Evil and God's World: A Special Problem 411<br>The Nature of the Problem 411<br>Types of Solutions 413<br>Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil 423           |
| Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation     | 366  |   |
| Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation     | 367  |   |
| God's Later Creative Work                         | 373  |   |
| The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine           | 374  |   |
| The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science | 378  |   |
| The Uniqueness of God's Creative Work             | 384  |   |
| Implications of the Doctrine of Creation          | 385  |   |
| 20. God's Special Agents: Angels                  | 433  |   |
| History of the Doctrine                           | 434  |   |
| Good Angels                                       | 437  |   |
| Evil Angels                                       | 445  |   |
| The Role of the Doctrine of Angels                | 451  |   |

---



---

**PART FIVE Humanity**

---

|  |     |  |
|--|-----|--|
| 21. Introduction to the Doctrine of Humanity | 455 | Conclusions Regarding the Nature of the Image 512<br>Implications of the Doctrine 515  |
| Importance of the Doctrine of Humanity       | 455 |  |
| Images of Man                                | 462 |  |
| The Christian View of Man                    | 470 |  |
| 22. The Origin of Humanity                   | 473 | 24. The Constitutional Nature of the Human 519<br>Basic Views of the Human Constitution 520<br>Biblical Considerations 527<br>Philosophical Considerations 530<br>An Alternative Model: Conditional Unity 536<br>Implications of Conditional Unity 538 |
| The Meaning of "Origin"                      | 473 |  |
| The Status of Adam and Eve                   | 474 |  |
| Views of Human Beginning                     | 477 |  |
| The Age of Man                               | 484 |  |
| The Theological Meaning of Human Creation    | 487 |  |
| 23. The Image of God in the Human            | 495 | 25. The Universality of Humanity 541<br>All Races 542<br>Both Sexes 545<br>People of All Economic Statuses 549<br>The Aged 551<br>The Unborn 553<br>The Unmarried 556  |
| The Relevant Scripture Passages              | 496 |  |
| Views of the Image                           | 498 |  |
| Evaluation of the Views                      | 510 |  |

**PART SIX Sin**

|   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 26. The Nature of Sin   | 561 | <b>Effects on the Sinner</b> 615<br><b>Effects on the Relationship to Other Humans</b> 618   |
| The Interrelationship Between the Doctrine of Sin and Other Doctrines | 562 |  |
| The Difficulty of Discussing Sin                                      | 563 |  |
| Methods of Studying Sin   | 564 |  |
| Terms for Sin   | 565 |  |
| The Essential Nature of Sin   | 577 |  |
| 27. The Source of Sin   | 581 | 29. The Magnitude of Sin 621<br><b>The Extent of Sin</b> 621<br><b>The Intensiveness of Sin</b> 625<br><b>Theories of Original Sin</b> 631<br><b>Original Sin: A Biblical and Contemporary Model</b> 636 |
| Various Conceptions of the Source of Sin                              | 581 |  |
| The Biblical Teaching   | 596 |  |
| Implications of the Various Views—The Cure for Sin                    | 599 |  |
| 28. The Results of Sin  | 601 | 30. The Social Dimension of Sin 641<br><b>The Difficulty of Recognizing Social Sin</b> 642<br><b>The Biblical Teaching</b> 643<br><b>Strategies for Overcoming Social Sin</b> 655                        |
| Results Affecting the Relationship with God                           | 602 |  |

**PART SEVEN The Person of Christ**

|   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 31. Contemporary Issues in Christological Method              | 661 | <b>The Sinlessness of Jesus</b> 718<br><b>Implications of the Humanity of Jesus</b> 721  |
| History and Christology                                       | 662 |  |
| The Person and the Work of Christ                             | 675 |  |
| Incarnation Viewed as Mythology                               | 677 |  |
| 32. The Deity of Christ                                       | 683 | 34. The Unity of the Person of Christ 723<br><b>The Importance and Difficulty of the Issue</b> 723<br><b>The Biblical Material</b> 724<br><b>Early Misunderstandings</b> 726<br><b>Other Attempts to Solve the Problem</b> 730<br><b>Basic Tenets of the Doctrine of Two Natures in One Person</b> 734 |
| The Biblical Teaching   | 684 |  |
| Historical Departures from Belief in the Full Deity of Christ | 693 |  |
| Functional Christology  | 698 |  |
| Implications of the Deity of Christ                           | 703 |  |
| 33. The Humanity of Christ                                    | 705 | 35. The Virgin Birth 739<br><b>The Significance of the Issue</b> 739<br><b>Evidence for the Virgin Birth</b> 743<br><b>Objections to the Virgin Birth</b> 748<br><b>The Theological Meaning of the Virgin Birth</b> 754  |
| The Importance of the Humanity of Christ                      | 706 |  |
| The Biblical Evidence   | 706 |  |
| Early Heresies Regarding the Humanity of Jesus                | 712 |  |
| Recent Depreciations of the Humanity of Jesus                 | 716 |  |

**PART EIGHT The Work of Christ**

|   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| 36. Introduction to the Work of Christ  | 761 | <b>The Basic Meaning of Atonement</b> 811<br><b>Objections to the Penal-Substitution Theory</b> 815<br><b>The Penal-Substitution Theory in Relation to the Other Theories</b> 819<br><b>The Implications of Substitutionary Atonement</b> 822 |
| <b>The Functions of Christ</b> 762<br><b>The Stages of Christ's Work</b> 769                      |     |   |
| 37. Theories of the Atonement   | 781 |   |
| <b>The Significance of the Atonement</b> 781<br><b>The Manifold Theories of the Atonement</b> 783 |     |   |
| 38. The Central Theme of Atonement  | 801 | 39. The Extent of the Atonement 825<br><b>For Whom Did Christ Die?</b> 825<br><b>For What Did Christ Atone?</b> 836   |
| <b>Background Factors</b> 802<br><b>The New Testament Teaching</b> 806                            |     |   |

**PART NINE The Holy Spirit**

|   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 40. The Person of the Holy Spirit   | 845 | 41. The Work of the Holy Spirit 865<br><b>The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament</b> 866<br><b>The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus</b> 870<br><b>The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Christian</b> 872<br><b>The Miraculous Gifts Today</b> 877<br><b>Implications of the Work of the Spirit</b> 882 |
| <b>The Importance of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit</b> 846<br><b>Difficulties in Understanding the Holy Spirit</b> 846<br><b>The History of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit</b> 848<br><b>The Nature of the Holy Spirit</b> 857<br><b>Implications of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit</b> 862 |     |  |

**PART TEN Salvation**

|   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| 42. Conceptions of Salvation  | 887 | 44. The Beginning of Salvation: Subjective Aspects 929<br><b>Effectual Calling</b> 930<br><b>The Logical Order: Effectual Calling, Conversion, Regeneration</b> 932<br><b>Conversion</b> 933<br><b>Regeneration</b> 942<br><b>Implications of Effectual Calling, Conversion, and Regeneration</b> 946 |
| <b>Details on Which Conceptions of Salvation Differ</b> 888<br><b>Current Conceptions of Salvation</b> 891  |     |   |
| 43. The Antecedent to Salvation: Predestination   | 907 |   |
| <b>The Historical Development of the Doctrine</b> 908<br><b>Differing Views of Predestination</b> 914<br><b>A Suggested Solution</b> 924<br><b>Implications of Predestination</b> 927 |     |   |
| 45. The Beginning of Salvation: Objective Aspects   | 947 |   |
| <b>Union with Christ</b> 948<br><b>Justification</b> 954<br><b>Adoption</b> 961   |     |   |

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 46. The Continuation of Salvation 967 | 48. The Means and Extent of Salvation 1003 |
| Sanctification 967                    |  |
| The Christian Life 974                |  |
| 47. The Completion of Salvation 98.5  | Views of the Means of Salvation 1003       |
| Perseverance 986                      | The Extent of Salvation 1015               |
| Glorification 997                     |  |

## PART ELEVEN The Church

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 49. The Nature of the Church 1025                         | 52. The Initiatory Rite of the Church: Baptism 1089           |
| Defining the Church 1026                                  |   |
| Biblical Images of the Church 1034                        |   |
| Special Problems 1041                                     |   |
| Implications 1049   |   |
| 50. The Role of the Church 1051                           | 53. The Continuing Rite of the Church: The Lord's Supper 1107 |
| The Functions of the Church 1052                          |   |
| The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: The Gospel 1059  |   |
| The Character of the Church 1067                          |   |
|   | Points of Agreement 1108                                      |
|   | Points of Disagreement 1112                                   |
|   | Major Views 1115  |
|   | Dealing with the Issues 1121                                  |
| 51. The Government of the Church 1069                     | 54. The Unity of the Church 1129                              |
| Forms of Church Government 1070                           |   |
| Constructing a System of Church Government for Today 1083 |   |
|   | Arguments for Unity of the Church 1130                        |
|   | Conceptions of the Nature of Unity 1135                       |
|   | The History and Present Status of Ecumenism 1137              |
|   | Issues Raised by Evangelicals 1142                            |
|   | Guidelines for Action 1146                                    |

## PART TWELVE The Last Things

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 55. Introduction to Eschatology 1149                                   | 57. The Second Coming and Its Consequents 1185 |
| The Status of Eschatology 1149   |  |
| The Classification of Eschatologies 1153                               |  |
| Modern Treatments of Eschatology 1155                                  |  |
| Conclusions Regarding Eschatology 1164                                 |  |
| 56. Individual Eschatology 1167  | 58. Millennial and Tribulational Views 1205    |
| Death 1168   |  |
| The Intermediate State 1174  |  |
| Implications of the Doctrines of Death and the Intermediate State 1184 |  |
|  | Millennial Views 1206                          |
|  | Tribulational Views 1217                       |

|   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 59. Final States 1225                                 | Concluding Thoughts 1243 |
| Final State of the Righteous 1226                     |                          |
| Final State of the Wicked 1234                        |                          |
| Implications of the Doctrine of the Final States 1241 |                          |
| Scripture Index 1249                                  |                          |
| Name and Subject Index 1271                           |                          |

---

---

## Preface

**L**n twenty-two years of teaching systematic theology, I have often wished for a recent introductory textbook written from an evangelical perspective. While the textbooks written by Charles Hodge, Augustus Strong, Louis Berkhof, and others served admirably for their day, there was no way they could anticipate and respond to the recent developments in theology and other disciplines. *Christian Theology* represents an attempt to fill that need for our day.

This volume is intended to serve as a text for an introductory seminary course in systematic theology. It is designed to be supplemented by the three-volume *Readings in Christian Theology* which I previously edited, but it can also be used independently of those sources. As a student textbook it does not treat in depth all of the technical problems that advanced scholars would investigate, but it does deal with issues which lay persons will raise in the circles in which evangelical students will minister.

I have found it necessary to resist the temptation to write an entire book on the topic of each chapter. The negative result has been the danger of being superficial. The positive result for me personally is the gaining of an agenda for several dozen more books. I have deliberately avoided making this work a bibliographical collection of references to all the available literature on each topic (although a certain amount of guidance for further reading is provided). As a work in systematic theology, however, this treatise does utilize the results of a great deal of the work which evangelicals have done in the area of exegesis. Thus,

ordinarily we will not get ourselves involved in the type of detailed exegesis that swells the pages of a work like Karl Barth's *Church Dogma tics*.

This volume assumes the reader's familiarity with the contents of the Old and New Testaments and with the history of Christianity. It also assumes that the reader possesses a rudimentary knowledge of New Testament Greek. Those who lack this background will not, however, find this volume unusable, although they may at points need to consult reference works. No reading knowledge of biblical Hebrew is presupposed. The transliterations follow the nontechnical transliteration system found in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*.<sup>1</sup>

The discerning reader will soon discover that the organization and the conclusions of this book are of the type sometimes referred to as classical. *Christian Theology*, a volume edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, discusses several traditional doctrines of systematic theology in terms of their classical formulations, the challenge of modern consciousness, and modern reformulations.<sup>2</sup> In doing theology today, one may refuse or fail to recognize this modern consciousness, acknowledge but not accept it, or fully accept it. I have chosen the second option. I believe that the theologian must be fully aware of this modern consciousness, both in theological and broader cultural developments, respond to it, and utilize it where it is valid. Because this consciousness itself rests upon presuppositions which I do not personally accept and which at points seem to me to be untenable, particularly in their ultimate implications, I find that many of its aspects are not compelling.

In particular, I attempt to approach the Scriptures postcritically, rather than critically, precritically, or uncritically. My reservations about the utility of the more extreme forms of critical methodology did not originate with a naive biblicalism. Rather, they have sprung from the study of ancient philosophy, particularly a course on Plato at the University of Chicago and a course on Aristotle at Northwestern University. In each case, the professor found fault with form-critical approaches to dating and organizing the thought of the philosopher under consideration. This skepticism has been nurtured by the work of nontheologians such as Walter Kaufmann<sup>3</sup> and C. S. Lewis.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), vol. 1, pp. xx-xxi.

2. *Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

3. Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 377-96.

4. C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 152-65.

The theology of the author of this book is that of classical orthodoxy. Some have considered such a position to be merely the absolutizing of one period in theology. Paul Tillich, for example, characterizes fundamentalism as speaking from a situation of the past and elevating something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity.<sup>5</sup> Better informed is the observation of Kirsopp Lake that fundamentalism reflects the view of the biblical writers and was once universally held by all Christians.<sup>6</sup> In attempting to maintain the delicate balance between biblical authority and contemporary statement, I have chosen the former at those points where a choice seemed to be necessitated.

There is currently considerable controversy over the use of "sexist" and "nonsexist" language. While I share the concern for not excluding half the human race by the use of nouns and pronouns, it is well to be mindful of the fact that the English language still lacks an accepted singular common-gender third-person pronoun, and in some cases, the use of "human being" or "humankind" is awkward. The reader should, however, understand that from the author's perspective, gender and sex are not equivalent. Indeed, in some languages, there is little relationship between **the** two. Thus, as some legal documents say, "The masculine shall be understood as representing the feminine, and the singular the plural, where appropriate." Consequently, the third-person singular masculine pronoun and the term *man* when used herein shall be understood as designating maleness only where the context clearly indicates such.

Many persons have contributed to this book's being brought into reality. I owe an immense debt to numerous theologians whose writings I have read and especially those with whom I have studied personally. Three of the latter stand out for their influence upon my theological understanding. Bernard Ramm, currently professor of systematic theology at American Baptist Seminary of the West, Berkeley, California, was my first theology professor. In his courses my interest in theology grew into a love for the subject. William Hordern, now president of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, was my mentor in the doctoral program at Northwestern University and Garrett Theological Seminary (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary). Not only did he introduce me to the intricacies of the issues of recent theology, but his openness to and appreciation for viewpoints other than his own permitted me the freedom to develop with integrity my own evangelical position. Wolfhart Pannenberg, with whom I was privileged to engage in

5. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), vol. 1, p. 3.

6. Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton, 1926), p. 61.

postdoctoral studies at the University of Munich, challenged me with his clear, profound, and penetrating insight into theological issues. These three men, representing widely varied theological positions, have contributed to my theological maturation and given me models as scholars, teachers, and persons. This volume is dedicated to these three theologians, in expression of my appreciation for what I have learned from them.

Colleagues at my own institution and elsewhere have offered insights and encouragement. Two suggestions by Clark Pinnock, professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario, were very helpful: "Don't be a slave to exhaustiveness," and "Let it sing like a hymn, not read like a telephone book." I have striven to be comprehensive, covering all areas of theology, but without dealing with every possible detail and point of view. I have also tried to include, wherever possible, practical applications and notes of doxology together with the factual material. While acknowledging gratefully the assistance of these several persons, I accept full responsibility for all shortcomings of the book.

I wish to thank others who have helped expedite the publication of this volume. The administration and the board of regents of Bethel College and Seminary granted me a sabbatical leave, which enabled me to do much of the writing. I especially wish to thank the faculty of divinity, New College, University of Edinburgh, and particularly its dean, Dr. A. C. Ross, and its librarian, J. V. Howard, for providing me with facilities for research and writing during the summer of 1983.

Laurie Dirnberger typed most of the manuscript for parts 1-4, with assistance from Lorraine Swanson. Aletta Whittaker transcribed the typewritten original of parts 5-8 on computer disks; she and Pat Krohn typed portions of the manuscript for parts 9-1 2.

Many students over the years have helped to shape the contents of this book, especially through their questions in class. My teaching assistant, Dan Erickson, read the entire manuscript. Mark Moulton read parts 9- 12. Bruce Kallenberg did an independent study course in the subject areas covered in parts 1-4, as did Randy Russ in the areas covered in parts 5-8. All four gave me comments from a student perspective, helping me to anticipate student reactions and adjust my writing accordingly. Three recent students particularly encouraged me to complete the manuscript for parts 1-4 and supported me in prayer: David McCullum, Stanley Olson, and Randy Russ.

Special thanks are due to the Cross of Glory Baptist Church of Hopkins, Minnesota, which I served as interim pastor during the entire period of writing parts 5-H. This fine suburban congregation served as my church laboratory for the theological concepts which I was develop-

ing. Particularly in the Sunday evening feedback sessions and the Wednesday Bible studies, I was impressed again with the theological interest and competency of lay persons, and was enabled to sharpen my formulation and expression of the thoughts in this section.

The editorial staff of Baker Book House have once again been most helpful and encouraging. In particular, I wish to salute Ray Wiersma, the project editor who gave a major portion of two years to the editing of this enormous project. His thorough and careful work has done much to insure accuracy and readable style.

My family has encouraged me in this extended project, showing understanding when the demands of the task and the deadlines which had to be met meant alterations of customary schedules. My wife Ginnie has helped me through those moments of doubt understood only by someone who has undertaken a task of this type.

The growing cadre of producing scholars on the Bethel Theological Seminary faculty proved to be a support group through the times when both persistence and patience were indispensable.

The effort that has gone into this volume will have been well spent if it is a means by which some who "received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Col. 2:7, NIV). In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul wrote some words of instruction to Timothy, which I have taken as a guide in the preparation of *Christian Theology*, and which I commend also to those who read it: "And what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

Arden Hills, Minnesota

---

---

## PART ONE

# Studying God

1. What Is Theology?
  2. Theology and Philosophy
  3. The Method of Theology
  4. Theology and Critical Study of the Bible
  5. Contemporizing the Christian Message
  6. Theology and Its Language
-

# 1

## What Is Theology?

- The Nature of Religion
- The Definition of Theology
- Locating (Systematic) Theology on the Theological Map
  - Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology
  - Systematic Theology and Historical Theology
  - Systematic Theology and Philosophical Theology
- The Need for Theology
- The Starting Point of Theology
- Theology as Science
- Why the Bible?

### The Nature of Religion

Man is a wondrous and complex being. He is capable of executing intricate physical feats, of performing abstract intellectual calculations, of producing incredible beauty of sight and sound. Beyond this, man is incurably religious. For wherever we find man-in widely different cultures geographically dispersed and at all points from the dimmest moments of recorded history to the present-we also find religion.

Religion is one of those terms that we all assume we understand, but few of us can really define. Wherever one finds disagreement or at least variety in the definitions or descriptions of an object or activity, there is reason to believe either that there have not been sufficient study into, reflections on, and discussion of the subject, or that its matter is too rich and complex to be gathered into a single comprehensive statement.

Certain common features appear in many descriptions of religion. There is belief in something higher than the individual human person himself. This may be a personal god, a whole collection of supernatural beings, a force within nature, a set of values, or the human race as a whole (humanity). Typically there is a distinction between sacred and secular (or profane). This distinction may be extended to persons, objects, places, and practices. The degree of force with which it is held varies among religions and among the adherents of a given religion.<sup>1</sup>

Religion also ordinarily involves a world-and-life view, that is, a perspective upon or general picture of reality as a whole, and a conception of how the individual is to relate to the world in the light of this perspective. A set of practices, of either ritual or ethical behavior, or both, attaches to a religion. And certain attitudes or feelings, such as awe, guilt, and a sense of mystery, are found in religion. There is some sort of relationship or response to the object which is higher than the individual human; for example, commitment, worship, or prayer.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there are often, but not always, certain social dimensions. Groups of one type or another are frequently formed on the basis of a common religious stance or commitment."

Attempts have been made to find one common essence in all religion. For example, during much of the Middle Ages, particularly in the West, religion was thought of as belief or *dogma*. What distinguished Christianity from Judaism or Hinduism was a differing set of beliefs. When the Reformation occurred, it was differing doctrines (or dogmas) that were thought of as distinguishing Protestant Christianity from Roman Catholicism. Even Protestant denominations were seen as differing from one another primarily in their ideas about the respective roles of divine sovereignty and human freedom, baptism, the structure of church government, and similar topics.

It was natural that doctrinal teachings should have been seen as primary during the period from the beginning of the Middle Ages

1. William P. Alston, "Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 7, pp. 141-42.

2. Ibid.

3. "Religion, Social Aspects of," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, vol. 15, pp. 604-13.

through the eighteenth century. Since philosophy was a strong, well-established discipline, the character of religion as a world-view would naturally be emphasized. And since the behavioral sciences were still in their infancies, relatively little was said about religion as a social institution or about the psychological phenomena of religion.

With the start of the nineteenth century, however, the understanding of the locus of religion shifted. Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, rejected the idea of either dogma or ethics as the locus of religion. Rather, Schleiermacher said, religion is a matter of feeling, either of feeling in general, or of the feeling of absolute dependence.<sup>4</sup> This view has been developed by the phenomenological analysis of thinkers such as Rudolf Otto, who spoke of the numinous, the awareness of the holy.<sup>5</sup> This has been continued in much of twentieth-century religious thought, with its reaction against logical categories and "rationalism." The "Jesus religion" which flourished in the 1970s was a widespread manifestation of emphasis on feeling.

Schleiermacher's formulation was in large part a reaction to the work of Immanuel Kant. Although Kant was a philosopher rather than a theologian, his three famous critiques—The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)—had an immense impact upon philosophy of religion.<sup>6</sup> In the first of these, he refuted the idea that it is possible to have theoretical knowledge of objects transcendent to sense experience. This of course disposed of the possibility of any real knowledge of *or* cognitive basis for religion as traditionally understood.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Kant determined that religion is an object of the practical reason. He deemed that God, norms, and immortal life are necessary as postulates without which morality cannot function.<sup>8</sup> Thus religion became a matter of ethics. This view of religion was applied to Christian theology by Albrecht Ritschl, who said that religion is a matter of moral judgments.<sup>9</sup>

How then shall we regard religion? It is my contention that religion is all of these—belief or doctrine, feeling or attitudes, and a way of life or

4. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958).

5. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University, 1958).

6. A. C. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (New York: Harper, 1961), obviously thinks of Kant as a watershed in the development of Protestant thought even though Kant was a philosopher, not a theologian.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Transcendental Analytic," book 1, chapter 2, section 2.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, part 1, book 2, chapter 2, section 5.

9. Albrecht Ritschl, "Theology and Metaphysics," in *Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 149-215.

manner of behaving. Christianity fits all these criteria of religion. It is a way of life, a kind of behavior, a style of living. And it is this not in the sense merely of isolated individual experience, but of giving birth to social groups. Christianity also involves certain feelings, such as dependence, love, and fulfilment. And Christianity most certainly involves a set of teachings, a way of viewing reality and oneself, and a perspective from which the whole of experience makes sense.

To be a worthy member of a group named after a particular leader, one must adhere to the teachings of that leader. For example, a Platonist is one who in some sense holds to the conceptions taught by Plato; a Marxist is one who accepts the teachings of Karl Marx. Insofar as the leader also advocated a way of life inseparable from the message which he taught, it is essential that the follower also emulate these practices. We usually distinguish, however, between inherent (or essential) practices and accidental (or incidental) practices. To be a Platonist, one need not live in Athens and speak classical Greek. To be a Marxist, one need not be a Jew, study in the British Museum, or ride a bicycle.

In the same fashion, a Christian need not wear sandals or a beard, or live in Palestine. But those who claim to be Christians will believe what Jesus taught and practice what he commanded, such as, "Love your neighbor as yourself." For accepting Jesus as Lord means making him the authority by which we conduct our lives. What then is involved in being a Christian? James Orr put it well: "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny found only in Christianity."<sup>10</sup>

It seems reasonable, then, to say that holding the beliefs that Jesus held and taught is a part of what it means to be a Christian or a follower of Christ. And it is the study of these beliefs that is the particular concern of Christian theology. Belief is not the whole of Christianity. There is an experience or set of experiences involved, including love, humility, adoration and worship. There are practices, both ethical in nature and also ritualistic or devotional. There are social dimensions of Christianity, involving relationships both with other Christians in what is usually termed the church, and with non-Christians in the world as a whole. Other disciplines of inquiry and knowledge investigate these dimensions of Christianity. But the central task of examining, interpreting, and organizing the teachings of the one from whom this religion takes its name belongs to Christian theology.

10. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 4.

The actual living-out and personal practice of religion, including the holding of doctrinal beliefs, occur on the level of primary experience. There is also a level of reflection upon what is occurring on the primary level. The discipline which concerns itself with describing, analyzing, criticizing, and organizing the doctrines is theology. Thus theology is a second-level activity, as contrasted with religion. It is to religion what psychology is to human emotions, what aesthetics is to works of art, what political science is to political behavior.

### The Definition of Theology

The study or science of God is a good preliminary or basic definition of theology. The God of Christianity is an active being, however, and so there must be an initial expansion of this definition to include God's works and his relationship with them. Thus theology will also seek to understand God's creation, particularly man and his condition, and God's redemptive working in relation to mankind.

Yet more needs to be said to indicate what this science does. So we propose a more complete definition of theology: that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.

1. Theology then is biblical. It takes as the primary source of its content the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is not to say that it simply draws uncritically upon surface meanings of the Scriptures. It utilizes the tools and methods of biblical research. It also employs the insights of other areas of truth, which it regards as God's general revelation.

2. Theology is systematic. That is, it draws upon the whole of the Bible. Rather than utilizing individual texts in isolation from one another, it attempts to relate the various portions to one another, to coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole.

3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning. Thus, it attempts to relate its view of origins to the concepts advanced by science (or more correctly, such disciplines as cosmology), its view of human nature to psychology's understanding of personality, its conception of providence to the work of philosophy of history.

4. Theology must also be contemporary. While it treats timeless issues, it must use language, concepts, and thought forms that make some sense in the context of the present time. There is danger here. Some theologies in attempting to deal with modern issues have restated

the biblical materials in a way that distorted them. Thus we hear of the “peril of modernizing Jesus,”<sup>11</sup> a very real peril. In attempting to avoid making Jesus just another nineteenth-century liberal, however, the message is sometimes stated in such a fashion as to require the twentieth-century person to become a first-century person in order to understand it. As a result he finds himself able to deal only with problems which no longer exist. Thus, the opposite peril, “the peril of archaizing ourselves,”<sup>12</sup> must similarly be avoided.

It is not merely a matter of using today’s thought forms to express the message. The Christian message should address the questions and the challenges encountered today. Yet even here there needs to be caution about too strong a commitment to a given set of issues. If the present represents a change from the past, then presumably the future will also be different from the present. A theology which identifies too closely with the immediate present (i.e., the “today” and nothing but) will expose itself to premature obsolescence.

5. Finally, theology is to be practical. By this we do not mean practical theology in the technical sense (i.e., how to preach, counsel, evangelize, etc.), but the idea that theology relates to living rather than merely to belief. The Christian faith has something to say to help us with our practical concerns. Paul, for instance, gave assurances about the second coming and then said, “Comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18). It should be noted, however, that theology must not be concerned primarily with the practical dimensions. The practical effect or application of a doctrine is a consequence of the truth of the doctrine, not the reverse.

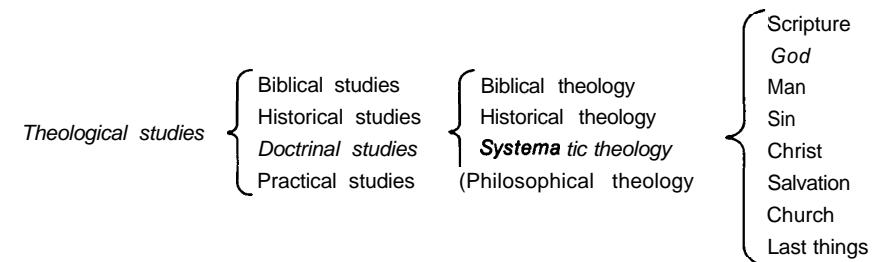
### Locating (Systematic) Theology on the Theological Map

“Theology” is a widely used term. It is therefore necessary to identify more closely the sense in which we are using it here. In the broadest

11. Henry J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). An example of modernizing Jesus can be found in the nineteenth-century reconstructions of the life of Jesus. George Tyrrell said of Adolf von Harnack’s construction of Jesus that “the Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well” (*Christianity at the Cross-Roads* [London: Longmans, Green, 1910], p. 44).

12. Henry J. Cadbury, “The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves,” *Interpretation* 3 (1949): 331-37. Examples of people who archaize themselves are those who try to form communities after the pattern of the early Christian church as it is described especially in Acts 4-5, or those who try to settle the question of the validity of drinking alcoholic beverages on the basis of New Testament practice, without asking in either case whether societal changes from biblical times to the present have altered the significance of the practices in question.

**Figure 1**  
Senses of “Theology”



sense the word encompasses all subjects treated in a theological or divinity school. In this sense, it includes such diverse subjects as Old Testament, New Testament, church history, systematic theology, preaching, Christian education, and counseling. A narrower sense of the word refers to those endeavors which treat the specifically *doctrinal* character of the Christian faith. Here are found such disciplines as biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and philosophical theology. This is theology as contrasted with the history of the church as an institution, the interpretation of the biblical text, or the techniques of the practice of ministry. Within this collection of theological subjects (biblical theology, historical theology, etc.), we may isolate systematic theology in particular. It is in this sense that the word *theology* will hereafter be used in this work (unless there is specific indication to the contrary). Finally, within systematic theology, there are various doctrines, such as bibliology, anthropology, Christology, and theology proper (or the doctrine of God). To avoid confusion, when the last-mentioned doctrine is in view, the expression “doctrine of God” will be used. Figure 1 may be helpful in visualizing these relationships.

### Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

When we inquire regarding the relationship of systematic theology to other doctrinal endeavors, we find a particularly close relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology. The systematic theologian is dependent upon the work and insights of the laborers in the exegetical vineyard.

We need here to distinguish three senses of the expression “biblical theology.” Biblical theology may be thought of as the movement by that name which arose in the 1940s, flourished in the 1950s, and declined in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> This movement had many affinities with neoorthodox

13. James Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia:

theology. Many of its basic concepts were severely criticized, particularly by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.<sup>14</sup> The decline of the biblical-theology movement has been documented by Brevard Childs in his *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.<sup>15</sup> It now begins to appear that despite its name, the movement was not always especially biblical. In fact, it was at times quite unbiblical.<sup>16</sup>

A second meaning of biblical theology is the theological content of the Old and New Testaments, or the theology found within the biblical books. There are two approaches to biblical theology thus defined. One is the purely descriptive approach advocated by Krister Stendahl.<sup>17</sup> This is simply a presentation of the theological teachings of Paul, John, and the other New Testament writers. To the extent that it systematically describes the religious beliefs of the first century, it could be considered a systematic theology of the New Testament. (Those who see greater diversity would speak of "theologies of the New Testament.") This is basically what Johann Philipp Gabler called biblical theology in the broader sense or "true" biblical theology. Gabler also spoke of another approach, namely, "pure" biblical theology, which is the isolation and presentation of the unchanging biblical teachings which are valid for all times. In this approach these teachings are purified of the contingent concepts in which they were expressed in the Bible.<sup>18</sup> We might today call this the distinction between descriptive biblical theology and normative biblical theology. Note, however, that neither of these approaches is

---

Westminster, 1979), p. 10, rejects this idea that biblical theology was a movement, accepting instead only our second meaning of biblical theology. He is therefore more optimistic about the future of biblical theology than is Brevard Childs.

14. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University, 1961).

15. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

16. An example is W. D. Davies's conception of "the resurrection body" of 2 Corinthians 5 (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [London: S.P.C.K., 1955], pp. 310-18). Cadbury comments regarding neoorthodoxy, "It is not much different from modernization since the current theology often is simply read into the older documents and then out again. It is the old sequence of eisegesis and exegesis. I do not mean merely that modern words are used to describe the teaching of the Bible like demonic or encounter, and the more philosophical vocabulary affected by modern thinkers. Even when the language is accurately biblical, it does not mean as used today what it first meant" ("The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves," p. 333).

17. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 418-32.

18. Johann Philipp Gabler, "Von der richtigen Unterscheidung der biblischen und der dogmatischen Theologie und der rechten Bestimmung ihrer beider Zeile," in *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1972), pp. 272-84; John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133-58.

dogmatics or systematic theology, since no attempt is made to contemporize or to state these unchanging concepts in a form suitable for our day's understanding. Brevard Childs has suggested that this is the direction in which biblical theology needs to move in the future.<sup>19</sup> It is this second meaning of biblical theology, in either the "true" or the "pure" sense, that will ordinarily be in view when the term "biblical theology" appears in this writing.

A final meaning of the expression "biblical theology" is simply theology which is biblical, that is, based upon and faithful to the teachings of the Bible. In this sense, systematic theology of the right kind will be biblical theology. It is not simply based upon biblical theology; it is biblical theology. Our goal is systematic biblical theology. Our goal is "pure" biblical theology (in the second sense) contemporized. The systematic theologian draws upon the product of the biblical theologian's work. Biblical theology is the raw material, as it were, with which systematic theology works.

#### *Systematic Theology and Historical Theology*

Historical theology is the study of theology as it has been developed through the centuries of the church's history. If New Testament theology is the systematic theology of the first century, then historical theology studies the systematic theologies held and taught by various theologians throughout the history of the church. There are two major ways to organize historical theology. It may be approached through studying the theology of a given time or a given theologian or school of theology with respect to several key areas of doctrine. Thus, the theology of each successive century or major period of time would be examined sequentially.<sup>20</sup> This might be termed the synchronic approach. The other approach is to trace the history of thought regarding a given doctrine (or a series of them) down through the periods of the church's life.<sup>21</sup> This could be called a diachronic approach. For instance, the history of the doctrine of the atonement from biblical times to the present might be examined. Then the doctrine of the church might similarly be surveyed. This latter method of organizing the study of historical theology is often referred to as the history of doctrines, whereas the former approach is generally termed the history of Christian thought.

19. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 99ff.

20. E.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971-), 5 vols.

21. E.g., Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949).

The systematic theologian finds significant values in the study of historical theology. First of all, it makes us more self-conscious and self-critical, more aware of our own presuppositions. We all bring to the study of the Bible (or of any other material) a particular perspective which is very much affected by the historical and cultural situation in which we are rooted. Without being aware of it, we screen all that we consider through the filter of our own understanding (or “preunderstanding”). An interpretation already enters at the level of perception. The question is, How can we control and channel this preunderstanding so as to prevent it from distorting the material being worked with? If we are aware of our own presuppositions, we can make a conscious compensation for these biases. But how do we recognize that our preunderstanding is our way of perceiving the truth, and not the way things are? One way to do this is to study the varying interpretations held and statements made at different times in the church’s life. This shows us that there are alternative ways of viewing the matter. It also makes us sensitive to the manner in which culture affects one’s thinking. It is possible to study the christological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries and recognize the influence which Greek metaphysics had upon the way in which the categories were developed. One may do so, however, without realizing that one’s own interpretation of the biblical materials about the person of Christ (and one’s own interpretation of fourth-century Christology) is similarly affected by the intellectual milieu of the present. Failure to realize this must surely be a case of intellectual presbyopia.<sup>22</sup> Observing how culture influenced theological thinking in the past should call our attention to what is happening to us.

A second value of historical theology is that we can learn to do theology by studying how others have done it before us. Thomas Aquinas’s adaptation of Aristotelian metaphysics to stating the Christian faith can be instructive as to how we might employ contemporary ideologies in expressing theological concepts today. The study of the theologizing of a John Calvin, a Karl Barth, or an Augustine will give us a good model and should inspire us in our activity.

A third value of historical theology is that it may provide a means of

**22.** Some of the theologians who discuss topics like the “Hebrew mind,” “functional Christology,” and the “unity of human nature” fail to recognize the presuppositions they bring to their analyses (existentialist, functionalist, and behaviorist respectively). Another case in point is Jack Rogers’s analysis that the principles of biblical inspiration propounded by the “Old Princeton” theologians were based on Scottish common-sense realism (“The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1977], p. 39). In the same volume there is no equally specific analysis of Rogers’s own position. He characterizes it merely as Platonic/Augustinian as opposed to Aristotelian, a misleading oversimplification.

evaluating a particular idea. It is often difficult to see the implications which a given concept involves. Yet frequently the ideas that seem so novel today have actually had precursors at earlier periods in the life of the church. In attempting to evaluate the implications of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ view of the person of Christ, one might examine the view taught by Arius in the fourth century, and see where it actually led in that case. History is theology’s laboratory, in which it can assess the ideas that it espouses, or considers espousing.<sup>23</sup> Those who fail to learn from the past are, as George Santayana said, condemned to repeat it. If we closely examine some of our “new” ideas in the light of the history of the church, we will find that they are actually new forms of old conceptions. One need not be committed to a cyclical view of history<sup>24</sup> to hold with the author of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9).

#### *Systematic Theology and Philosophical Theology*

Systematic theology also utilizes philosophical theology.<sup>25</sup> There are three contributions which different theologians believe philosophy or philosophy of religion may make to theology: philosophy may (1) supply content for theology; (2) defend theology, or establish its truth; (3) scrutinize its concepts and its arguments. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth reacted vigorously against the first of these three views, and to a considerable extent against the second. His reaction was aimed at a type of theology which had become virtually a philosophy of religion or natural theology. At the same time, the influential school of analytical philosophy restricted its work to the third type of activity. It is here that there lies a major value of philosophy for the theologian: the scrutiny of the meaning of terms and ideas employed in the theological task, the criticizing of its arguments, and the sharpening of the message for clarity. In the judgment of this writer, philosophy, within rather restricted scope, also performs the second function, weighing the truth claims

**23.** Millard J. Erickson, “The Church and Stable Motion,” *Christianity Today*, 12 October 1973, p. 7.

**24.** Cyclical views of history hold that instead of making progress toward a goal in a more or less straight-line fashion, history is simply repeating the same patterns. Cyclical views are usually pessimistic. A religious example is Hinduism, with its belief in repeated reincarnations of the soul.

**25.** Philosophical theology is theologizing which draws upon the input of philosophy rather than using merely biblical materials. Traditionally, such philosophical theology utilized metaphysics very heavily. In the twentieth century, it has tended to utilize logic (in the broadest sense of that word), thus becoming more analytical than speculative or constructive.

advanced by theology, and giving part of the basis for accepting the message. Thus philosophy may serve to justify in part the endeavor in which theology is engaged.<sup>26</sup> While philosophy, along with other disciplines of knowledge, may also contribute something from general revelation to the understanding of theological conceptions, this contribution is very minor compared to the special revelation which we have in the Bible.

### The Need for Theology

But is there really a need for theology? If I love Jesus, is that not sufficient? Indeed, theology seems to have certain disadvantages. It complicates the Christian message, making it confusing and difficult for the lay person to understand. It thus seems to hinder, rather than help, the communication of the Christian truth. Does not theology divide rather than unite the church, the body of Christ? Note the number of denominational divisions which have taken place because of a difference of understanding and belief in some minute area. Is theology, then, really desirable, and is it helpful? Several considerations suggest that the answer to this question is yes.

1. Theology is important because correct doctrinal beliefs are essential to the relationship between the believer and God. One of these beliefs deals with the existence and character of God. The writer to the Hebrews, in describing those who, like Abel and Enoch, pleased God, stated: "And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The author does not mean that one who attempts to approach God may be rejected because of lack of such a faith in him, but that one would not even attempt to approach God unless he already had this belief.

Belief in the deity of Jesus Christ also seems essential to the relationship. After Jesus had asked his disciples what men thought of him, he also asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter's response, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," met with Jesus' resounding approval (Matt. 16:13-19). It is not sufficient to have a warm, positive, affirming feeling towards Jesus. One must have correct understanding

26. Although philosophy cannot prove the truth of Christian theology, it can evaluate the cogency of the evidence advanced, the logical validity of its arguments, and the meaningfulness or ambiguity of the concepts. On this basis philosophy offers evidence for the truth of Christianity, without claiming to prove it in some conclusive fashion. There are philosophical and historical evidences which can be advanced, but not in such a way as to offer an extremely probable induction.

and belief. Similarly, the humanity of Jesus is important. First John was written to combat the teachings of some who said that Jesus had not really become human. These "docetists" maintained that Jesus only seemed to be human, that his humanity was merely an appearance. John pointed out the importance of belief in the humanity of Jesus when he wrote: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God" (1 John 4:2-3). Finally, in Romans 10:9-10 Paul ties belief in the resurrection of Christ (which, it should be noted, is both a historical event and a doctrine) directly into the salvation experience: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved." These are but a few examples of the importance of correct belief. Theology, which concerns itself with defining and establishing correct belief, is consequently important.

2. Theology is necessary because truth and experience are related. While some would deny or at least question this connection, in the long run the truth will affect our experience. A man who falls from the tenth story may shout as he passes each window on the way down, "I'm still doing fine," and may mean it, but eventually the facts of the matter will catch up with his experience. We may continue to live on happily for hours and even days after a close loved one has, unknown to us, passed away, but again the truth will come with crushing effect upon our experience. Since the meaning and truth of the Christian faith will eventually have ultimate bearing on our experience, we must come to grips with them.

3. Theology is needful because of the large number of alternatives and challengers abroad at the present time. Secular alternatives abound, including the humanism which makes man the highest object of value, and the scientific method that seeks truth without recourse to revelation from a divine being. Marxism, with its large following and powerful appeal to the satisfaction of some of man's most basic needs, is avowedly opposed to the Christian view of reality. Other religions now compete with Christianity, even in once supposedly secure Western civilization. It is not merely automobiles, electronic devices, and cameras which are exported to the United States from the East. Eastern religion is now also challenging the once virtually exclusive domain of Christianity. Islam has captured the loyalty of some Westerners. Numerous quasi religions also make their appeal. Countless psychological self-help systems are advocated. Cults are not restricted to the big-name varieties (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism). Numerous groups, some of which seem to practice virtual brainwashing and mind control, now attract individuals

who wish an alternative to straight Christianity. Finally, many varieties of teaching, some mutually contradictory, exist within Christianity.

The solution to the confusion is not merely to determine which are false views and attempt to refute them. The Treasury Department trains agents to detect counterfeit money not by having them study false bills, but by having them examine numerous samples of genuine money. They look at it, feel it, scrutinize it in every way. Then, when finally the agents are given bogus bills, they immediately recognize the difference. Similarly, understanding correctly the doctrinal teachings of Christianity is the solution to the confusion created by the myriad of claimants to belief.

### The Starting Point of Theology

The theologian attempting to develop a systematic treatment of Christian theology early encounters a dilemma regarding the question of starting point. Should theology begin with the idea of God, or with the nature and means of our knowledge of him? In terms of our task here, should the doctrine of God be treated first, or the doctrine of Scripture? If, on the one hand, one begins with God, the question arises, How can anything meaningful be said about him without our having examined the nature of the revelation about him? On the other hand, beginning with the Bible or some other source of revelation seems to assume the existence of God, undermining its right to be considered a revelation at all. The dilemma which theology faces here is really no different in kind from philosophy's problem of the priority of metaphysics or epistemology. On the one hand, there really cannot be an investigation of an object without having decided upon the method of knowing. On the other hand, however, the method of knowing will depend, to a large extent, upon the nature of the object to be known.

The former alternative, beginning with a discussion of God before considering the nature of Scripture, has been followed by a number of traditional theologies. While some simply begin using the Scripture to treat of God without formulating a doctrine of Scripture, the problem with this is quite evident. A more common approach is to seek to establish the existence of God on some extrabiblical basis. A classic example is the systematic theology of Augustus Hopkins Strong.<sup>27</sup> He begins his theology with the existence of God, but does not offer a proof of it. Rather, he maintains that the idea of God is a first truth. It is a rational intuition. It is not a piece of knowledge written on the soul, but an

27. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 52-70.

assumption which is so basic that all other knowledge depends upon it. It comes to consciousness as a result of sense experience, but is not derived from that sense experience. It is held by everyone, is impossible to deny, and cannot be resolved into or proved by any other ideas. Another form of this approach utilizes a more empirical type of natural theology. Thomas Aquinas maintained that the existence of God could be proved by pure reason, without relying upon any external authority. On the basis of his observations he formulated five proofs (or a fivefold proof) for the existence of God (e.g., the proof from movement or change, the proof from order in the universe). These proofs were formulated independently of and prior to drawing upon the biblical revelation.<sup>28</sup>

The usual development of the argument of both varieties of this approach, the rational and the empirical, proceeds somewhat as follows:

1. God exists (this point is assumed as a first truth or established by an empirical proof).
2. God has specially revealed himself in the Bible.
3. This special revelation must be investigated in order to determine what God has revealed.

Certain problems attach to this approach, however. The first is that the second statement above does not necessarily follow from the first. Must we believe that God, of whose existence we are now convinced, has revealed himself? The deists did not think so. The argument, if it is to be an argument, must establish not only that God exists, but also that he is of such a character that we may reasonably expect a revelation from him.

The other problem concerns the identity of this god whose existence has been established. It is assumed that this is the same God revealed in Scripture. But is this so? Many other religions claim that the god whose existence is thus established is the god revealed in their sacred writings. Who is right? Is the god of Thomas's fivefold proof the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The latter seems to have numerous qualities and characteristics that the former does not necessarily possess. Is not a further proof necessary, namely, that the god whose existence has been established and the God of the Bible are the same being? And for that matter, is the god whose existence is proven by various arguments really just one being? Perhaps Thomas did not propound a fivefold proof for the existence of one god, but rather single proofs for the

28. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*. For a more recent example of this approach see Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

existence of five different gods—a creator, designer, mover, and so on. So while the usual procedure is to establish the existence of God, and then present proofs for the supernatural character and origin of the Bible, it appears that a logical gap exists.

The alternative approach is to begin with the special revelation, the Bible. Those who take this approach are often skeptical about the possibility of any knowledge of God outside the Bible or the Christ-event; without special revelation man has no knowledge *that* God exists or *what* he is like. Thus, Karl Barth rejected any type of natural theology. He begins his *Church Dogmatics*, following an introduction, with the doctrine of the Word of God, not the doctrine of God. His concern is with what the Word of God is, and then secondly with what God is known to be in the light of this revelation. He does not begin with what God is and then move to what revelation must be in the light of his nature.<sup>29</sup> A recent example of this approach is found in Dale Moody's *Word of Truth*. The introduction consists largely of a historical survey of theology. The substantive portion of the book begins with revelation. After stating the nature of revelation, Moody goes on to examine what God has revealed himself to be like.<sup>30</sup>

The problem for this approach is the difficulty of deciding what revelation is like without some prior idea of what God is like. The type of revelation a very transcendent God would give might well be very different from that given by a God immanent within the world and working through "natural" processes. If God is an all-controlling, sovereign God, his work of inspiring the Scriptures would be quite different from what it would be if he in fact allows a great deal of human freedom. In the former case, one might treat every word of Scripture as God's own message, while taking it somewhat less literally in the latter case. To put it another way, the way we interpret Scripture will be affected by how we conceive of God.

A further problem for this approach is, How can Scripture be regarded as a revelation at all? If we have not already established God, have we any grounds for treating the Bible as more than simply religious literature? Unless we somehow prove that the Bible must have had a supernatural origin, it may simply be a report of the religious opinions of a variety of authors. It is possible to develop a science of fictional worlds or persons. One can develop a detailed study of Wonderland, based upon Lewis Carroll's writings. Are there such places and persons, however? One could also presumably develop an extensive study of

29. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), vol. 1, part 1.

30. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

unicorns, based upon the literature that refers to them. The question, however, is whether there are any such beings. The same issue attaches to a theology which, without first establishing God's existence, begins with what the Bible has to say about him and the other topics of theology. These topics may have no objective status, no reality independent of the literature (the Bible) in which they are discussed. Our systematic theology would then be no better than a systematic unicornology.

Is there some solution to this impasse? It appears to me that there is. Instead of beginning with either God or the Bible, either the object of knowledge or the means of knowledge, we may begin with both. Rather than attempting to prove one or the other, we may presuppose both as part of a basic thesis, then proceed to develop the knowledge that flows from this thesis, and assess the evidence for its truth.

On this basis, both God and his self-revelation are presupposed together, or perhaps we might think of the self-revealing God as a single presupposition. This approach has been followed by a number of conservatives who desire to hold to a propositional or informational revelation of God without first constructing a natural-theology proof for his existence. Thus the starting point would be something of this type: "There exists one Triune God, loving, all-powerful, holy, all-knowing, who has revealed himself in nature, history, and human personality, and in those acts and words which are now preserved in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."<sup>31</sup> From this basic postulate we may proceed to elaborate an entire theological system by unfolding the contents of the Scriptures. And this system in turn will function as a world-view which, like all others, can be tested for truth. While no specific part is proved antecedently to the rest, the system as a whole can be verified or validated.

### Theology as Science

Is theology entitled to be referred to as a science, and if so, of what is it a science? Another way of putting this question is to ask whether theology deals with knowledge, and if so, in what sense?

Until the thirteenth century, the term *science* was not applied to theology. Augustine preferred the term *supientia* (wisdom) to *scientia* (knowledge). Sciences dealt with temporal things, wisdom related to the eternal matters, specifically to God as the highest good. Science and

31. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), p. 33; Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 89.

knowledge could lead to wisdom. For this to happen, however, the truths acquired by the specific sciences would have to be ordered in relation to the highest good. Thus wisdom, including philosophy and theology, can serve as an organizing principle for knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

With Thomas Aquinas, theology came to be thought of as the queen of the sciences. He maintained that it is a derived science. There are sciences which proceed from a principle known by the natural light of intelligence, such as various mathematical disciplines. There are also sciences which proceed from principles known by a higher science. Music, for example, proceeds from the principles established by arithmetic. Similarly, sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from the principles revealed by God.<sup>33</sup> It is nobler than other sciences. Science is partly speculative and partly practical. Theology surpasses other speculative sciences by its greater certitude, being based upon the light of divine knowledge, which cannot be misled, while other sciences derive from the natural light of human reason, which can err. Its subject matter, being those things which transcend human reason, is superior to that of other speculative sciences, which deal with things within human grasp. It is also superior to the practical sciences, since it is ordained to eternal bliss, which is the ultimate end to which science can be directed.<sup>34</sup>

As what we call natural science began to come into its own, there was a gradual limiting of the conception of science; more-rigid criteria had to be met in order for a discipline to be designated as a science. In particular, science now is restricted to the objects of sense experience, and verification to the “scientific method,” which employs observation and experimentation, following strict procedures of inductive logic. On this basis, theology is rather obviously not a science, since it deals with supersensible objects.<sup>35</sup> So, for that matter, are many of the other intellectual disciplines. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of personality is unscientific, since no one can see or measure or test such entities as the id, the ego, and the superego. In an attempt to be regarded as scientific, disciplines dealing with humanity have tended to become behavioristic, basing their method, objects, and conclusions upon what is observable, measurable, and testable, rather than on what can be known introspectively. All intellectual disciplines are expected to conform to this standard.

Theology is then in a dilemma. Either it must redefine itself in such a

32. Augustine *De trinitate* 14. 3.

33. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, part 1, question 4, article 4.

34. *Ibid.*, article 5.

35. Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (New York: AMS, 1979), chapter 1, “The Rejection of Metaphysics.”

way as to fulfil the criteria of science, or it must claim a uniqueness not answering to science’s norms, and thus surrender the claim to being a science, and also virtually surrender the claim to being knowledge in the sense of involving true propositions about objective realities (i.e., realities existing independently of the knower).

Karl Barth has argued vigorously for the autonomy of theology. He notes Heinrich Scholz’s six criteria which theology must meet if it is to be accepted as *Wissenschaft*:<sup>36</sup> (1) theology must be free from internal contradiction; (2) there must be a unity or coherence in its propositions; (3) its statements must be susceptible to testing; (4) it must make no assertion which is physically and biologically impossible; (5) it must be free from prejudice; (6) its propositions should be capable of being broken up into axioms and theorems and susceptible of proof on that basis. Barth accepts the first only partially, and rejects the others. “Not an iota can be yielded here without betraying theology,” he writes. It nonetheless is to be called a “science,” because like all other sciences (1) it is a human effort after a definite object of knowledge; (2) it follows a definite, self-consistent path to knowledge; and (3) it is accountable to itself and to everyone capable of effort after this object and hence of following this path.<sup>37</sup>

What shall we say, then, about theology as a science? It must first be noted that the definition which virtually restricts science to natural science, and which then tends to restrict knowledge to science, is too narrow.

Second, if we accept the traditional criteria for knowledge, theology must be regarded as scientific. (1) Theology has a definite subject matter to investigate, primarily that which God has revealed about himself. (2) Theology deals with objective matters. It does not merely give expression to the subjective feelings of the theologian or of the Christian. (3) It has a definite methodology for investigating its subject matter. (4) It has a method for verifying its propositions. (5) There is coherence among the propositions of its subject matter.

Third, to some extent, theology occupies common ground with other sciences. (1) Theology is subject to certain basic principles or axioms. In particular it is answerable to the same canons of logic as are other disciplines. (2) It involves communicability. What one theologian refers to can be understood, observed, and investigated by others as well.

36. A German term meaning, derivatively, “knowledge.” It is usually rendered “science,” but in a broader sense than that English word ordinarily conveys. There are *Naturwissenschaften* (sciences of nature) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences of spirit). The word usually denotes an organized discipline of knowledge.

37. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 7-8.

(3) Theology employs, to some extent at least, methods employed by other specific disciplines. It shows a particular affinity for the methodology of history, since it makes claims regarding historical occurrences, and for the methodology of philosophy, since it advances metaphysical claims. (4) It shares some subject matter with other disciplines. Thus it is possible that some of its propositions may be confirmed or refuted by natural science, behavioral science, or history.

At the same time, theology has its own unique status. It deals with unique objects or with common objects in a unique way. It shares with numerous other sciences the human being as an object, yet it considers man in a different light than do any of these others. It considers what God has revealed about man; thus it has data of its own. And it considers man in relationship to God; thus it treats man within a frame of reference not examined by any of the other disciplines.

### Why the Bible?

The question, however, may and should be raised as to why the Bible should be made the primary source and criterion for building our understanding of Christian theology or even of Christianity. This calls for a closer analysis of the nature of Christianity.

Every organization or institution has some goals, objectives, or defining basis. These are usually formalized in something like a constitution or charter which governs the form and functions of the organization, and determines the qualifications for membership. Especially where this is a legally incorporated body, these standards are in effect unless they are replaced or modified by persons having authority to alter them.

Christianity is not an institution as such. While it may take institutional form, the movement known as Christianity is just that, a movement, rather than an organization *per se*. Thus, while local churches may set up requirements for membership in their body, the universal church must look elsewhere.

From the name itself it should be apparent that Christianity is a movement which follows Jesus Christ. We would then logically look to him to state what is to be believed and what is to be done, in short, what constitutes being a Christian. Yet we have very little information outside of the Bible regarding what Jesus taught and did. On the assumption that the Gospels are reliable sources of historical information (an assumption which will be tested at a later point), we must turn to them for reports of Jesus' life and teaching. Those books that Jesus endorsed (*i.e.*, the books that we now refer to as the Old Testament) must be regarded as further sources for our Christianity. If Jesus taught that

additional truth was to be revealed, that also is to be examined. If Jesus claimed to be God himself, and if his claim is true, then of course no human has the authority either to abrogate or to modify what he has taught. It is the position which Jesus himself proposed in the founding of the movement that is determinative, not what may be said and taught by others who at some later point may call themselves Christians.

This is true in other areas as well. While there may be some reinterpretation and reapplication of the concepts of the founder of a school of thought, there are limits beyond which changes cannot be made without forfeiting the right to bear his name. Thus, Thomists are those who hold substantially to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. When too much adaptation is done, the view has to be called neo-Thomism. Usually these "neo" movements are within the broad stream and spirit of the founder, but have made significant modifications. At some point the differences may become so great that a movement cannot even be considered to be a "neo" version of the original. Note the arguments that go on among Marxists as to who are the true Marxists and who are the "revisionists." Following the Reformation there were divisions within Lutheranism between the genuine Lutherans and the Philippists, the followers of Philipp Melanchthon.

This is not to say that the doctrines will be maintained in precisely the same form of expression that was held to in biblical times. To be truly biblical does not ordinarily mean to repeat the words of Scripture precisely as they were written. Indeed, to repeat the exact words of Scripture may be to make the message quite *unbiblical*. A biblical sermon does not consist exclusively of biblical quotations strung together. Rather, it involves interpreting, paraphrasing, analyzing, and resynthesizing the materials, applying them to a given situation. To give a biblical message is to say what Jesus (or Paul, etc.) would say today to this situation. Indeed, Paul and Jesus did not always give the same message in precisely the same way. They adapted what they had to say to their hearers, using slightly different nuances of meaning for different settings. An example is found in Paul's epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, which deal with basically the same subject, but with slight differences.

In making the Bible the primary or supreme source of our understanding, we are not completely excluding all other sources. In particular, if God has also revealed himself in general ways in such areas as nature and history (as the Bible itself seems to teach), then we may also fruitfully examine these for additional clues to understanding the principal revelation. But these will be secondary to the Bible.

# 2

## Theology and Philosophy

Types of Relationships Between Theology and Philosophy

Some Twentieth-Century Philosophies

Pragmatism

Existentialism

Analytical Philosophy

Process Philosophy

Theology's Use of Philosophy

**O**f all the disciplines of human inquiry and knowledge, probably the one with which theology has had the greatest amount of interaction over the years of the history of the church is philosophy. The theologian and the philosopher have frequently been partners in dialogue. There are a number of reasons for this, but perhaps the major one is that there is considerable commonality between the two. For example, they deal with some of the same subject matter. Both treat unseen or transempirical objects, at least in the traditional formulation of philosophy. Both are concerned with values. And both have focused at least a part of their attention upon humans.

This overlap was particularly true early in the history of philosophy before its many children left home. For in the earliest days many topics

now treated by other separate disciplines were part of philosophy. An indication of this is the variety of works in the Aristotelian corpus: mathematics, psychology, political science, and so forth. One by one, however, these children matured and made their own homes, where they in turn formed families. Although psychology, sociology, and other behavioral sciences have long since left the philosophical nest, they still discuss the key philosophical and theological issue of the nature and purpose of human existence, at least in connection with ethics. And in one sense or another, both philosophy and theology attempt to give some integrative approach to reality, some understanding of life. Where the agenda is at least in part the same, there will inevitably be some type of exchange.

### Types of Relationships Between Theology and Philosophy

1. The relationship between theology and philosophy has taken different forms. The first we will note is, in effect, no relationship at all; that is, theology disjoined from philosophy. This approach manifested itself as early as Tertullian (c. 160-230). Consider his famous lines:

What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?  
What between the Academy and the Church:  
What between heretics and Christians?<sup>1</sup>

This approach regards philosophy as having nothing to contribute to Christian theology. In fact, the two have such different goals that the Christian is well advised to avoid contact and dialogue with philosophy completely. Belief does not arise because of support from philosophy or other sources, but virtually in spite of the contribution of these disciplines. This view also appeared in the Middle Ages in the thought of the Averroists, who taught virtually a double-truth concept: that the truth of theology and that of philosophy are two totally different and separate matters.\* Martin Luther, reacting against the scholastic Catholic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, tended to reject philosophy. In his **Table-Talk** Luther says, "Let philosophy remain within her bounds, as God has appointed, and let us make use of her as a character in a comedy?"

1. Tertullian *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.

2. Stuart McClintock, "Averroism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 1, p. 225.

3. Martin Luther, *The Table-Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing House, n.d.), p. 27.

2. The second position to arise historically was that of Augustine, who felt that theology can be elucidated by philosophy. He stressed the priority of faith and acceptance of the biblical revelation, but also insisted that philosophy may help us to understand better our Christian theology. He adopted the philosophy of Plato, finding therein a vehicle for theology. Augustine felt, for example, that the Christian metaphysic, with its concept of the supernatural world of God and the created world which derives from and depends on that supernatural world, might be better understood in terms of Plato's imagery of the divided line. On one side are the unseen Ideas, which are more real than the sensible objects on the other side. The sensible objects are but shadows cast by these Ideas.<sup>4</sup> The Platonic theory of knowledge was also adapted to Augustine's theology. Plato taught that all the knowledge which we have is actually of the Ideas or pure Forms. In a preexistent state our soul had contact with these Ideas (whiteness, truth, chairness, etc.), enabling us to recognize these qualities in empirical particulars today.<sup>5</sup> Augustine adapted this part of the Platonic philosophy to his own doctrine of illumination: the light enlightening every man who comes into the world (John 1:9) is God impressing the Forms upon the human intellect.<sup>6</sup>

3. Theology is sometimes established by philosophy. As Christian theology began to encounter both paganism and non-Christian religions, it became necessary to find some neutral basis on which to establish the truth of the authoritative message. Thomas found such a basis in Aristotle's arguments for the existence of God.<sup>7</sup> In this case philosophy was able to supply theology with credibility. In addition, Aristotle's substance-accident metaphysic became the basis for formulating certain key doctrines, such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

4. Theology may also be judged by philosophy. From the position that theology can be proved by philosophy came the logical development that theology must be proved by philosophy in order to be accepted. Deism resolved to accept only those tenets of religion which could be tested and demonstrated by reason.\*

5. In some cases philosophy even supplies content to theology. Georg Hegel, for example, interpreted Christianity in terms of his own idealistic

4. Plato *Republic* 6.

5. For an interpretation which understands the Forms or Ideas of Plato's epistemology not as universals but as formulae for the particulars, see A. E. Taylor, "On the First Part of Plato's *Parmenides*," *Mind*, n.s., vol. 12 (1903): 7.

6. Augustine *The City of God* 12. 25; *On Christian Doctrine* 2.32.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*.

8. John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious: Or, A Treatise Showing That There Is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above It*. Reprinted in *Deism: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1968), pp. 52-77.

philosophy. The result was a thoroughly rationalized version of Christianity. He saw the truths of Christianity as merely examples of a universal truth, a dialectical pattern which history follows. Take the Trinity, for example. As pure abstract thought God is the Father; as going forth eternally into finite being, he is the Son; as returning home again enriched by this being, he is the Holy Spirit. Because the doctrines of Christianity fit the triadic pattern of all history (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), their truth is established and guaranteed, but as universal truths, not particular facts. Thus the understanding of Christianity was modified as its content was accommodated to a philosophy believed to be true.<sup>9</sup>

### Some Twentieth-Century Philosophies

At this point it is necessary to examine briefly several significant philosophical movements of the twentieth century. Because they may to some extent influence our thinking, even unconsciously, it is helpful to be able to recognize and evaluate their valid and invalid emphases.

#### *Pragmatism*

Pragmatism is perhaps the one distinctively American philosophy. It was the most influential philosophy in the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Through John Dewey's influence upon educational philosophy, it exercised much more power than would be recognized from an analysis of its formal constituency. This influence still lives on, as a mood of much American life, long after its popularity as a distinct movement has declined.

Although the adherents of pragmatism maintain that it had antecedents in the thought of such persons as John Stuart Mill,<sup>11</sup> it appears that its actual beginning was in a "Metaphysical Club" founded by

9. Georg Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities, 1910); "Revealed Religion," in *Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 750-85. Contrary to popular opinion, Hegel never used the terms **thesis**, **antithesis**, and **synthesis** together in one place to describe his own view. His only usage of these three terms in combination was in referring to the thought of Immanuel Kant. The terms were also used in combination by Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Karl Marx. See Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 168; Gustav Emil Müller, "The Hegel Legend of Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958): 411-14.

10. H. S. Thayer, "Pragmatism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6, p. 430.

11. Donald S. Mackay, "Pragmatism," in *A History of Philosophical Systems*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 394.

Charles Sanders Peirce and William James in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the 1870s. It is interesting that both Peirce and James came into philosophy by rather indirect routes, Peirce being a practicing astronomer and physicist, and James traveling the route of medicine and psychology. While the ideas were a group product, the first galvanizing event was a paper by Peirce on "How to Make Our Ideas Clear."<sup>12</sup> It was James, however, who popularized the method of pragmatism, making some significant changes in the form proposed by Peirce.

The common factor in the several varieties of pragmatism is its view of truth. Traditional philosophy was concerned with a quest for absolute reality as such. Science was seen as pursuing the same goal, but utilizing a different method.<sup>13</sup> Pragmatism emphasized that there is no absolute truth; rather the meaning of an idea lies solely in its practical results. Peirce concentrated on the repeatable experiments of the community of scientists. James, on the other hand, stressed the particular beliefs of the individual as a human being rather than as an intellectual investigator.<sup>14</sup>

The goal, then, is not metaphysical truth, statements about the nature of ultimate reality. Rather, the meaning (for Peirce) or the truth (for James) of a proposition is its experienceable consequences. Peirce took particular note of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which has long been a subject of dispute and disagreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants. He observed that there really is no difference between the two views. For while the adherents of the two views maintain that they are describing different metaphysical conceptions, they actually agree as to all the sensible effects.<sup>15</sup> By the same measure, James did not believe that there is any real difference between assigning the origin of the world to purely material forces and assigning it to creation by God, since this question deals only with the past.<sup>16</sup> The world is what it is, regardless of how it was made. Although the naturalistic cosmologist and the theistic creationist maintain that their ideas are different, in practical terms there really is no significant distinction.

In the thought of John Dewey, pragmatism took yet another turn. Dewey's instrumentalism stressed that logic and truth are to be understood in terms of capacity to solve problems and of impact upon the

12. Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 23-41.

13. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 267.

14. Gertrude Ezorsky, "Pragmatic Theory of Truth," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6, p. 427.

15. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1934), vol. 5, paragraphs 401,402 n. 2.

16. R. W. Sleeper, "Pragmatism, Religion, and 'Experienceable Difference,'" in *American Philosophy and the Future*, ed. Michael Novak (New York: Scribner, 1968), p. 291.

values and moral development of human beings. Religion, in his view, has the instrumental value of bringing persons together in a unity of communication, of shared life and shared experience.<sup>17</sup> Religion which does not contribute to this unity, for instance, institutional and creedal religion, is to be rejected. It is, in the pragmatist sense, not true religion, for it does not help humans, individually or collectively, to develop true values. With respect to "true" religion James once said, "On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is 'true'."<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to assess the truth and validity of pragmatism, for the writings of Peirce, James, Dewey, and others contain such a variety of viewpoints. Further, the present forms of pragmatism are much more diffuse. In fact, pragmatism appears even within Christian circles in the form of an impatience with issues and ideas that do not show immediate applicability. The value of the movement has been in calling attention to the important link between ideas and actions. Certain cautions or limitations need to be observed, however:

1. What does it mean to say that something "works"? Does this not require some standards by which to measure our ideas and actions? To say, as James did, that "the true is only the expedient in our way of thinking just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behavior," does not really solve the question. Expedient for whom? and for what? If Hitler had won World War II, would his treatment of the Jews have been right? It might have been expedient for him, but not for the Jews.

2. In effect James reduces the proposition "it is true that X exists" to "it is useful to believe that X exists." Yet in practice we certainly distinguish between the two propositions. Further, large numbers of propositions, such as those about past events, seem to have no usefulness one way or the other. There is therefore an unjustified limitation of the realm of true statements.

3. What is the time span for the evaluation of ideas? Is a true idea one which will work immediately? In a year from now? In ten years? In a hundred years? This is a question which needs to be addressed. Popular pragmatism tends to assume that immediate workability is the criterion. Yet what is expedient in the short term often turns out to be inexpedient in the long run.

17. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: H. Holt, 1920).

18. William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian, 1955), p. 192.

19. William James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1919), p. vii.

### **Existentialism**

If existentialism was not founded by Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), it was at least anticipated by his thought. Kierkegaard was reacting against two major influences upon his life. One was the philosophy of Georg Hegel, according to which the whole of reality is rational. The various concepts and facts of reality can be fitted into a logical system, in which the individual has no ultimate significance. The other influence on Kierkegaard was the cold, formal state church of his native Denmark, in which dispassionate practice was the norm. Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) atheistic emphasis upon the human will also served to give rise to existentialism, a major tenet of which is subjectivity. In the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel have been spokesmen for the movement.

If one were to attempt to summarize existentialism in one sentence, it would be that existentialism is a philosophy which emphasizes the priority of existence over essence.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, the question "Is it?" ("Does it exist?") is more important than "What is it?" But this brief and obscure formula is not very helpful. It is necessary, therefore, to examine several basic tenets or themes of this philosophy: (1) irrationalism, (2) individuality, (3) freedom, and (4) subjectivity.

1. There are many aspects or dimensions to the tenet of irrationalism. Basically it is the contention that reality cannot be captured within, or reduced to, intellectual concepts. It goes beyond them, or breaks out of them. Further, it is not possible to put ideas into a logical system.<sup>21</sup> All such attempts end in distortion of the elements. The truth is not smoothly reducible to a neat package of coherent ideas. When reality is looked at intellectually apparent paradoxes and contradictions emerge. There is no discernible pattern of meaning to be detected by man. The meaning of reality must be created by one's own free choice.<sup>22</sup>

2. The individual is of paramount importance. In part this means the uniqueness of individual persons. It is not possible to capture an individual by classifying him within a general category or series of categories. I am not simply a member of the class of persons who are white, male, American, blue-eyed, and so forth. Even if someone were to add up all of these characteristics, including the answers given to each question of

20. Helmut Kuhn, "Existentialism," in *A History of Philosophical Systems*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 406.

21. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: World, 1956), p. 12.

22. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, p. 291; *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 43.

the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, he still would not have me. He would have, at most, a police description of me. Corresponding to emphasis on the individual there is also within existentialism an emphasis upon particular events or facts. Any effort to develop from these events or facts some sort of general truths will inevitably give only an abstraction which is not reality or life, but rather a poor shell of it.<sup>23</sup>

3. Another basic axiom of existentialism is human freedom. I am free. Nothing can encumber my ability to choose, to decide my destiny to create my world as it were.<sup>24</sup> Sartre's atheism is based largely upon this point of freedom. If a sovereign God existed, he would encroach upon my freedom. Therefore, he does not exist. He cannot.

A correlate of freedom is responsibility. I must not surrender my freedom and individuality by simply accepting what the crowd thinks, says, and does. To do so would be "inauthenticity? Rather, one must be one's own person, have one's own ideas, "do one's own thing," in the popular terminology. Another form of inauthenticity is to deny one's freedom by seeking to explain one's actions on 'the basis of some sort of determinism. Each form of inauthenticity amounts to an unwillingness to accept responsibility for one's own behavior. One has freedom, but must admit it, claim it, and exercise it.<sup>25</sup>

4. The final tenet of existentialism is subjectivity. Generally speaking, existentialism classifies truth into two types. Objective truth is involved when an idea correctly reflects or corresponds with the object signified. Objective truth applies in scientific-type endeavors. Subjective truth, on the other hand, is not a matter of correspondence with the object known, but rather of the effect of that object and idea on the knowing subject. Where the object evokes great inward passion or subjectivity, there is truth.<sup>26</sup> This is the really important type of truth; it involves knowing persons rather than things.

Of all philosophies existentialism has probably been the one most widely utilized and even adopted by theologians in the twentieth century, particularly in the period from about 1920 to 1950 or 1960. The major influence of Soren Kierkegaard was not upon his day but upon those who lived two and three generations after his time. Karl Barth, for example, recognized the presence of Kierkegaardian thought in his first

23. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 21, 114, 115.

24. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 40.

25. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 210.

26. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 498.

27. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1941), book 2, part 2, chapter 2.

attempt at writing a dogmatics,<sup>28</sup> and even though he attempted to purge it from his later writing there is some question whether he ever fully succeeded. And the indebtedness of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr to Kierkegaard is clear, as is the existentialist basis of the thought of Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann.

There have been various effects of this existentializing of theology. First among them is the **subjectivizing** of truth. Truth is truth when it becomes truth for me. It is not to be thought of as an objective set of propositions; it must be assimilated by someone if it is to be regarded as truth.<sup>29</sup> Second is the separating of religious truth from more objective types of truth in general. Unlike these other types of truth revelation does not come through general **culture**.<sup>30</sup> A third result of the existentializing of theology is a nonsubstantive or nonessentialist view of religious reality. Truth, sin, and salvation are not fixed substances, "blocks of reality," or permanent states. They are dynamic occurrences.<sup>31</sup>

There are motifs in existentialism that parallel biblical Christianity and hence have reemphasized themes which have sometimes been neglected. Among these themes are the nature of Christian faith and truth as matters of passionate subjective concern and involvement, freedom and the necessity of choice, the importance and uniqueness of individual persons, and, paradoxically, the absurdity and despair to which one is led when he views life as having no discernible rational pattern.

There are also various points of inadequacy within existentialism:

1. The existentialists' distinction between objective evidence for the truth of a tenet and fervency of passion is worth noting, but this passion is often nothing more than the anxiety of insecurity, and should not be confused with the inward intensity of commitment which constitutes Christian faith. In practice, commitment and action tend to increase, rather than decrease, with certainty.

2. Existentialism has difficulty justifying the choice of one particular object to which to relate in faith. If it does not offer a basis for preferring one particular object to others, it tends to fall into subjectivism, in which the subjective experience becomes the end in itself.

3. Existentialism has difficulty supporting its values and ethical judgments. If meaning is created by one's own choice, are not the good and the right whatever one makes them to be by one's own choice? On

28. Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik in Entwurf* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1927).

29. John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM, 1955), chapter 9.

30. Karl Barth, "No!" in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946), p. 71.

31. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943).

existentialist grounds, helping an old lady across the road or beating her over the head and snatching her handbag might be equally right. Consider also Sartre's inconsistency when he signed the *Algerian Manifesto*. He was taking a moral stand which he was urging upon others as if this was somehow objectively right, yet on his own existentialist terms there seems little basis for such an action.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Analytical Philosophy*

There has always been an element within philosophy which is concerned with getting at the meaning of language, with clarifying concepts, with analyzing what is being said and how. Socrates in particular was noted for this. He pictured himself as a midwife. He himself did not give birth to any ideas. What he did instead was to lead others to truth by helping them discover it.

In the twentieth century this task was taken on in a serious and systematic fashion. Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore in particular were early practitioners of analysis in the modern sense.<sup>33</sup> Philosophers in the past had attempted to make pronouncements on a variety of subjects: what is right, what is true, what is beautiful. In modern times, however, philosophers have adopted much more modest goals. In part this is due to the fact that a number of these areas are now the domain of certain special sciences. Now philosophers focus instead on the meaning of language. The clarification and illumination of the goals of language and of the means by which it achieves those goals are the task of philosophy. Instead of having a special subject matter, philosophy is concerned with the subject matter of all the various disciplines, but in a special way. It deals with the language of ethics, science, and religion, examining how it functions and how it signifies. Typical questions with which philosophy is to be concerned are, "What do you mean by that?" and "What kind of statement is that?"<sup>34</sup>

This means that philosophy has come to be conceived of as an activity rather than a theory or a body of knowledge. Ludwig Wittgenstein put it this way: "The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear."<sup>35</sup>

32. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1968), pp. 24, 56, 124.

33. Moritz Weitz, "Analysis, Philosophical," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 97-101.

34. Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 1-7.

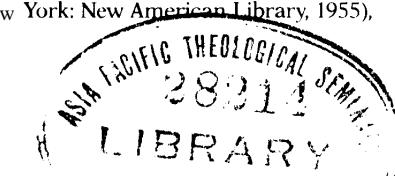
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), p. 77.

There have been two major stages of analytical philosophy in the twentieth century. The first was a militant stage in which the philosophers were aggressive and even dogmatic. This was associated particularly with the label "logical positivism," a movement which grew out of a seminar conducted by Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna in 1923. Names associated with this movement are A. J. Ayer, Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and the early Wittgenstein. This movement set up rather rigid standards of meaningfulness. According to this view, there are only two types of meaningful language: (1) mathematico-logical truths, in which the predicate is contained within the subject, such as "the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees," and (2) empirical truths such as "the book is on the table." Empirical truths are propositions which are verified by sense data. These are the only meaningful types of language. All other propositions, that is, propositions which are neither mathematical-type truths nor empirical or scientific-type statements verified by sense data, are literally "non-sense" or meaningless. They are actually pseudopropositions. They fall into the category of expressive language; like the arts, they express the emotions of the speaker or writer. The force of a statement like "the universe is actually mental rather than material" is more like "Ouch!" or "Hurrah!" than it is like "the book is on the table." The language of metaphysics, ethics, theology, and many other time-honored disciplines was consigned by the logical positivists to this status.<sup>36</sup>

It can be seen from this brief synopsis that the logical positivists were imposing a standard or criterion upon language. This led to the type of analysis termed "ideal language philosophy," which set up the language of science as the paradigm to which all languages which would inform had to conform. Here there was a prescribing, a telling of how language should operate.

In the second stage of modern analytical philosophy, however, the approach is quite different. Rather than insisting that language must function in a particular way to be meaningful, now philosophy tries to describe how language actually does function. It asks rather than prescribes. Recognizing the narrowness of the earlier approach, the philosophers of the second stage observe the ordinary language used by people in everyday conversation, as well as more technical forms of language. Instead of insisting that all language must function in the same way in order to be meaningful, they ask about the different functions of language and the type of meaningfulness inherent in each. This approach is termed "ordinary language philosophy" or "functional

36. *The Age of Analysis*, ed. Morton White (New York: New American Library, 1955), pp. 203-09.



analysis." Its aim is clarification; it seeks to untangle confusion by noting illogic and misuses of language.<sup>37</sup>

From the perspective of theology, analytical philosophy is not a competitor in the sense of offering an alternative view of reality or of values. The philosopher is not a preacher with his own pulpit from which he makes pronouncements. And in the latter phase, analytical philosophy is not an opponent, ruling out theology's right to speak. Rather, it is a facilitator, helping theologians sharpen their use of words and avoid misleading language. Analytical philosophy, then, can be of immediate and obvious benefit to theology. Because Christianity has as a primary objective the communication of its message, and because the task of explicating the abstract concepts of theology is particularly difficult, any help in using language is desirable.

There are certain problems with analytical philosophy, however:

1. Rather than being merely descriptive, analytical philosophy tends to become prescriptive in subtle ways. To be sure, its prescriptiveness is not categorical ("you must use language this way"), but suggestive ("if you wish to avoid confusion, do not use language in the following way"). Yet even the criteria of what is confusion and what is clarity are based upon presuppositions. At times this tends to be overlooked.

2. Analytical philosophy sometimes appears to draw too sharp distinctions between different types of language. Some language, particularly theological, may participate in several different functions simultaneously. A statement such as "Jesus Christ is the risen Lord of the church" may simultaneously have historical, metaphysical, ethical, and expressive functions.

3. Analytical philosophy is not a truly neutral tool, for it does not always guard against naturalistic assumptions, particularly with respect to its conception of the nature of language. It should not preclude language having supraempirical reference.

4. There are areas in which we cannot be content with descriptive, nonprescriptive treatments. This is particularly true with regard to ethics. If philosophy does not contribute in some normative way to drawing conclusions in this area, who or what discipline will? Thus in more recent years philosophy, in order to justify its existence, has begun to move toward making a greater number of normative judgments than it had. Contemporary society cannot afford the luxury of mere description and analysis, and even analytical philosophers have had to change to avoid being left out of the ferment of the modern scene.

37. Ferré, *Language*, chapter 5.

### Process Philosophy

There has long been debate over whether reality changes or is basically fixed in character. Heraclitus maintained that change is of the very essence of reality, whereas Parmenides emphasized fixity. Most philosophers have recognized both change and permanence within the world. Those who hold to a substantialist view have emphasized the fixed states, regarding the changes as merely necessary transitions between them. Others, such as Alfred North Whitehead, have seen the changes themselves as the key to understanding reality. Whitehead is the father of modern process thought, although later philosophers and theologians, such as Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Norman Pittenger, have given it greater visibility.

Unlike the other three philosophies which we have sketched here, process philosophy is avowedly metaphysical. While aware of the impatience of many modern philosophers with metaphysics, the process thinkers feel that their type of metaphysics is not as vulnerable to attack as are essentialist, substantialist, or idealistic views. The central conviction here is that change is the key to the understanding of reality, in fact, that change *is* reality. The world is not basically made up of substances which change from one to another. Rather, it is made up of dynamic processes.<sup>38</sup> We are to be concerned not so much with things as with events.

The divine reality participates in the reality of all else. Consequently it (or he) is not a static unmoved mover or changeless essence. It is living, active, creative. This observation underscores a basic tenet of process thought: that reality is basically of one type. There is no dualism here, whether of material and spiritual, nature and super-nature, phenomena and noumena, or changing and unchanging. What is true of the whole of reality is consequently true of each part of it. So the characteristics of God are those of the rest of reality in general.

Whitehead thinks of the basic units of reality not as bits of matter but as moments of experience. A moment of experience is always someone experiencing something.<sup>39</sup> There is an inter-relatedness among these moments. Consequently each moment is a function of and related to everything else. Even history is thought of in this way. It is not merely a cataloguing of past events. It is a living-out of the past in the present.

38. John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 15. Herbert J. Nelson has argued that an absolutely perfect being could be active, sympathetic, and yet unchanging ("The Resting Place of Process Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 72, nos. 1-2 [January-April 1979]: 1-21).

39. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, p. 16.

Thus history is all the occurrences in the past as they are included in what is in the present. In a sense, nothing is ever really lost. It is retained and incorporated into what now is.<sup>40</sup>

Since the final units of reality are not persons or substances, but momentary states or experiences,<sup>41</sup> I am a concrete new reality every fraction of a second. The "I" that is at this moment is able to feel a concern for the "I" that will be a year from now. By similar bonds of empathy, the "I" as I now am is able to feel concern for future units that are part of series other than my own.<sup>42</sup> Thus while reality is not a fixed substance, it is not merely isolated individual moments either. There is an organic connection between past, present, and future, and between different series of these events, or what we might term persons.

Whenever process philosophy has been applied or adapted to Christianity, there has been a considerable impact. The Christian faith, for example, is not conceived of as some fixed, permanent essence which remains the same. It is not something which was, has been, or is. It is something that is becoming, that will be. The same is true of the nature of God. He does not have a fixed, final nature. His nature is what he is doing, his becoming. That very becoming is what it is to be God. He is not isolated, unable to empathize with what is non-God, to feel what is occurring in us.

There is a significant value in the emphasis here upon change and the good that can result. Sometimes the status quo has been so revered by Christians as to seem to be good per se. Consequently, change has been resisted and Christianity has been thought of by those outside as an irrelevant and obsolete belief. It seems to be dealing with questions asked years ago and problems that were present ages ago. But if Christianity is true, it is certainly a faith for all time and all times. The emphasis that God is empathetic and not impassive is also a biblical concept and one that has great practical value.

Like the other modern philosophies we have examined, there are significant problems with process philosophy as well:

1. What really is the basis of identity? If the connection between the "I" which now is, the "I" which was a year ago, and the "I" which will be a year from now is not in a substance or a person, where is it? Presumably there is some basis for distinguishing what Hartshorne calls one "personal series" from another. But just what is it?

40. Robert B. Mellert, *What Is Process Theology?* (New York: Paulist, 1975), pp. 23-25.

41. Charles Hartshorne, "Process Philosophy as a Resource for Christian Thought," in *Philosophical Resources for Christian Thought*, ed. Perry LeFevre (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), pp. 55-56.

42. Ibid., p. 56.

2. What is the basis for evaluating change? This philosophy seems at times to consider change per se to be good. But is it always good? Sometimes change is not evolution but deterioration. On what criteria is such a judgment made? In answer we note that process philosophers do not insist that everything is changing. Values, for example, are not changing. But what is their nature, their origin, their locus, their basis, their justification? This is a question which does not seem to be fully answered. To put it differently, what exempts these values from the change that is seen virtually everywhere?

3. Is there no middle ground between the emphasis upon change as the basic reality, and the view that ultimate reality is a static, immovable, fixed substance? These alternatives are often stated as virtually exhausting the possibilities. It is worth noting here that classical orthodoxy has not always been modeled on the Aristotelian prime mover. The biblical picture of God seems rather to be of a being whose nature does not change, but who experiences and empathizes, and who is constantly active in the world which he has created.

4. How long is a moment? Hartshorne speaks of our being different from the person we were a fraction of a second ago. But how long is this instant? How many are there in an hour? Is there an infinite number of these units, even within a finite time? Is it proper to speak of them as units at all? While this is a *reductio ad absurdum*, it pinpoints a certain lack of precision by process thought.

### Theology's Use of Philosophy

At the beginning of this chapter we noted the variety of relationships which can exist between theology and philosophy. What should be the role and place of philosophy in our theology? I propose two basic guidelines.

First, in keeping with our fundamental presuppositions, revelation rather than philosophy will supply the content of our theology. Thus, revelation will be turned to first to supply the major tenets of our understanding of reality. This will give us the basic framework within which our philosophizing will proceed. Our basic stance, then, falls somewhere between the first and second positions outlined above (pp. 40-41). And while philosophy will be employed, there will be no commitment to one system of philosophy as such. Rather, we will insist upon the autonomy of theology; thus the explication of the revealed content will not be required to conform to any particular system of philosophy.

Yet Christian theology has a definite world-view.<sup>43</sup> The Bible quite clearly affirms a theistic and, specifically, a monotheistic understanding of reality. The supreme reality is a personal, all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, and holy being-God. He has created everything else that is, not by an emanation from his being, but by bringing it all into existence without the use of preexisting materials. Thus the Christian metaphysic is a dualism in which there are two types or levels of reality, the supernatural and the natural, a dualism in which all that is not God has received its existence from him. God preserves in existence the whole creation and is in control of all that happens as history moves to the fulfilment of his purpose. Everything is dependent upon him. Man, the highest of God's creatures, is, like him, personal, and hence capable of having social relationships with other humans and with God. Nature is not merely a neutral given. It is under God's control; and while it ordinarily functions in uniform and predictable ways in obedience to the laws he has structured into it, he can and does also act within it in ways which contravene these normal patterns (miracles).

With this as a starting point, the Christian theologian is to utilize the capacity of reasoning given him by God to work out the implications of the revealed body of truth. In other words, he philosophizes from the position or perspective created by the divine revelation. In this respect, my position is close to that of Carl Henry, who maintains that the biblical world-view is the starting point and framework for all intellectual endeavor.<sup>44</sup> It also agrees with Edwin Ramsdell<sup>45</sup> and Arthur Holmes<sup>46</sup> that Christian theology is perspectival.

Taking the biblical concepts as the tenets of one's view of reality restricts considerably the range of philosophical world-views that are acceptable. For instance, a naturalistic world-view is excluded, both because it restricts reality to the system of observable nature, and because possible occurrences within this system are restricted to what is in conformity with its fixed laws. Materialism is even more emphatically opposed by biblical revelation. Similarly, most idealisms are excluded insofar as they tend to deny the reality of the material world and the transcendence of God. Edgar Sheffield Brightman has spoken of four main types of idealism:

43. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 4.

44. Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority: The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 198-201.

45. Edwin Ramsdell, *The Christian Perspective* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950).

46. Arthur Holmes, *Faith Seeks Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 46-47.

1. Platonic-value is objective. Its origin and meaning are more than human.
2. Berkeleyan-reality is mental. Material objects have no independent being, but exist only as concepts of mind.
3. Hegelian-reality is organic, that is, the whole has properties which its parts do not possess. Ultimate reality is nothing but the manifestation of reason.
4. Lotzean (or Leibnitzean)-reality is personal. Only persons or selves are real.<sup>47</sup>

It would seem that the first type of idealism can be assimilated within Christian theology; the fourth can with certain limitations be adopted by Christian theology. The second and third, however, seem incompatible with the tenets of Christian theism as outlined above. Perhaps the most compatible type of metaphysic is some form of realism, provided that it includes a supernatural dimension rather than limiting itself to nature.

The world-view here presented is an objectivism. By this is meant that there are objective measures of the true, the good, and the right. The God who is the center of the world-view revealed in Scripture is capable of emotion and action. Yet he is fully perfect, complete, and thus, in a sense, unchanging. There are also norms and values that have permanence. Love, truth, and honesty are enduringly good; and they are so because they correspond to the unchanging nature of God. Thus process philosophy does not seem to be a viable alternative.

The world-view here presented also regards truth as unitary. Rather than there being one kind of truth (objective) in regard to scientific matters, and another type (subjective) in matters of religion, truth has something in common in all areas. Truth is a quality of statements or propositions which agree with the way things are. Even William James, the pragmatist, gives a similar definition of truth: "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their 'agreement,' as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality.' Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course."<sup>48</sup> God and reality are what they are independently of anyone's perceiving, understanding, appreciating, or accepting them. While the knower's reaction is important, the truth is not dependent upon that reaction. Thus any type of subjective idealism is precluded, as are certain aspects of existentialism.

Logic is applicable to all truth. While some areas are clothed in

47. Edgar Sheffield Brightman, "The Definition of Idealism," *Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1933): pp. 429-35.

48. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 132.

mystery, and may therefore be beyond our ability to understand all of the relationships involved, no areas are believed to be inherently contradictory. Coherent thought or at least communication depends on this assumption. Truth is a quality of propositions, not something that happens to them as a result of how we react or how they are used. Thus a thoroughgoing functionalism also must be regarded as untenable.

Our second basic guideline is that philosophy should be thought of primarily as an activity, philosophizing, rather than as a body of truths. It is potentially capable of functioning from any perspective and with any set of data. Hence it is a tool which can be used by theology. The form of philosophy known as analytical philosophy aims at clarifying and refining the terms, concepts, and arguments found in theology. We will make use of this discipline throughout the remainder of this treatise, and give it special attention in chapter 6. Further, the philosophy of phenomenology provides us with a method for isolating experiences, clarifying them, and thus determining their true nature. An example of the application of phenomenology is to be found in the investigation of the nature of religion in the opening portion of chapter 1. Both of these can be useful to theology to the extent that they are descriptive and analytical. Any attempt to be prescriptive or normative, however, will need to be carefully evaluated in the light of their presuppositions.

Our primary use of philosophy will be to help us develop and employ certain critical abilities which are of value in all areas of endeavor, particularly intellectual inquiry, and which can accordingly be utilized in doing theology:

1. Philosophy sharpens our understanding of concepts. Whatever be the exact theory of meaning which we adopt, it is essential that we ruthlessly seek to determine just what we mean by what we believe and what we say. Progress in establishing the truth of ideas requires knowing precisely what we mean by them. Further, communication involves the ability to indicate to others just what it is that we are commanding to them. We are never able to make clear to others what is not clear to ourselves.

2. Philosophy can help us ferret out the presuppositions behind an idea or a system of thought. If, for example, we seek to combine two or more ideas that depend upon incompatible presuppositions, the result will inevitably be internal contradiction, regardless of how appealing these ideas may initially appear. Philosophy can resolve the situation by searching out and evaluating those presuppositions. We also need to be aware that there is scarcely any such thing as a neutral analysis or assessment. Every critique is made from somewhere. And the validity of the perspective from which such an evaluation is made must be considered in determining how seriously the evaluation is to be taken. We

do well to consider any such assertion to be the conclusion of a syllogism, and to ask what are the premises of that syllogism. Sometimes we will find that we are dealing with an enthymeme—an assumption, perhaps a disputed or questionable one, has been smuggled in instead of being made explicit.

Awareness of our presuppositions will help make us more objective. Since presuppositions affect the way we perceive reality, we may not be able to detect their influence. Knowing that they are present and presumably operative, however, should enable us to compensate for their likely effect. This is like the problem faced by a fisherman who is spearfishing. He sees a fish and his natural reaction is to drive the spear into the water at the point where his eyes tell him the fish is. Yet his mind tells him that because of the refraction of light passing from one medium (water) to another (air) the fish is not where it seems to be. The fisherman must consciously thrust the spear at a point where the fish does not seem to be. Similarly a hunter shooting at a moving object must "lead" it, or shoot at a point where the target will be when the bullet arrives. Awareness of presuppositions means that we will consciously adjust our perception of things. This is true for both our general approach and our analysis of specific points. As a Baptist, for example, my background will lead me to weigh more heavily the arguments favoring Baptist conclusions in such areas as the doctrine of the church. I must consequently require what will seem to me excessive evidence for conclusions which fit my biases.

3. Philosophy can help us trace out the implications of an idea. Often it is not possible to assess the truth of an idea in itself. However, it may be possible to see what implications follow from it. These implications will then often be measurable against the data. If the implication proves false, the tenet (or tenets) from which it logically derives will be false as well, if the argument is valid. One method of determining implications is simply the logical analysis of the ideas being advanced. Another is to consider what have, in actual historical occurrence, been the results where similar conceptions have been held.

4. Philosophy also makes us aware of the necessity of testing truth claims. Assertions by themselves are not sufficient grounds for us to accept them; they must be argued. This involves asking what kind of evidence would bear upon the truth or falsity of the issue under consideration, and when an appropriate type and a sufficient amount of evidence would be present. There also needs to be assessment of the logical structure of each argument, to determine whether the claimed conclusions really follow from the support offered for them.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup>. The question of how we gain religious knowledge will be dealt with to some extent

In the type of endeavor involved in theology, one should not expect complete or exact proof. Probability is the best that can be hoped for. Yet one must not be content with showing the plausibility of a conception. It is necessary to demonstrate that this option is preferable to the alternatives. Similarly, in criticism it is not sufficient to find flaws in a given view. One must always ask, "What is the alternative?" and, "Does the alternative have fewer difficulties?" John Baillie tells of writing a paper in which he severely criticized a particular view. His professor commented, "Every theory has its difficulties, but you have not considered whether any other theory has less difficulties than the one you have criticized."<sup>50</sup>

Whenever we critique a view different from our own, we must use valid objective criteria. There would seem to be two types: the criteria which a view sets for itself, and the criteria which all such views must meet (i.e., universal criteria). It is not a damaging criticism to point out, in effect, a difference between our view and another position. Much criticism virtually consists of the charge that A is different from B. But such a complaint is inconsequential, unless one has already established that B is the correct view, or A claims to be an instance of B. To draw an illustration from a totally different realm: suppose that a football team stresses offense. If the team wins a game by the score of 40-35, it would not be a valid criticism to point out the poor quality of its defense. On the other hand, if the team wins a game by the score of 7-6, it would be appropriate to point out its low scoring, since the team has not met its own criterion of a well-played game. And if the team scores 49 points but gives up 52, it is vulnerable to criticism on the basis of universal criteria, since presumably all teams, regardless of their style of play, intend to have more points at the end of the game than do their opponents.

More will be said about the criteria for evaluating propositions and systems in the chapter on religious language. At this point, it will be sufficient to point out that the criteria generally utilized are internal consistency and coherence of ideas or sets of ideas, and their ability to accurately describe and account for all the relevant factual data.

in chapter 6. For recent treatments of the issue from an evangelical Christian perspective see Jerry H. Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Arthur Holmes, *Faith*, pp. 134-62.

50. John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (New York: Scribner, 1942), p. 15.

# 3

## The Method of Theology

### The Theological Scene Today

### The Process of Doing Theology

1. Collection of the Biblical Materials
2. Unification of the Biblical Materials
3. Analysis of the Meaning of Biblical Teachings
4. Examination of Historical Treatments
5. Identification of the Essence of the Doctrine
6. Illumination from Sources Beyond the Bible
7. Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine
8. Development of a Central Interpretive Motif
9. Stratification of the Topics

### Degrees of Authority of Theological Statements

The doing of theology, like all other human endeavors, takes place within a given context. Each theologian and each student of theology lives at a specific period of time rather than in some timeless vacuum, and theology must be done within that situation. There are both theological and nontheological (or cultural) factors in every situation. Before we proceed, it is important for us to observe certain characteristics of the present-day theological scene.

1. The first theological factor that is significant and to some extent unique about the present period is the tendency for theologies to have

brief life-spans. This has been a progressively developing trend. In earlier times, a given form of theology might persist for decades or even centuries, but that seems to have changed. In the fifth century Augustine developed a synthesis of Platonic philosophy and theology (*The City of God*) which in many ways dominated theology for more than eight hundred years. Then Thomas Aquinas synthesized Catholic theology with Aristotle's philosophy (*Summa theologica*) and thus supplied a basis for theology until the Reformation, the interval being nearly three centuries. The Reformers developed a theology independent of the earlier Catholic syntheses, with Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* being the most thorough statement of the new understanding of Christianity. Although there were heretical movements from time to time, and a somewhat different understanding of evangelical theology came into being with the work of John Wesley, for a period of more than 250 years there was no major theological figure or writing to rival the influence of Calvin.

Then, with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, came the birth of liberal theology, not as an outside challenge to orthodoxy, as deism had been, but as a competitor within the church. Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* and his *Christian Faith* were the first indication that a new type of theology was abroad.<sup>1</sup> Liberalism, with its many different varieties, was to dominate European theology throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, its period of popularity being somewhat later in North America. If the nineteenth century ended in August 1914 for Karl Barth,<sup>2</sup> it was in 1919 that this change became apparent to the rest of the theological world, with the publication of his *Der Römerbrief (Epistle to the Romans)*.<sup>3</sup> This marked the end of the liberal theology and the ascendancy of what came to be known as neoorthodoxy. The duration of its supremacy proved notably shorter, however, than that of some of the preceding theologies. In 1941, Rudolf Bultmann's "New Testament and Mythology" heralded the beginning of a movement (or actually a program) known as demythologization.<sup>4</sup> This was to prove a short-lived and yet a genuine displacement of the neoorthodox view. In 1954, Ernst Käsemann presented a paper which marked the resurgence of the search for the

1. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958); *The Christian Faith*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

2. Karl Barth, *God, Grace, and Gospel* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), pp. 57-58.

3. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University, 1968). In 1963 E. V. Z. Verlag of Zurich issued a reprint of the original German edition-*Der Römerbrief: Unveränderter Nachdruck der ersten Auflage von 1919*.

4. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 1-44.

historical Jesus, calling into question the view of Bultmann.<sup>5</sup> Yet this did not really introduce a new system. It primarily indicated the end of regnant systems as such.

Note what has been occurring during this period. The first great theological systems which we observed lasted for hundreds of years, but the period of dominance of each was shorter than that of its immediate predecessor. The life-span of theologies is becoming shorter and shorter. Thus, any theology which attempts to tie itself too closely to the present conditions in the intellectual world is evidently consigned to early obsolescence. This is particularly obvious in the case of the Death of God theology, which flourished briefly, as far as public attention was concerned, in the mid-1960s, and then faded from sight almost as quickly as it had come to life. In the terminology of the present day the half-life of new theologies is very short indeed.

2. Another phenomenon of the present time is the demise of great schools of theology as such. By this we do not mean educational institutions, but definite movements or clusterings of adherents around a given set of teachings. Today there are merely individual theologies and theologians. While this is not completely true, there is nonetheless a considerable element of correctness in the generalization. When I began doctoral studies in theology in 1959, it was fairly easy to classify theologians into camps or teams. There were the orthodox team, the neoorthodox, the neoliberals, the demythologizers, and other groups. Here and there individuals, such as Paul Tillich, defied classification, falling outside every particular group. Catholic theology was considered, at least by those outside it, to be rather monolithic: all Catholic theologians were Thomists.

Today matters are quite different. To use an athletic metaphor: whereas previously the playing field was occupied by several teams easily distinguishable by their uniforms, now each player seems to wear a different uniform. There are, to be sure, specific theologies; for example, the theology of hope and process theology. Yet these lack the internal coherence and complete set of doctrines traditionally manifested by theological systems built on an overall theme or even a mood. Movements such as the theology of liberation, black theology, feminist theology, and various secular theologies are simply orientations to some specific sociological concerns. None of these really deserves to be termed a theological system.

What all this means is that it no longer is possible to adopt one's theology by buying into a system. Whereas in earlier times there were distinctive theologies which had worked out their view of virtually every topic and one could therefore find consistent answers to each particular

5. Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM, 1964), pp. 15-47.

question by buying into a system, this is no longer the case. There are only sketches, rather than detailed blueprints, of theology.

3. Related to these other two developments is the fact that there do not seem to be the theological giants that were abroad even a generation ago. In the first half of the twentieth century, there were great theological thinkers who formulated extensive, carefully crafted systems of theology: Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann. In conservative circles men like G. C. Berkouwer in the Netherlands and Edward Carnell and Carl Henry in the United States were recognized as leaders. Now most of these men have passed from the active theological scene, and no thinkers have arisen to dominate the theological landscape quite as they did. Two who have made noteworthy accomplishments are Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, but they have not gathered sizable followings. Consequently there is a considerably larger circle of influential theologians, but the extent of the influence exerted by any one of them is less than that of the men already mentioned.

Theology is now being done in a period characterized by, among other things, a “knowledge explosion.” The amount of information is growing so rapidly that mastery of a large area of thought is becoming increasingly difficult. While this is especially true in technological areas, biblical and theological knowledge is also much broader than it once was. The result has been a much greater degree of specialization than was previously the case. In biblical studies, for example, New Testament scholars tend to specialize in the Gospels or in the Pauline writings. Church historians tend to specialize in one period, such as the Reformation. Consequently, research and publication are often in narrower areas and greater depth.

This means that the systematic theologian will find it increasingly difficult to cover the entire range of doctrines. To do all of theology in depth, as Karl Barth sought to do in his massive *Church Dogmatics*, for example, becomes the task of a lifetime (Barth himself died before completing his work). Systematic theology is further complicated by the fact that it requires a knowledge of all of Scripture and of the development of thought throughout the whole history of the church. Moreover, as far as new information is concerned, systematic theology is not restricted to recent discoveries in the field of Hebrew philology, for example, but must also relate to modern developments in such “secular” areas as sociology, biology, and numerous other disciplines. Yet the task must be done—and at various levels, including the elementary or introductory.

Recent decades saw the development of an intellectual atmosphere which was rather unfavorable to the doing of systematic theology. In part, this was a result of the atomistic (rather than holistic) approach to knowledge. Awareness of the vast amounts of detail to be mastered

produced the feeling that the bits and pieces of data could not be effectively gathered into any sort of inclusive whole. It was considered impossible for anyone to have an overview of the entire field of systematic theology.

Another factor impeding systematic theology was the view of revelation as historical events. According to this view, revelation was always given in concrete historical situations. Hence, what was revealed was limited to that localized perspective. The message dealt with specifics rather than with universal statements about things in general. Sometimes there was a tendency to believe that this diversity of particulars could not be combined into any sort of harmonious whole. This, it should be noted, was based upon the implicit assumption that reality is internally incoherent. Consequently, any attempt to harmonize or systematize would inevitably be distortive of the reality under consideration.

The result of all this was that biblical theology was thought to be adequate and systematic theology dispensable. In effect, biblical theology was substituted for systematic theology.<sup>6</sup> This had two effects. First, it meant that the theology written and studied had a more limited scope. It was now possible to concentrate upon Paul’s anthropology or Matthew’s Christology. This was a much more manageable endeavor than attempting to see what the entire Bible had to say on these subjects. The second effect was that theology became descriptive rather than normative. The question was no longer, “What do you believe about sin?” but “What do you believe Paul taught about sin?” The views of Luke, Isaiah, and other biblical writers who mentioned sin might then in turn be described. Particularly where there was thought to be tension between these views, biblical theology could hardly be normative for belief.

During those years, systematic theology was in retreat. It was engaged in introspective concern about its own nature. Was it in fact justified? How could it be carried out? Relatively little was being done in terms of comprehensive, overall treatments of theology. Essays on particular topics of theology were being written, but not the synoptic system-building that had traditionally characterized the discipline. Now, however, that is changing. Several new systematic-theology textbooks have appeared, and others are in preparation.<sup>7</sup> Now it is biblical theology which, far from replacing systematic theology, is being reexamined as to its viability. And one rather prophetic treatment of biblical theology in effect argues that it must move toward becoming more like systematic

6. Henry J. Cadbury, “The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves,” *Interpretation* 3 (1949): 332-33.

7. Examples are Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner, 1968); John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1966); Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

theology.<sup>8</sup> There are indications of a swing away from the emphasis upon immediate experience, which contributed to the reaction against systematic theology.<sup>9</sup> The growth of cults and foreign religions, some of them extreme in their control of their devotees and in the practices in which they engage, has reminded us that the reflective and critical element in religion is indispensable. And there has been a growing awareness, partly through the rise of the "new hermeneutic," that it is not possible to formulate a theology simply on the basis of the Bible. Issues such as how the Bible is to be conceived of and how it is to be approached in interpretation must be dealt with.<sup>10</sup> And one is therefore plunged into the much larger realm of issues traditionally dealt with in systematic theology.

One of the lessons which we might well learn from the foregoing brief survey of the recent and present status of the theological milieu is to beware of too close an identification with any current mood in culture. The rapid changes in theologies are but a reflection of the rapid changes in culture in general. In times of such rapid change, it is probably wise not to attempt too close a fit between theology and the world in which it is expressed. While we will in chapter 5 discuss the matter of contemporizing the Christian message, it is perhaps wise at the present time to take a step back toward the timeless form of Christian truth, and away from an ultracontemporary statement of it. Two analogies come to mind, one from athletics, the other from mechanics. The defensive back in football or the player on defense in basketball must be careful not to play an extremely quick offensive player too closely. If he does, he may find that his opponent is past him and that he is unable to recover quickly enough. To avoid the danger of a big gain or an easy score, he must risk the chance of his opponent's catching a short pass or getting off a long shot. Similarly, it is well not to have too much looseness in a mechanical device, since this would lead to excessive wear. But if the mechanism is tightened too severely, there may not be enough play to allow for normal movement of the parts, and they may snap.

The theology to be developed within this writing will seek to strike something of a balance between the timeless essence of the doctrines and a statement of them geared to the contemporary audience. To the extent that it concentrates on the former, it will make the elements found within the Bible normative for its basic structure. In this

**8.** Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), chapter 6.

**9.** E.g., Harold Kuhn, "Reason Versus Faith: Challenging the Antithesis," *Christianity Today*, 10 April 1981, pp. 86-87.

**10.** Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

connection it should be pointed out that the orthodox form of theology is not the theology of any one particular period, not even a fairly recent one. This latter erroneous conception seems to underlie Brevard Childs's characterization of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* as a "restitution of seventeenth century dogmatics."<sup>11</sup> To some, this present work may appear to be the same. To be sure, the incorporation or repetition of seventeenth-century statements of orthodox theology may justify a criticism of that type. But a theology should not be assessed as being nothing but a version of an earlier theology simply because it happens to agree with the theology of an earlier time. Rather, the two theologies may be differing versions of the traditional Christian position. In the preface, we alluded to a remark by Kirsopp Lake:

It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he; and I am sorry for anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The *Bible* and the *corpus theologicum* of the Church are on the fundamentalist side.<sup>12</sup> [italics added]

A second lesson which we may learn from our survey of the present-day theological scene is that a degree of eclecticism is both possible and desirable. This is not to suggest the incorporation of ideas from a wide variety of perspectives which presuppose mutually exclusive bases. Rather, it is to note that today issues are generally being treated on a less strongly ideological basis. As a result distinctive systems are not as readily produced. We need to keep our doctrinal formulations flexible enough to be able to recognize and utilize valid insights from positions with which in general we disagree. While we are to systematize or integrate the biblical data, we ought not do so from too narrow a basis.

A third lesson to be derived from the present situation is the importance of maintaining a degree of independence in one's approach to doing theology. When one theologian is a giant, there is a tendency to simply adopt his treatment of a particular doctrine. There is a feeling that there is no way that one can improve upon it. This was, for example,

**11.** Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 20.

**12.** Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton, 1926), p. 61.

the feeling that Jürgen Moltmann had after reading Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics-Barth* had said everything, so there was nothing left to say.<sup>13</sup> But when one becomes unreservedly committed to another persons system of thought, he becomes a disciple in the worst sense of that term, merely repeating what he has learned from the master. Creative and critical independent thinking ceases. But the fact that there are no undisputed superstars, or at least very few of them, should spur us to being both critical of the teaching of anyone whom we read or hear and willing to modify it at any point where we think we can improve upon it.

### The Process of Doing Theology

We now turn to the actual task of developing a theology. There is a sense in which theology is an art as well as a science, so that it cannot follow a rigid structure. Yet procedures need to be spelled out. The following steps will not necessarily be followed in this sequence, but there must be a comparable logical order of development. The reader will notice that in this procedure biblical theology, in both the "true" and "pure" sense, is developed before systematic theology, so that the sequence is exegesis-biblical theology-systematic theology. We do not move directly from exegesis to systematic theology.

#### 1. Collection of the Biblical Materials

The first step in our theological method will be to gather all the relevant biblical passages on the doctrine being investigated. This step will also involve a thorough and consistent utilization of the very best and most appropriate tools and methods for getting at the meaning of these passages.

But before we can get at the meaning of the biblical passages, attention should be given to the procedures of exegesis. Sometimes there is a tendency to assume that we are working with neutral methods. In actuality, however, there are interpretative factors inherent within the methodology itself; therefore, careful and continued scrutiny and refinement of the methodology are required. We have already noted the importance of knowing the whole philosophical framework within which a theologian is functioning. This applies at the level of exegesis as well; the exegete will want to make certain that the presuppositions of

<sup>13</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, "Politics and the Practice of Hope," *Christian Century*, 11 March 1970, p. 289.

the tools and methods he is using are harmonious with his own. Exegesis involves, among other things, consulting grammars and dictionaries. These will have to be carefully analyzed. An example is the massive and prestigious *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (often referred to simply as "Kittel").<sup>14</sup> Each of the contributors to this work operates within a tradition and a context of his own. James Barr has pointed out and Kittel himself has observed that such presuppositions underlie this reference work.<sup>15</sup> The theologian will insist, as part of the preexegetical task, on investigating the presuppositions of the authors he consults, or, at the very least, on being alert to the presence of factors that might influence what is said. In the case of some authors, such as Rudolf Bultmann, who has overtly indicated his philosophical biases, this is fairly easy to do. In the case of others, it may be a much more elusive search. Yet there should be inquiry into the intellectual biography and pedigree of even these authors in order to sensitize the exegete to the possible presence of presuppositions with which he might not agree.

Not only the tools but the methods of exegesis as well must be scrutinized. Here one must insist that the method not preclude anything which, at least upon a surface examination, the documents seem to assume. Since the Bible reports the occurrence of miracles, a methodology which virtually assumes that everything can be explained without resorting to supernatural concepts or causes will result in an interpretation at variance with what the Bible claims has happened. This is true not only with respect to the events reported within the Bible, but also with respect to the very process of production of the Bible. If the assumption is that the existence of the documents can be fully accounted for simply by tracing the history of the formation of the tradition, then any possibility of direct revelation or communication from God will be eliminated.

The opposite problem may also occur. A supranaturalistic approach may be taken, in which the Bible is regarded as so unique that the types of criteria and methods used to interpret and evaluate other historical documents are excluded in interpreting and evaluating the Bible. In this case, the Bible will be virtually taken out of the class of historical materials. If the former approach emphasizes too strongly the human character of the Bible, the latter would seem to assume too strongly the divine character.

<sup>14</sup> James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University, 1961), pp. 206-62; Gerhard Kittel, *Lexicographia Sacra, Theology* Occasional Papers 7 (London: S.P.C.K., 1938)—German version in *Deutsche Theologie* 5 (1938): 91-109.

<sup>15</sup> James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University, 1961), pp. 206-62; Gerhard Kittel, *Lexicographia Sacra, Theology* Occasional Papers 7 (London: S.P.C.K., 1938)—German version in *Deutsche Theologie* 5 (1938): 91-109.

What is being suggested here is that the approach be one which is open to any possibilities. Thus, it should not be assumed that the most supernatural explanation possible must be what occurred, nor that it cannot have occurred. Rather, the assumption should be that it may or may not have happened; the objective is to determine just what did happen. In particular, it is important to take seriously what the biblical text claims, and to assess that claim carefully. This is what Hans-Georg Gadamer means by grasping what is said in its distance from the interpreter.<sup>16</sup> That is, the interpreter should simply attempt to see what was said, what was meant by the writer or speaker, and how the ancient message would have been understood by the readers or hearers.

It is possible simply to adopt uncritically the methodology of another, without asking whether it is really consistent with the material being examined or with our own perspective. If we do so, we will to a certain extent have built in our conclusions at the very beginning. Interpretation is in many ways like navigation. In dead reckoning, a pilot works with the information that his ship or aircraft begins from a given point and proceeds in a certain direction at a certain speed for a certain length of time. Even if the speed and direction of the wind and the speed of the vessel or craft have been precisely and accurately determined, the correctness of the course will depend upon the accuracy of the compass (or, more exactly, the accuracy of the pilot's knowledge of the compass, since all compasses have slight variations at different headings). If the compass reading is merely one degree off, then after one hundred miles of travel, the craft will be almost two miles off course. The larger the error, the larger the departure from the intended course. Similarly, a slight error in the presuppositions of a methodology will adversely affect the conclusions. What we are warning against here is blind acceptance of a particular set of presuppositions; rather, the theologian should self-consciously scrutinize his methodology and carefully determine his starting point.

Once the theologian has carefully defined his methodology, it will then be important to make the broadest possible inquiry into doctrinal content. This will include careful word study of the terms that apply to the issue under consideration. A correct understanding of faith, for example, will be dependent upon a careful examination of the numerous uses of the word *pistis* in the New Testament. Lexical studies will often be the foundation of doctrinal inquiry.

There must also be close examination of what is said about the topic in the didactic sections of Scripture. Whereas lexical studies give us

<sup>16</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), pp. 270-73.

general insight into the building blocks of meaning, the portions of Scripture in which Paul, for example, expounds upon faith will give us a deeper understanding of the specific meanings of the concept. Particular significance should be attached to those passages where the subject is afforded a thorough, systematic treatment, rather than a mere incidental reference.

Attention also needs to be given to the narrative passages. While these are not so easily dealt with as the didactic passages, they often shed special light upon the issue, not so much in defining or explaining the concept, as in illustrating and thus illuminating it. Here we see the doctrinal truth in action. In some cases, the term under consideration may not even occur in a relevant passage. For example, Genesis 22 describes the testing of Abraham; he was asked to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, a burnt offering. The words *faith* and *believe* do not appear in the passage, yet it is a powerful description of the dynamics of faith, and the writer to the Hebrews in the famous chapter on faith identifies Abraham's willingness to offer up his son as an act of faith (11:17-19).

It will be important, in studying the biblical material, to view it against the historical and cultural background of the time. We must guard against modernizing the Bible. The Bible must be allowed to say first what it was saying to the readers and hearers of that time, rather than what we think it should have said, or what we think it is saying to us. There are a time and a place for this, but not at this step.

## 2. Unification of the Biblical Materials

We must next develop some unifying statements on the doctrinal theme being investigated. Rather than having simply the theology of Paul, Luke, or John on a particular doctrine, we must attempt to coalesce their various emphases into a coherent whole.

This means that we are proceeding on the assumption that there are a unity and a consistency among these several books and authors. We will, then, emphasize the points of agreement among the Synoptic Gospels and interpret the rest in that light. We will treat any apparent discrepancies as differing and complementary interpretations rather than contradictions. Even without undue or strained effort, if we expect harmony, we will generally find it to be greater than we would if we expected paradox.

Note that this is the procedure ordinarily followed in other areas of research. Usually, in investigating the writings of an author or of a school of thought or even of diverse contributors on a given subject, the researcher begins by trying to find a common ground. Generally he

attempts to see whether the various passages can be interpreted to reveal coherence rather than diversity and disparity. We are not here advocating a forced interpretative approach which seeks agreement at any cost. Rather, we are advocating that the theologian seek out the points of harmony rather than discord.

To use a Reformation term and principle, the *analogia fidei* or analogy of faith should be followed in interpretation. The whole Bible must be taken into account when we interpret Scripture. The Old Testament and New Testament are to be approached with the expectation that a unity between the two exists. As one student put it, "The whole Bible is my context." This is simply practicing biblical theology in Gabler's "pure" sense.

### *3. Analysis of the Meaning of Biblical Teachings*

Once the doctrinal material has been synthesized into a coherent whole, it is necessary to ask, "What is *really* meant by this?" When we deal with theological terminology with which we are familiar, we may consider only the connotations which these words have for us and ignore their denotations. Take as examples references to the church as the body of Christ and Jesus' statement, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Numerous other biblical terms and concepts come to mind as well. What do they really mean? In a homogeneous group these terms may become signals which evoke a particular reaction on the basis of a conditioned response. Once beyond that closed circle, however, communication of the meaning of these terms may be difficult. Here people do not share the same experience. We may find ourselves hard pressed to communicate exactly what we do mean. And difficulty making something clear to someone else may be an indication that we ourselves do not really understand what we mean. It is very difficult to make clear to others what is not clear to oneself.

At this point, we are still dealing with the meaning of the biblical concepts as biblical concepts. The theologian will relentlessly press the question, "What does this really mean?" If these biblical concepts are to be translated into contemporary form, it is essential that their biblical form be precisely analyzed. If not, there is bound to be even greater imprecision at later points in the process as the ambiguity is compounded. Unless we know just what it is that we wish to communicate, the task will—perhaps without our knowledge—be greatly complicated from the very start.

### *4. Examination of Historical Treatments*

While the utilization of history may take place at any one of several stages in the methodological process, this seems to be a particularly

appropriate point. In chapter 1 we discussed some of the roles which historical theology plays in the doing of systematic theology. (It should be noted that we do not study the earlier formulations out of a special regard for the authority of tradition.) A key role is to help us isolate the essence of the doctrine under consideration (the next step in our methodological process). We will find that some expressions of a doctrine which seem so self-evidently the only way to handle it are not indeed the only option; they are just one of many possibilities. This is also true of the interpretation of a given biblical text. At the very least, the examination of these other possibilities should impart an element of humility and tentativeness to our commitment to our own view. We may also be able to detect within the many variations the common element that constitutes the essence of the doctrine, although we must be careful not to assume that the lowest common denominator is necessarily the essence.

Historical theology may be of direct value for the constructing of our own expressions of theology. By studying a period very similar to our own, we may find models which can be adapted for modern doctrinal formulations. Or we may find that some current expressions are but variations upon earlier instances of the same basic view. We may then see what the implications were, at least in terms of the historical consequences. We may learn from past instances of the present formulation.

### *5. Identification of the Essence of the Doctrine*

We will need to distinguish the permanent, unvarying content of the doctrine from the cultural vehicle in which it is expressed. This is not a matter of "throwing out the cultural baggage," as some term it. It is rather a matter of separating the message to the Corinthians as first-century Christians living in Corinth, for example, from the message to them as Christians. The latter will be the abiding truth of Paul's teaching, which in an appropriate form of expression applies to all Christians at all times and places, as contrasted with what was pertinent in that restricted situation. This is Gabler's "pure" biblical theology.

In the Bible permanent truths are often expressed in the form of a particular application to a specific situation. An example of this is the matter of sacrifices. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were regarded as the means of atonement. We will have to ask ourselves whether the system of sacrifices (burnt offerings—lambs, doves, etc.) is of the essence of the doctrine, or whether it was simply an expression, at one point, of the abiding truth that there must be vicarious sacrifice for the sins of humanity. This separation of permanent truth from temporary form is of such importance that an entire chapter (chapter 5) will be devoted to it.

#### 6. Illumination from Sources Beyond the Bible

While the Bible is systematic theology's major source, it is not the only one. While the use of these other sources must be very carefully limited, it is nonetheless a significant part of the process. Some evangelicals, noting the excesses to which natural theology has gone in constructing a theology quite apart from the Bible, have overreacted to the point of ignoring the general revelation. But if God has revealed himself in two complementary and harmonious revelations, then at least in theory something can be learned from the study of God's creation. General revelation will be of value when it sheds light upon the special revelation or fills it out at certain points where it does not speak.

If, for instance, God has created man in his own image, as the Bible teaches, what does this image of God consist of? The Bible tells us little, but does seem to make clear that the image of God is what distinguishes man from the rest of the creatures. (While man is described as created "in the image of God," the other creatures are described as being brought forth "after their kind.") Since the Bible and the behavioral sciences intersect one another at this point of common interest and concern, the behavioral sciences may be able to help us identify what is unique about man, thus yielding at least a partial understanding of the image of God. The data of these behavioral sciences will have to be studied and evaluated critically, of course, to make sure that their presuppositions are harmonious with those of our biblical inquiry. If the presuppositions are harmonious, the behavioral sciences may be regarded as another method of getting at the truth of what God has done.

Other areas of inquiry will also be of service. If God's creation involves the rest of the universe, both living and inert, then the natural sciences should help us understand what he has done. Salvation (particularly such aspects as conversion, regeneration, and sanctification) involves man's psychological makeup. Thus psychology, and particularly psychology of religion, should help illuminate this divine work. If, as we believe, God is operative within history, then the study of history should increase our comprehension of the specific outworkings of his providence.

We should note that historically the nonbiblical disciplines have in fact contributed to our theological knowledge-sometimes despite the reluctance of biblical exegetes and theologians. It was not primarily exegetical considerations which moved theologians to observe that, of the various possible meanings of the Hebrew word יֹם (yom), "a period of time" might, in the case of interpreting the creation account, be preferable to the more literal and common "twenty-four-hour day."

We need to be careful in our correlation of theology and other

disciplines, however. While the special revelation (preserved for us in the Bible) and the general revelation are ultimately in harmony with one another, that harmony is apparent only as each is fully understood and correctly interpreted. In practice, we never have a complete understanding of either of these sources of God's truth, so some friction between the two may well be possible.

#### 7. Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine

Once we have determined the essence of the doctrine, the next task is to give it a contemporary expression, to clothe the timeless truth in an appropriate form. This can be done in several ways, one of which is to find the present form of the questions to which the specific doctrine offers answers. This is similar to the method of correlation which Paul Tillich developed.

Tillich characterized his theology as an apologetic or answering theology.<sup>17</sup> He viewed the theologian as moving back and forth between two poles. One pole is the theological authority, the source from which the theology is drawn. In our case, it is the Bible. This pole is necessary in order to assure that the theology is authoritative. The other pole is what Tillich calls the situation. By this he does not mean the specific predicament of individuals or a temporary facet of this year's headlines. (There is room in preaching and personal evangelistic work to deal with these matters. This may be the stuff of which best-seller Christian books are made, but no one remembers such books a decade later.) Rather, he means the art, music, politics of a culture, in short, the whole expression of the mind-set or of the mood or outlook of a given society. From an analysis of this situation it will become apparent what questions are being asked, either explicitly or implicitly, by the culture. Such an analysis, in Tillich's judgment, is largely the role of philosophy.

In this dialogical approach (question and answer) to the doing of theology, the authoritative pole supplies the content of theology. But the form of expression will be determined by correlating the answers offered by the Bible with the questions being asked by the culture. Thus, the message is not proclaimed without regard for the situation of the hearer. Nor is it proclaimed in the manner of an ideologue who runs down the street, shouting, "I have an answer! I have an answer! Who has the question?" Rather, an analysis of the situation, that is, of the questions being asked, will give a general cast, an orientation, to the message.

It is necessary to emphasize again that the questions influence only

<sup>17</sup>. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 1-8.

the form of the answer, not the content. One problem of the modernism in the United States during the early twentieth century was that it was too concerned with the immediate situation and could not adjust when the situation changed. Underlying this problem was the fact that modernism tended to determine not only its form but also its content from the situation it faced. Thus, it did not merely restate its answers; it actually restructured them. It did not offer the permanent answer in a new form; it gave a new answer, a different answer.

The analysis of a culture must be carefully and thoroughly done. A superficial treatment will often be very misleading, for the apparent situation may in fact belie the actual questions being asked. Two examples, from persons of very different perspective, may be noted. On the one hand, Francis Schaeffer, in his analysis of mid-twentieth-century Western culture, has observed that on the surface there seem to be a rejection of rationality and a strong emphasis instead upon the irrational, the volitional. The popular conception seems to be that meaning is not discovered, but created by willing. This emphasis has been especially true of existentialism. But in actuality, Schaeffer says, society has a deep need for, is asking for, a rational interpretation of reality.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Langdon Gilkey has pointed out that on the surface modern secularism seems to present a philosophy in which man is seen as completely in control of things, and as having lost any sense of mystery or of need of outside help. In actuality, Gilkey argues, there are within modern secular man's experience definite "dimensions of ultimacy" to which the Christian message can be addressed.<sup>19</sup>

Theologies which attempt to respond directly to the apparent mood of the time are doomed to having their immediate popularity succeeded quickly by a sharp decline. An example of an attempt to respond directly to the situation is the Death of God theology, which attracted a great deal of attention, if not following, in the mid-1960s. This movement accepted the apparent secularism and attempted to build a theology that was similarly secular. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, was positively prophetic in his criticism of "cheap grace." He realized that attempting to respond to the mood of the time by overemphasizing grace and decrying legalism would result in superficial religion.<sup>20</sup>

Another way of stating the thesis of this section is to say that we should attempt to find a model that makes the doctrine intelligible in a

18. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1968), pp. 87-115.

19. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal Of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 247-413.

20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 45-60.

contemporary context. A model is an analogy or image used to represent and clarify the truth which is being examined or conveyed. The search for contemporary models will constitute a major part of the work of systematic theology (unlike biblical theology, which restricts itself to biblical models). We are here speaking of synthetic rather than analytical models. The latter are tools of understanding, the former tools of expression. The synthetic model should be freely exchangeable for other more suitable and useful models.

What we are calling for here is not to make the message acceptable to all, particularly to those who are rooted in the secular assumptions of the time. There is an element of the message of Jesus Christ which will always be what Paul called a "scandal" or an offense (1 Cor. 1:23). The gospel, for example, requires a surrender of the autonomy to which we tend to cling so tenaciously, no matter what age we live in. The aim, then, is not to make the message acceptable, but to make sure, as far as possible, that the message is at least understood.

A number of themes will present themselves as fruitful for exploration as we seek to formulate a contemporary expression of the message. Although our age seems to be increasingly characterized by depersonalization and detachment, there are indications that there is a real craving for a personal dimension in life, to which the doctrine of the God who knows and cares about each one can be profitably related. And although there has been a type of confidence that modern technology could solve the problems of the world, there are growing indications of an awareness that the problems are much larger and more frightening than realized and that man is the greatest problem to himself. Against this backdrop the power and providence of God have a new pertinence. In addition, giving a different cast to our theology may enable us to make the world face questions which it does not want to ask, but must ask.

Today it is popular to speak of "contextualizing" the message.<sup>21</sup> Because the message originally was expressed in a contextualized form, it must first be "decontextualized" (the essence of the doctrine must be found). Then, however, it must be recontextualized in three dimensions. The first we may refer to as length, involving the transition from a first-century (or earlier) setting to a twentieth-century setting. We have already made mention of this.

The second dimension is what we might refer to as breadth. At a given time period, there are many different cultures. It has been customary to observe the difference between East and West, and to note that Christianity, while preserving its essence, may take on somewhat

21. F. Ross-Hinsler, "Mission and Context: The Current Debate About Contextualization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (1978): 23-29.

different forms of expression in different settings. Some institutions have disregarded this, and the result has been a ludicrous exportation of Western customs; for example, little white chapels with spires were sometimes built for Christian worship in the Orient. Just as church architecture may appropriately take on a form indigenous to a given part of the world, so also may the doctrines. We are becoming increasingly aware that the most significant distinction culturally may be between North and South, rather than between East and West, as the Third World becomes especially prominent. This may be particularly important to Christianity, as its rapid growth in places like Africa shifts the balance from the traditional centers in North America and Europe. Missions, and specifically cross-cultural studies, are keenly aware of this dimension of the contextualization process.<sup>22</sup>

There is also the dimension of height. Theology may be dealt with on varying levels of abstraction, complexity, and sophistication. We may think of this as a ladder with rungs from top to bottom. On the top level are the theological superstars. These are the outstanding thinkers who make profoundly insightful and innovative breakthroughs in theology. Here are found the Augustines, Calvins, Schleiermachers, and Barths. In some cases, they do not work out all the details of the theological system which they found, but they begin the process. Their writings are compulsory reading for the large number of professional theologians who are one level below. While these ordinary theologians admire the superstars on the top level and aspire to join them, most of them will never become part of that select group. On the next rung down are students in theological schools, and persons engaged in the practice of ministry. While they study theology with competence, that is only one part of their commitment. Consequently, their understanding of theology is less thorough and penetrating than that of those who devote full time to its study.

On lower rungs of the ladder are lay persons-those who have never studied theology in a formal setting. Here several levels of theological literacy will be found. Various factors determine where each lay person stands on the ladder-the amount of background in biblical study (as in church and/or Sunday school), chronological age or maturity, the number of years of formal education. True contextualization of the message means that it will be capable of being expressed at each of

**22.** For example, the modern missionary takes the particular culture into consideration when he decides which of the many complementary motifs of the Christian doctrine of the atonement he will stress. In an African culture where sin is viewed as oppressive, enslaving darkness, it might be wise to emphasize the power of God to overcome evil (what Gustaf Aulen has called the "classical view" of the atonement) as a beginning point leading to the other motifs in the doctrine.

these levels. Most persons in ministry will be called upon to interpret the message at a level about one step below where they are personally; they should also try to study some theology at least one step above their position in order to remain intellectually alive and growing.

#### 8. Development of a Central *Interpretive Motif*

Each theologian must decide on a particular theme which, for him, is the most significant and helpful in approaching theology as a whole. Considerable differences will be found among leading thinkers in terms of the basic idea that characterizes their approach to theology. For example, many see Luther's theology as centering on salvation by grace through faith. Calvin seemed to make the sovereignty of God basic to his theology. Karl Barth emphasized the Word of God, by which he meant the living Word, Jesus Christ; as a result some have characterized his theology as Christomonism. Paul Tillich made much of the ground of being. Nels Ferré and the Lundensian school of such Swedish thinkers as Anders Nygren and Gustaf Aulen made the love of God central. Oscar Cullmann stressed the "already but not yet."

There is need for each theologian to formulate such a central motif. It will lend unity to his system, and thus power to his communication of it. I was once taught in an introductory speech course that just as a basket has a handle by which it can be picked up, so a speech should have a central proposition or thesis by which the whole can be grasped, and in terms of which the whole can be understood. The metaphor applies equally to theology. There is also the fact that a central motif in one's theology will give a basic emphasis or thrust to his ministry.

One might think of the central motif as a perspective from which the data of theology are viewed. The perspective does not affect what the data are, but it does give a particular angle or cast to the way in which they are viewed. Just as standing at a particular elevation or location often enables us to perceive a landscape more accurately, so a useful integrative motif will give us a more accurate understanding of theological data.

It could be argued that any theology which has coherence has an integrating motif. It could also be argued that sometimes there may be more than one motif and these may even be somewhat contradictory in nature. What is being pled for here is conscious and competent choice and use of an integrating motif.

Care must be exercised lest this become a hindering, rather than a facilitating, factor. Our central motif must never determine our interpretation of passages where it is not relevant. This would be a case of eisegesis rather than exegesis. Even if we hold that "already but not yet"

is the key to understanding Christian doctrine, we should not expect that every passage of Scripture is to be understood as eschatological, and find eschatology "behind every bush" in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the potential abuse of a central interpretive motif should not deter us from making a legitimate application of it.

The integrative motif may have to be adjusted as a part of the contextualization of one's theology. It may well be that at a different time or in a different cultural or geographical setting one's theology should be organized on a somewhat different fulcrum. This is true where a major element in the milieu calls for a different orientation. For example, one structures one's theology somewhat differently in an antinomian than in a legalistic atmosphere.

By basing our central motif upon the broadest possible range of biblical materials rather than upon selected passages, we can make sure the motif will not distort our theology. The result may be a somewhat broad and general motif, but we will be assured it is truly comprehensive. Another important guideline is to keep the motif constantly subject to revision. This is not to say that one will frequently exchange one motif for another, but that the motif will be expanded, narrowed, refined, or even replaced if necessary, to accommodate the full set of data it is intended to cover.

The central motif around which theology will be developed in this writing is the *magnificence of God*. By this is meant the greatness of God in terms of his power, knowledge, and other traditional "natural attributes," as well as the excellence and splendor of his moral nature. Theology as well as life needs to be centered upon the great living God, rather than upon man the creature. Because God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, it is appropriate that our theology be constructed with his greatness and goodness as the primary reference point. A fresh vision of the magnificence of the Lord of all is the source of the vitality that should pervade the Christian life. (Magnificence here is to be understood as encompassing what has traditionally been associated with the expression "the glory of God," but without the connotation of self-centeredness sometimes carried by that expression.)

#### 9. Stratification of the Topics

The final step in the theological method is to range the topics on the basis of their relative importance. This is, in effect, to say that we need to outline our theology, assigning a Roman numeral to major topics, a capital letter to subtopics, an Arabic numeral to topics subordinate to the subtopics, and so on. We need to know what the major issues are. And we need to know what can be treated as subtopics, that is, which

issues, while important, are not quite so crucial and indispensable as are the major divisions. For example, eschatology is a major area of doctrinal investigation. Within that area, the second coming is a major belief. Rather less crucial (and considerably less clearly taught in Scripture) is the issue of whether the church will be removed from the world before or after the great tribulation. Ranging these topics on the basis of their magnitude should help spare us from expending major amounts of time and energy on something which is of secondary (or even tertiary) importance.

Once this is done, there will also need to be some evaluation even of the topics which are on the same level of the outline. While they have equal status, there are some which are more basic than others. For example, the doctrine of Scripture affects all other doctrines, since they are derived from the Scripture. Further, the doctrine of God deserves special attention because it tends to form the framework within which all the other doctrines are developed. A modification here will make a considerable difference in the formulation of the other doctrines.

Finally, we need to note that at a particular time one doctrine may need more attention than another. Thus, while we would not want to assert that one doctrine is superior to another in some absolute sense, we may conclude that at this point in time one of them is of greater significance to the total theological and even ecclesiastical enterprise, and therefore deserves greater attention.

#### Degrees of Authority of Theological Statements

Our theology will consist of various types of theological statements which can be classified on the basis of their derivation. It is important to attribute to each type of statement an appropriate degree of authority.

1. Direct statements of Scripture are to be accorded the greatest weight. To the degree that they accurately represent what the Bible teaches, they have the status of a direct word from God. Great care must of course be exercised to make certain that we are dealing here with the teaching of Scripture, and not an interpretation imposed upon it.

2. Direct implications of Scripture must also be given high priority. They are to be regarded as slightly less authoritative than direct statements, however, because the introduction of an additional step (logical inference) carries with it the possibility of interpretational error.

3. Probable implications of Scripture, that is, inferences that are drawn in cases where one of the assumptions or premises is only probable, are somewhat less authoritative than direct implications. While

deserving respect, such statements should be held with a certain amount of tentativeness.

4. Inductive conclusions from Scripture vary in their degree of authority. Inductive investigation, of course, gives only probabilities. The certainty of its conclusions increases as the proportion between the number of references actually considered and the total number of pertinent references which could conceivably be considered increases.

5. Conclusions inferred from the general revelation, which is less particularized and less explicit than the special revelation, must, accordingly, always be subject to the clearer and more explicit statements of the Bible.

6. Outright speculations, which frequently include hypotheses based upon a single statement or hint in Scripture, or derived from somewhat obscure or unclear parts of the Bible, may also be stated and utilized by the theologians. There is no harm in this as long as the theologian is aware and warns the reader or hearer of what he is doing. A serious problem enters if these speculations are presented with the same degree of authoritativeness attributed to statements of the first category listed above.

The theologian will want to employ all of the legitimate material available, giving it in each case neither more nor less credence than is appropriate in view of the nature of its sources.



## Theology and Critical Study of the Bible

Form Criticism

Background

Axioms

Values of Form Criticism

Criticism of Form Criticism

Redaction Criticism

Development and Nature of the Discipline

Criticisms of Redaction Criticism

Values of Redaction Criticism

Guidelines for Evaluating Critical Methods

O f many factors which have marked the transition from the premodern to the modern period in theology, perhaps the most significant has been the adoption of critical methodology in the study of the Bible. For long periods of time, the task of the exegete was thought of as merely explicating the plain sense of the Bible. The various books of the Bible were assumed to have been written by the persons to whom they were traditionally attributed, and at the dates usually ascribed to them. Most Christians believed that the Bible described events as they had actually occurred. It was thought that a chronology of the Bible could be developed, and indeed this was done by Archbishop James Ussher,

who dated creation at 4004 B.C. Harmonies of the Gospels were formulated, purporting to give something of a biography of Jesus.

Gradually the approach to the study of the Bible changed, however.<sup>1</sup> The discipline of historiography was developing new methodologies. One of these was historical criticism, which, among other things, attempts to ascertain the genuineness or spuriousness of certain documents. This method was used as early as the time of Laurentius Valla, who in 1440 demonstrated the correctness of Nicholas of Cusa's contention that the "Donation of Constantine" was not authentic. This document purported to be from Constantine the Great to Pope Sylvester I, and had been used by the Roman Catholic Church to support its claims to temporal lordship over central Italy. But the critical study by Valla, Reginald Pecock independently in 1450, and many others thereafter, established the spuriousness of the document.

If this method could be used successfully to ascertain the genuineness or spuriousness of the "Donation of Constantine," it seemed reasonable to some to assume that it could also be applied to the books of the Bible. Did Moses actually write the five books traditionally credited to

1. For general introductions to the various types of criticism, the reader is referred to the Guides to Biblical Scholarship series published by Fortress Press (Philadelphia): Norman C. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (1971); Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (1971); Walter E. Rast, *Tradition History and the Old Testament* (1972); Ralph W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament* (1974); Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (1975); J. Maxwell Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian* (1976); William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (1970); Edgar V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* (1969); Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (1969); William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (1973); Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (1976).

General introductions to the Old Testament from a conservative perspective are Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), and Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969). A conservative reaction to the documentary analysis of the Pentateuch is found in Oswald T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1949). The weaknesses of pentateuchal criticism are discussed from a secular viewpoint in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion und Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 377-96. An overview of the historicity of the Old Testament and the use of critical methods is provided by Gordon Wenham, "History and the Old Testament," in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. Colin Brown (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1976), pp. 13-75. For a discussion of sources underlying Old Testament books, see Cyrus Gordon, "Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit," *Christianity Today*, 23 November 1959, pp. 3-6.

For conservative treatments of New Testament criticism see George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), and Everett Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964). Discussions of the historicity of the New Testament may be found in two chapters in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. Colin Brown: F.F. Bruce, "Myth and History," pp. 79-100, and R. T. France, "The Authenticity Of the Sayings of Jesus," pp. 101-43.

him? Did events actually occur as described there? Historical criticism was applied to the Pentateuch, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the "documentary hypothesis" was quite fully developed. It included the following tenets:

1. The Pentateuch is a compilation of several different documents. These are referred to as J, E, D, and P. Proofs of the multiple sources include the use of various divine names, the presence of doublets (repeated or overlapping accounts), and secondary variations in vocabulary and style.
2. The Pentateuch was composed well after the time of Moses.
3. The historical accounts are in many cases inaccurate. Some portions are, in fact, clearly fictional and legendary.
4. According to some forms of the theory, later passages of the Pentateuch can be distinguished from earlier parts on the basis of an evolutionary development of religion which is believed to have taken place.

If this hypothesis were in any sense true, the Bible could not simply be taken at face value and indiscriminately quoted from as being dependable. It would rather be necessary to sift through the Bible to determine what is genuine and what is not. From these early beginnings, critical study of the Bible has become a highly developed procedure, involving even the use of computers. It is possible today to distinguish several types of criticism:

1. Textual criticism (which in the past was sometimes referred to as lower criticism) is the attempt to determine the original text of the biblical books. This is done by comparing the various extant manuscripts. Conservatives have often taken the lead in this endeavor.
2. Literary-source criticism is the effort to determine the various literary sources upon which books of the Bible are based or from which they derive.
3. Form criticism is the endeavor to get behind the written sources of the Bible to the period of oral tradition, and to isolate the oral forms that went into the written sources. Insofar as this attempts to trace the history of the tradition, it is known as tradition criticism.
4. Redaction criticism is a study of the activity of the biblical authors in shaping, modifying, or even creating material for the final product which they wrote.
5. Historical criticism in a sense employs all of the above and, in addition, draws upon the data of archaeology and of secular historical sources. It has as its aim the determination of the authorship and date of

the biblical books, and the establishment and interpretation of what actually occurred historically.

6. Comparative-religions criticism assumes that all religions follow certain common patterns of development. It explains the history of the Judeo-Christian faith in terms of these patterns. A common assumption in this endeavor is that religions develop from polytheism to monotheism.

7. Structural criticism attempts to investigate the relationship between the surface structure of the writing and the deeper implicit structures that belong to literature as such. These implicit structures are the formal literary possibilities with which the author must work.

The view of faith and reason espoused in this text will not permit the question of the relationship between the contents of the Bible and historical reality to be ignored or settled by presumption. We must, then, make some use of the critical methods. Yet there have sometimes been quite violent disagreements over the use of these methods. Those who unqualifiedly accept and employ them may consider those who do not to be naive. The latter, however, often see the critics as destructive and in some cases as not believing the Bible. The stance adopted on this matter, and the assumptions that go into one's methodology, will have a far-reaching effect upon the theological conclusions. It will therefore be necessary to look closely and critically at biblical criticism itself.

The large number and complexity of critical methodologies 'prevent more than a selective examination of some of the issues. We have chosen to limit ourselves to the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels, and to two types of criticism, form and redaction, since an adequate examination of all types of criticism of both Testaments would require several volumes. It is hoped that this chapter will at least illustrate the stance of some conservative biblical scholars and theologians in relation to modern critical methodology. And while it will not be possible within the pages of a treatise of this size to share the process of exegesis of each text cited, this brief chapter may serve to illustrate the type of biblical study which lies behind our citation of those texts.

### Form Criticism

Form criticism was in many ways a logical outgrowth of source criticism, as biblical scholars sought to get behind the written sources to determine the growth of the tradition in the preliterary or oral period. While the early concentration was on the Synoptic Gospels, it has been extended to other portions of the New Testament, and to the Old Testament as well.

### Background

By the year 1900, source critics had reached something of a consensus regarding the Gospels. The earlier traditional belief that Matthew was the earliest Gospel had been supplanted by belief in the chronological priority of Mark. Mark was believed to have been written first, and Matthew and Luke were thought to have depended in their writing upon Mark and another source referred to as "Q" (from the German word *Quelle*, meaning source). This was believed to have been made up, to a large extent, of the sayings of Jesus. In addition, Matthew and Luke were each thought to have relied upon an independent source, initially referred to as "special Matthew" and "special Luke." These independent sources supposedly contained the material unique to the particular Gospel in question. Special Luke, for example, was regarded as the source of the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son.

There was a growing conviction, however, that behind these written documents were oral traditions. Form criticism represented an attempt to get at these oral forms and trace the history of their development. Thus, this methodology has been called *Formgeschichte* or "form-history."<sup>2</sup> The underlying assumption was that knowledge gained from studying the patterns of various forms in other literatures could be applied to the Gospel accounts. Observation of the laws of development followed by the oral forms in other cultures could help lead to an understanding of the development of the forms lying behind the Bible.

### Axioms

1. The stories and sayings of Jesus were first circulated in small independent units.<sup>3</sup> When one looks carefully, the chronological and geographical transitions between many of the stories in the Gospels are seen to be vague. These vague transitions are believed to be the work of an editor trying to fit the stories together in some sort of coherent form. They are particularly noticeable and abrupt in Mark, especially his heavy use of the word *εὐθέως* ("immediately"). Matthew and Luke have done somewhat more skillful editing, thus obscuring the type of loose transitions which are so apparent in Mark.

It is also to be noted that the Gospels present some of the same incidents in different settings. This bears out the view that the evangelists had stories before them "like a heap of unstrung pearls." Mark took

2. Basil Redlich, *Form Criticism Its Value and Limitations* (London: Duckworth, 1939), p. 9.

3. Edgar V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 18.

this heap of pearls and strung them together in a way which seemed to him to make good sense.

2. These self-contained units or elements of material found in the Gospels can be classified according to their literary forms.<sup>4</sup> This tenet is based upon the observation that the oral traditions and literary works of primitive cultures follow comparatively fixed patterns and occur in a few definite styles. First there are the sayings, which include a variety of subtypes: parables, proverbs of the sort found in wisdom literature (such as Jewish, Greek, or Egyptian), prophetic and apocalyptic utterances, legal prescriptions (including community rules), and "I" words (e.g., "I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it"). And then there are the stories, which also include several subtypes: (a) "Apothegm stories" (which Martin Dibelius called "paradigm stories") provide a historical setting for a saying or pronouncement of Jesus. (b) Miracle stories are characteristically made up of a description of the historical situation, including the words Jesus spoke at the time, and a brief remark about the effect of the miracle. (c) Legends resemble the tales or fragments of tales concerning saints or holy men in both Christian and non-Christian traditions. A biographical interest is dominant. An example is the story of the cock's crowing after Peter's denial of Jesus. (d) Myths are literary devices used to convey a supernatural or transcendent truth in earthly form. They are not easily distinguishable from legends. They usually present the words or works of a divine being.<sup>5</sup>

3. Once classified, the various units of Gospel material can be stratified. That is to say, they can be ranged in terms of their relative ages.<sup>6</sup> From this, the historical value of various types of Gospel units can be determined. The earlier the material, the more historically reliable or authentic it is.

The assumption is that the process by which the church handed down the Gospel materials followed the same rules of development which govern the transmission of other oral materials, including popular folk tales. If we know the general processes and patterns that oral traditions follow, it will be possible to ascertain at what stage a certain element is likely to have entered. This is particularly true if we know at what time specific influences were present in the community preserving and transmitting the tradition. In such circumstances it is relatively easy to identify the earlier, purer "strata of tradition."

A comic strip appearing in a college newspaper began with one student telling another, "The president is wearing a red tie today." In the

4. Ibid., p. 20.

5. Ibid., pp. 21-23.

6. Redlich, *Form Criticism*, pp. 73-77.

next frame the second student told a third student, "The president has red ties." This student told a fourth student, "Honest, Prexy is tied in with the Reds." Finally this student exclaimed to an amazed fifth student, "The president is an out-and-out Communist!" If one had only the second and the fourth frames, but not the rest of the story, he could determine which had come first, and probably could reconstruct the first and third frames with a reasonable degree of accuracy. And just like this rumor, oral traditions follow definite patterns of development.

Several conclusions emerge with respect to the Gospel materials. For example, the explanations of the parables do not belong with the parables; the moralizing conclusions often provided are secondary additions.<sup>7</sup> The parables themselves are likelier to go back to Jesus' own sayings than are the explanations and moralizing applications which probably represent the work of the church serving as interpreter.<sup>8</sup> The miracles can often be stratified as well. Some miracles are typically "Jewish" (healings and exorcisms); these accounts are presumed to have arisen during the earlier period, when the church was almost exclusively under Jewish influence. Others are "Hellenistic." The so-called nature miracles, such as the stilling of the waters and the cursing of the fig tree, reflect a Hellenistic interest. They therefore must have entered the tradition at a later period when there were Greek influences upon the church. Since the tradition of the healing miracles arose earlier, they are likelier to be authentic than are the nature miracles.

4. The setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) of the early church can be determined.<sup>9</sup> A careful study of the Gospels will reveal to us the problems faced by the early church, for the form of the tradition was affected by these problems. Specific words of Jesus were preserved in order to deal with the needs of the church. In some cases sayings may even have been created and attributed to him for this purpose. What we have therefore in the Gospels is not so much what Jesus said and did, as what the church preached about him (the kerygma). Why did the church proclaim what it did at this point? To meet the present situation. Even today, by examining the manuscripts of sermons, including the way Jesus' teachings are interpreted, we can often detect what situations and problems the pastor of a local church was dealing with at a given time in his ministry. The same is true of the early church. It preached what met the need. This is not a matter merely of the form, however, but of the

7. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 240.

8. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Study of the Synoptic Gospels," in Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Kunds, *Form Criticism Two Essays on New Testament Research* (New York: Harper, 1941), pp. 46ff.

9. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 4.

content as well, according to the form critic. The church did not merely select the message; it created the message in order to serve the needs of its existential *Sitz im Leben*.

The results of form criticism have varied. Some critics, such as Rudolf Bultmann, are very skeptical about the possibility of knowing what really transpired in the life and ministry of Jesus. Bultmann wrote on one occasion, "One may admit that for no single word of Jesus is it possible to produce positive evidence of its authenticity." This, however, says Bultmann, is not total skepticism: "One may point to a whole series of words found in the oldest stratum of tradition which do give us a consistent representation of the historical message of Jesus."<sup>10</sup>

Others reach much more positive conclusions regarding the historicity of the Gospel accounts; and since the 1950s there has even been a new search for the historical Jesus which takes into account the insights and conclusions of form criticism. A difficulty which has emerged, however, is that if one accepts the methodology of form criticism, he cannot simply utilize the materials of the Gospels as if the presence of a saying or an account there establishes that this is indeed what was said or done. In the view of a large number of form critics, the sayings of Jesus may well be authentic, but there is a grave question about the framework of the narrative. All information about the original situation in which many of the sayings were uttered had been lost. Since these could not simply be left dangling, a skeleton for the sayings was created.<sup>11</sup> Further, it appears that what has been written about Jesus was not from the standpoint of detached observers, but from the position of faith. The authors of the Gospels were committed to Christ, and thus wrote from the perspective of faith and of a desire to influence others to faith in this same Jesus.<sup>12</sup> If the position of most form critics is correct, the Gospels should be seen as more like sales or promotional literature put out by a manufacturer or merchandiser, and less like the carefully controlled research bulletins issuing from an independent scientific laboratory. The question, of course, will be to what extent these materials actually are reliable, and, accompanying and logically preceding that question, to what extent the method being used to determine their reliability is itself reliable and objective.

#### Values of Form Criticism

We need to note the positive contributions of form criticism. Some of these have been ignored at times. Partly this was a reaction to the

<sup>10</sup>Bultmann, "Study of the Synoptic Gospels," p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner, 1935), p. 31.

findings of some early practitioners of form criticism, which were rather extreme denials of the historicity of the Gospels. These early critics were also somewhat extravagant in their estimation of the utility of their method, regarding it as giving conclusive or definitive results. Consequently, a reaction took place on the basis of both the content of the conclusions and the degree of dogmatism with which these results were held. Some of the early reactions to form criticism were similarly extreme, regarding it as a totally negative and ephemeral method. Some of this reaction was due to the association of form criticism with a particular school of theology. In theory at least, form criticism can be employed by persons holding various theologies. But because of the visibility given to Rudolf Bultmann's alignment of form-critical methodology with the demythologization which he practiced, the two came to be regarded as synonymous or at least as inseparable in many people's minds, and the objections to the latter came to be attached to the former. In spite of this, however, we must discuss a number of benefits which have emerged from the use of the methodology.

1. Form criticism has pointed out the vital connection between, on one hand, the incorporation of Jesus' deeds and words into the Gospel accounts and, on the other, the faith and life of his followers.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the clearest statement of this was made by John: "These [things] are written that you may believe" (John 20:31). This was not a neutral observer writing merely to fulfil a scholarly concern for information and desiring to convey that information to others. The Gospel of John was written by a man who was convinced of the value of the one in whom he had come to trust, and who wanted others to do the same. It was not sufficient merely to know what Jesus had done and said, or even to believe that he had done and said these things, or that what he had said was true, and what he had done was worthy of note. It was more important to obey the words of Jesus.

It is also apparent that the Gospel writers were not concerned to dwell upon any aspects of Jesus which were not of significance for faith. For example, we are told nothing about the bodily build of Jesus (although, of course, we would assume that he was of an ideal weight!). We know nothing of the color of his eyes or hair, although we may make some surmises on the basis of his nationality. We are told nothing about the quality of his voice, its pitch, whether he spoke slowly or rapidly, or anything of that type. We are not informed regarding the gestures which he made when teaching or preaching. The reason for this is that these details have nothing to do with the purposes for which the Gospels were written. One's faith is unaffected by whether the message was delivered

<sup>13</sup> Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism*, p. 153.

rapidly or slowly. It is the content, the ideas taught, that is important, not how it was delivered.

It is obvious that a selection was made out of everything which Jesus said and did. John makes this fact very clear (John 21:25). The selection that John made reflected the announced purpose of his writing: that those who hear and read might come to faith. Matters of merely biographical curiosity were omitted. That is why it would be difficult to write a feature article about Jesus. Human-interest items usually are not found in the books of the Bible.

2. The form critics have pointed out that the Gospels are products of the *group* of believers. While this might seem to be a disadvantage, and to lead to skepticism, the opposite is actually the case.<sup>14</sup> If the Gospels had been written by solitary individuals, there might be the sort of private interpretation that so often enters when one lives alone and never has opportunity to share his ideas with others and get their reaction. Out of such situations frequently issue very limited or even distorted understandings. But because the tradition was the possession of the church, the Gospels reflect the sort of well-balanced judgment that is possible when one's ideas are subjected to the scrutiny of others. Personal biases are balanced by the recollection and interpretation of the group as a whole.

3. Form criticism points out that we are able to learn a considerable amount about the early church and the situations it was facing from the material the Gospel writers chose to include and the material they chose to emphasize.<sup>15</sup> Obviously a great deal more could have been included. Some criteria were employed, and certainly the Holy Spirit inspired the recording of matters which he knew would be of importance to the church throughout its history, or at least at later times. Nonetheless, because the revelation did come in what we will later describe as anthropic form, it related particularly to situations which the church was then facing. Consequently, to some extent the history of the early church is illuminated by what is included in the Gospels.

4. Form criticism, when its presuppositions are not contrary to the perspectives and positions of the biblical authors, is able to help confirm some of the basic assertions of Scripture. Here the matter of presuppositions again becomes of crucial importance. At one point in the development of the method, form critics believed that when the earlier strata of tradition were identified, what would emerge would be a rather non-supernatural Jesus, the type of person that Adolf von Harnack believed

14. James Price, *Interpreting the New Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 159.

15. Redlich, *Form Criticism*, p. 79.

he had found, a Jesus who called people to believe with him, not in him, whose message was primarily about the Father, not about himself. This has proven to be an illusory expectation, however. For at what are judged to be the earlier strata of the tradition, we do not find this kind of Jesus emerging.<sup>16</sup> There has therefore tended to be confirmation of the supernaturalness of Jesus. Other aspects suggested by the sayings and stories have also been shown on the criteria of the form critic to be authentic.

#### Criticism of Form Criticism

Yet there are a number of points at which caution must be exercised, points relating to both the presuppositions and the application of form criticism. It will be apparent that there are limitations upon the effective use of this particular method. We must strive to achieve a balance between an uncritical use of critical methodology and simply discarding the method because of its excesses.

1. There seems to be an implicit assumption that the early Christians, or those who preserved the traditions and reduced them to writing, were really not too interested in history. It should be noted, however, that, on the contrary, these were people to whom historical events were very important.<sup>17</sup> The kerygma itself indicates the importance of various events. The crucifixion and resurrection, for example, were very significant in the preaching of Peter (Acts 2:22–36) and the writing of Paul (1 Cor. 15).

Further, the early Christians came from a background in which the idea of God's working in history was very important. The Passover, for instance, was regarded as highly significant because at that time God had specially intervened in history. The law was also regarded as significant because in it God had actually spoken and revealed his will at definite points in history. The early Christians believed that all of this was part of God's great redemptive working in history and that the events occurring in their own time were a continuation and completion.

Stephen Neill has raised the question of why the first-generation church should have been so disinterested in the actions of Jesus and the historical context in which his teachings were set.<sup>18</sup> Why should there have been such a greater concern with the words than with the works? And why, by comparison, should the second-generation believers then

16. Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism*, p. 158.

17. Clark Pinnock, "The Case Against Form Criticism," *Christianity Today*, 16 July 1965, p. 12.

18. Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (New York: Oxford University, 1964). p. 258.

have had such a strong interest in historical events? A possible explanation is that the number of eyewitnesses was beginning to thin. But is it not likely that these eyewitnesses would have passed on information about the setting or framework along with the sayings?

2. There is an assumption in form criticism that the Gospel writers were not persons of historical ability and dependability. But is this assumption valid? The form critic gives the impression that the historical references were created for the occasion, to give a skeleton on which to hang, or into which to insert, the sayings of Jesus. There are several problems with this, however. First, it seems to assume that data about the occurrences were not available. This, however, fails to take account of the eyewitnesses who helped form and preserve the tradition.<sup>19</sup> We also should note that these were men who would place a high value on veracity. James Price observes that in their background tradition was very important. Beyond that, he points out that being Jewish, they were possessed of a conservative mentality. They were prudent and cautious as to what they believed. They simply should not be compared with the naively credulous storytellers of many primitive societies. Nor should the tenacity of the Oriental memory be forgotten. Moreover, in view of what these men proved themselves willing to do and suffer for the sake of what they proclaimed as true, the possibility of intentional falsification is not a tenable suggestion.<sup>20</sup>

In all of this we are, of course, dealing with oral transmission of the tradition. Robert Grant has pointed out that we must look at Frederic Bartlett's classification of two types of oral transmission.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, there is "repeated reproduction"-someone reiterates what he himself has seen or heard. Presumably this is what took place in the early church. There also is "serial remembering"-a tradition is passed on in a chain from one person to another. It is primarily the former that we find in the New Testament. This type of oral transmission tends to be more accurate than the latter.

Each retelling of a story cements it the more firmly in the memory of the teller, particularly if he is highly dedicated to the task. To this day, there are storytellers in nonliterate societies who can recite from memory for several days at a time.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even though there may have

19. Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 41.

20. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, p. 160.

21. Robert M. Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 301; Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (New York: Oxford University, 1932), p. 176.

22. For data from anthropology regarding the memory capacities of storytellers, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Clarendon, 1970), pp. 106, 201-02; *African Folklore*, ed. Richard Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1972).

been a fair amount of prior oral transmission, it is quite possible that we have substantially accurate accounts in the Gospels. And even if we are dealing with the serial-remembering variety of oral transmission, eyewitnesses were still presumably present to serve as checks upon the accuracy of the Gospels. Some form critics have failed to take account of the relatively short time elapsing between the events and the writing. In some cases, as little as twenty years (or even less, if one accepts the theory that the Epistle to the Galatians was written to the churches of provincial rather than geographical Galatia) is involved.

3. The effort to stratify the forms tends to break down. The entire system depends upon this step, yet there are some forms which defy such analysis, and at other points considerable artificiality enters the endeavor.<sup>23</sup> The classification of some items as Judaic and therefore early, and others as Hellenistic and therefore late, seems to assume that a similarity of style indicates a common origin. But is this not somewhat subjective? One author may write in rather different style in different situations, or in dealing with different topics. Another aspect of this problem is the tendency to assume a rather radical dissimilarity between the Jewish and Hellenistic mentalities; some critics even speak of a radical distortion of the tradition in the Hellenistic church. Yet one finds a prevailing Semitic character throughout the Synoptic tradition.

There are some assumptions operative within form criticism which bear further examination, such as the assumption that the miracle stories are largely late additions, and that explicit Christology arose first in the church rather than in the teaching of Christ. Although these assumptions may be correct, they have not yet been sufficiently justified to warrant the extent to which they govern the method.

4. The *Sitz im Leben* is regarded as the explanation for the inclusion or even creation of many items. (At times the crucial distinction between including a story which has been remembered and creating one is overlooked.) But when we compare the Gospels with what we know to have been the *Sitz im Leben* of the church at certain points in its early period, we come up with some strange findings. On the one hand, some matters that we would expect to find Jesus addressing are not present. For example, it would not be surprising to find echoes of issues Paul dealt with in his ministry, such as speaking in tongues, circumcision, Jewish-Gentile relationships, or food offered to idols. Certainly it would have been helpful to the church to have had some word from Jesus on these topics, yet the Gospel accounts are strangely silent. Conversely, some matters are present which we would not expect the church to have

23. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, p. 161.

included. In a period in which the apostolic authority was being established, one would not expect to find references which cast the leaders of the early church in an unfavorable light. Yet incidents are recounted here which tend to compromise the status of some of these leaders. For instance, Mark 8:32-33 records Jesus' rebuke of Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." In Mark 9:19 the disciples' lack of faith and consequent lack of power are recorded. In Mark 9:34, their debate as to which of them was the greatest is reported. In Mark 14:26-72 the inability of the disciples to watch and pray is featured, followed by Peter's cowardly denial. These are not the types of accounts one would expect to find if the *Sitz im Leben* were the prime determinant of inclusion.<sup>24</sup> The other possibility is that what was included and what omitted were determined not by the *Sitz im Leben*, but by the concern of the writers and of the transmitters of the tradition for a reliable and historically accurate account.

5. Form criticism apparently regards uniqueness as the criterion of authenticity. A saying cannot be considered to be an authentic word of Jesus if there are parallels in the rabbinical records or the life of the early church. Bultmann would even deny authenticity if there are parallels within Gnosticism or Hellenism. On this basis, nothing Jesus might have said would be admitted as authentic unless it is unique or without parallels. But as F.F. Bruce points out, this is a standard of authenticity which "would not be countenanced by historical critics working in other fields."<sup>25</sup>

6. Form criticism seems to make little allowance for the possibility of inspiration. It allows no room for active direction and guidance by the Holy Spirit in the process of formation of the oral tradition. Rather, the process was governed by the immanent laws that control the formation of all oral traditions, and the writer was limited to the resources which he had before him. The possibility of the Holy Spirit's so guiding him supernaturally that the traditional material was supplemented or abrogated does not seem to be an option considered by form critics.

7. Finally, the possibility that some of the eyewitnesses may have made written records of what they had just observed is ignored. But what about Matthew the publican, for instance? He was familiar with record-keeping. Edgar Goodspeed discussed this very possibility in his treatise *Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist*.<sup>26</sup> Would it not be strange if not one of the twelve disciples had kept a diary of some sort?

24. Ibid., p. 160.

25. F.F. Bruce, "Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?" in *Evangelical Roots*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 53.

26. Edgar Goodspeed, *Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959).

While form criticism has useful contributions to make in clarifying the biblical account, our judgment of its ability to evaluate the historicity of the material must be tempered by the considerations advanced here.

## Redaction Criticism

### *Development and Nature of the Discipline*

Redaction criticism represents yet another stage in the attempt to understand the Scriptures. While this method has been applied to other portions of the Bible, it is again the Gospels that give us the clearest and fullest indication of its utility. There are various opinions regarding how form criticism, tradition criticism, and redaction criticism relate to one another. Norman Perrin speaks of form criticism in such a way as to include redaction criticism.<sup>27</sup> On one occasion, Grant Osborne refers to both tradition criticism and redaction criticism as stepchildren of form criticism;<sup>28</sup> at another time he speaks of tradition criticism as the critical side of redaction research.<sup>29</sup> For our purposes we will treat tradition criticism as part of form criticism.

The term *form criticism*, if we are to be precise, probably should be applied to the study of forms up to the point of classification, or possibly of stratification, with tradition criticism carrying on from there. We shall regard redaction criticism as an attempt to move beyond the findings of literary-source, form, and tradition criticism, using the insights gathered from them. Whereas form criticism attempts to go back before the first written sources, redaction criticism is concerned, as is literary-source criticism, with the relationship of the authors to the written sources. Literary-source criticism envisions the writers as rather passively compiling the written sources into the final product. Redaction criticism sees them as much more creative in their writing. Noting differences in the way the Synoptic Gospels handle and report the same incidents, redaction critics examine the active role of the evangelists in the production of their Gospel accounts. Redaction criticism finds them to have been genuine authors, not mere reporters or chroniclers on one hand, or editors on another. It rests upon the assumption that the Gospels grew

27. Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 15-32; *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, pp. 2-3.

28. Grant R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Traditionsgeschichte," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 117.

29. Grant R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979): 305.

out of a *theological* concern which each of the Gospel writers had. These men were, in a real sense, more theologians than historians.

The discipline which came to be known as redaction criticism developed and flowered following World War II. While some critics had been utilizing some of its insights, a trio of New Testament scholars were the first to give it full application. Working relatively independently of one another, each concentrated on a different book-Gunther Bornkamm on Matthew,<sup>30</sup> Hans Conzelmann on Luke,<sup>31</sup> and Willi Marxsen on Mark.<sup>32</sup> It was Marxsen who gave the method the name *Redaktionsgeschichte*. In many ways, however, it was Conzelmann's work which had the most important impact upon biblical scholarship. This was in large part because of the status and importance of Luke.

There had been a rather widely held assumption that of all the writers of the New Testament, Luke was probably the model of historical concern, competence, and exactness. The accuracy of his reference to officials in the Roman Empire, his obvious close acquaintance with the customs and life of the empire, and the vividness of his narrative in Acts led many scholars to consider him the first church historian as it were. In some ways he was thought more reliable than many who followed him. Under Conzelmann's scrutiny, however, a different facet of Luke emerges. He is seen as a self-conscious theologian who modified the tradition with which he was working in keeping with his theological motivation. As an example, Luke places the postresurrection appearances of Jesus in Jerusalem, whereas other New Testament testimony depicts them as occurring mostly in Galilee. Luke was motivated in his writing, then, not primarily by a desire to exercise historical accuracy, but by his theological concept of the role of Jerusalem.

The procedure Conzelmann followed was careful comparison of the text of Luke with his sources and especially Mark, a procedure which reveals Luke's editorial activity. When this type of analysis is applied to the other Synoptics, those writers are also seen to have been self-conscious theologians, including, expanding, compressing, omitting, and even creating material for their account in keeping with their theological purposes. In a very real sense, this makes the author simply the last stage in the process of the development of the tradition. Thus it has become customary to speak of three *Sitze im Leben*: (1) the original situation in which Jesus spoke and acted; (2) the situation faced by

30. Gunther Bornkamm et al., *Tradition und Interpretation in Matthew*, trans. Percy Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

31. Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

32. Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

early church in the conduct of its ministry; and (3) the situation of the Gospel writer in his work and purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Redaction criticism's orientation and emphasis are somewhat different from those of form criticism. Form criticism concentrates more upon the independent individual units of material, tending to break them off from the framework. It attempts to understand them in their most fundamental form. Redaction criticism, on the other hand, is more concerned with the framework itself, with later forms of the tradition, and, at the final stage, with the evangelist's own frame of reference.

A number of redaction critics begin like the more radical form critics, assuming that the evangelists were not greatly concerned about what Jesus said and did. On this basis, the Gospel writers are regarded as saying those things that served their purposes. Norman Perrin says that

very much of the materials in the Gospels must be ascribed to the theological motivation of the evangelist... We must take as our starting-point the assumption that the Gospels offer us directly information about the theology of the early church and not about the teaching of the historical Jesus, and that any information we may derive from them about Jesus can only come as a result of the stringent application of very carefully contrived criteria for authenticity.<sup>34</sup>

With such an approach there is, of course, no assumption that what is reportedly a word from Jesus is therefore authentic (i.e., was actually spoken by him). Rather, the burden of proof lies upon the person who assumes the reported words are authentic. Consider the comment of Ernst Käsemann: "The obligation now laid upon us is to investigate and make credible not the possible unauthenticity of the individual unit of material but, on the contrary, its genuineness."<sup>35</sup> Perrin makes a similar comment: "The nature of the synoptic tradition is such that the burden of proof will be upon the claim to authenticity?

In the hands of the more radical redaction critics, a skepticism has arisen not unlike that of the more extreme form critics. For now many of the sayings attributed to Jesus must be understood as actually the words of the evangelist. If form criticism says that the Gospels give us more of the faith of the church than the words of Jesus, then redaction criticism says the Gospels give us to a large extent the theology of

33. Joachim Rohde, *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 21ff.

34. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 69.

35. Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1964), p. 34.

36. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 39.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Faith becomes a faith, not in the Jesus who was, but in the Jesus who was believed in, and whom the evangelists want us to believe in.

Rather lengthy lists of criteria have been drawn up in efforts to determine what are traditional and what are redactional materials. William Walker has compiled a list of steps to follow in attempting to distinguish redactional from traditional material.<sup>37</sup> He proceeds on the assumption (a rather conservative one) that material is to be considered traditional unless there is good reason to consider it redactional. His criteria include both functional and linguistic factors. Among passages which on the basis of their function may be considered redactional are those which (1) explain, interpret, or otherwise comment upon the accompanying material; (2) provide condensed summaries of some general feature of Jesus' preaching, teaching, healing, or fame; (3) foreshadow or anticipate events to be related later in the Gospel; (4) introduce collections of sayings or narrative material; (5) provide brief indications of time, place, or circumstance. Significant linguistic phenomena occurring often in one Gospel but seldom or never in the others may be a sign of redactional origin. While Walker lays the burden on proving that a piece of material is redactional rather than traditional, many others would turn the process around.

#### Criticisms of Redaction Criticism

R. S. Barbour has pointed up well the shortcomings of redaction criticism:<sup>38</sup>

1. Redaction criticism seems to credit the evangelists with a remarkable refinement of theological purpose and method. The authors apparently utilized a great degree of subtlety and indirectness in the arrangement and modification of their material, creating their own new emphases for old stories and sayings. It is almost as if they had mastered modern methods of verisimilitude. In this respect they are virtually without parallel in the ancient or even the modern world. But it seems unlikely that they had this amount of ingenuity and creativity.

2. The search for the *Sitz im Leben* has a tendency to assume that everything in the Gospels or even the entire New Testament is said with a particular audience and a particular issue in view. While this is true of

37. William A. Walker, "A Method for Identifying Redactional Passages in Matthew on Functional and Linguistic Grounds," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 76-93.

38. R. S. Bat-hour, "Redaction Criticism and Practical Theology," *Reformed World* 33 (1975): 263-65.

much of the New Testament, it is highly questionable that all of it should be so regarded.

3. The force of linguistic or stylistic criteria varies greatly. It may indeed be of significance that the little word *τότε* (then) occurs ninety-one times in Matthew, six times in Mark, fourteen in Luke, and ten in John. But to conclude that a certain phrase is redactional because it occurs four times in Luke and Acts but not in the other Gospels is unwarranted.

4. It is sometimes assumed that the theology of the author can be determined from the editorial passages alone. But the traditional material is in many respects just as significant for this purpose, since the editor did choose to include it after all.

5. Redaction criticism as a method limits itself to the investigation of the situation and purpose of the evangelists. It does not raise questions of the historicity of the material recorded in their works. There is a tendency in redaction criticism to follow the *Geschichte-Historie* distinction found in form criticism. It is supposed that the Gospel writers were concerned with the significance of history, its impact on lives and the church (*Geschichte*), not with the facts of history, what actually happened (*Historie*). It was the present experience with the risen Lord which motivated the evangelists. Both their view of the past and their hope for the future were shaped by the experience in the present. According to Perrin, the Gospels are in a sense very similar to the letters to the seven churches found in the opening chapters of Revelation. Although the Gospels take the form of stories and sayings from the past and Revelation is focused on the future, in both cases it is Jesus' message to the present that is important.<sup>39</sup> And since the Gospel writers, then, were relatively unconcerned about what actually occurred in the past, so is redaction criticism.

#### Values of Redaction Criticism

We have seen that there are problems with redaction criticism if it is taken as a means of distinguishing the traditional and the redactional material. This is particularly so if we assume that no given unit shall be considered authentic unless demonstrated to be so. But are there not values in a careful use of redaction criticism if the criteria of authenticity are made more reasonable and some of the more subjective methodological assumptions are eliminated or restrained?

Here we should note that there are at least two meanings of redaction

39. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 78.

criticism, a wider and a narrower sense.<sup>40</sup> In the narrower sense, it refers to a school of German scholarship whose members (not all of whom are of German nationality) regard themselves as the successors of the form critics. In the broader sense, it includes all works in which the evangelists are not treated as mere compilers, but as authors with a point of view or even a theology of their own. In this latter sense, there have been redaction critics throughout much of the history of the church, even before the rise of modern methods of criticism. They have attempted simply to see the distinctive ways in which each author adapted and applied the material which he had received. The work of these critics can be of benefit to the evangelical biblical scholar.

A number of evangelical biblical scholars have argued for a restricted use of redaction criticism. They note that the late Ned B. Stonehouse of Westminster Seminary was using its sounder methods before the school of redaction criticism even developed. They advocate utilizing its techniques, but on the foundation of presuppositions harmonious with the stated claims of the Bible itself. Redaction criticism is seen as a means of elucidating the meaning of biblical passages, rather than a means of making negative judgments about historicity, authenticity, and the like.

Grant Osborne lists three values of redaction criticism?

1. Sound redaction criticism can help rebut the destructive use of critical tools and substantiate the veracity of the text.
2. The delineating of redactional emphases aids the scholar in determining the particular emphases of the evangelists.
3. Use of the redactional tools helps answer Synoptic problems.

To these I would add a fourth. By observing how a given evangelist adapted and applied the material he had received, we can gain insight into how the message of Christ can be adapted to new situations which we encounter. For these biblical authors were doing essentially what a preacher or teacher does today in communicating his message to an audience.<sup>42</sup>

The activity of the evangelists, then, included interpretation. They were taking Jesus' statements and paraphrasing them, expanding them, condensing them. They were, however, remaining true to the original teaching of Jesus. Just as a preacher or writer today may make the same point somewhat differently or vary the application in accordance with the audience, so the evangelists were adapting, but not distorting, the

40. George B. Caird, "The Study of the Gospels. III: Redaction Criticism," *The Expository Times* 87 (1976): 169.

41. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," pp. 313-14.

42. Barbour, "Redaction Criticism," pp. 265-66.

tradition. And the idea that they actually created sayings of Jesus, putting their own words and ideas in his mouth, is to be rejected. R. T. France says:

Our conclusion from all this is that while it is undeniable that the evangelists and their predecessors adapted, selected, and reshaped the material which came down to them, there is no reason to extend this "freedom" to include the *creation* of new sayings attributed to Jesus; that in fact such evidence as we have points decisively the other way, to a respect for the sayings of Jesus as such which was sufficient to prevent any of his followers attributing their own teaching to him.<sup>43</sup>

What we have, then, is not *ipsissima verba*, but the *ipsissima vox*. We do not have exactly the words which Jesus spoke, but we do have the substance of what he said. We have what Jesus would have said if he were addressing the exact group which the evangelist was addressing. Thus the Gospel writers cannot be accused of misrepresenting or misconstruing what Jesus said.

*Inerrancy does not demand that the Logia Jesu (the sayings of Jesus) contain the ipsissima verba (the exact words) of Jesus, only the ipsissima vox (the exact voice).* ... When a New Testament writer cites the sayings of Jesus, it need not be that Jesus said those exact words. Undoubtedly the exact words of Jesus are to be found in the New Testament, but they need not be so in every instance. For one thing, many of the sayings were spoken by our Lord in Aramaic and therefore had to be translated into Greek. Moreover, ... the writers of the New Testament did not have available to them the linguistic conventions that we have today. Thus it is impossible for us to know which of the sayings are direct quotes, which are indirect discourse, and which are even freer renderings. With regard to the sayings of Jesus what, in light of these facts, would count against inerrancy? If the sense of the words attributed to Jesus by the writers was not uttered by Jesus, or if the exact words of Jesus are so construed that they have a sense never intended by Jesus, then inerrancy would be threatened.<sup>44</sup>

One way in which the more conservative understanding of redaction criticism differs from the more skeptical variety is in their explanations of the precise nature of the evangelist's redaction work. Several positions are possible, for example, with respect to the origin of a saying of

43. France, "Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," p. 125; cf. Rohde, *Rediscovering*, p. 258.

44. Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 301.

**Jesus** which is found in one of the Gospels but not in the tradition. One position is that, if the writer was fully dependent upon the received tradition for what he wrote, this saying must represent a creation on his part, an imposition, as it were, of his own view upon Jesus.<sup>45</sup> A second position is that a saying found in the Bible but not in the tradition may have been an attempt to give expression to the believers' present experience with the risen Lord. That is, it may have been an attempt to relate the early church's understanding of its present situation (its *Sitz im Leben*) directly to the figure of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> A third possibility is that although the saying in question was not uttered by Jesus during his earthly ministry, it was nevertheless specially revealed by the risen and ascended Lord to the evangelist.<sup>47</sup> A fourth possibility is that the saying was actually uttered by Jesus during his earthly ministry, but not preserved in the tradition. It was something of which the Gospel writer had knowledge independent of the tradition. This may have been through the availability of other sources, his own memory or notes if he was an eyewitness, or even a direct revelation from God.<sup>48</sup> Only in the case of the first two positions would there seem to be a question about the truthfulness of the Scripture. And where, in contrast to what we have just been discussing, Scripture does reflect traditional material, but in a modified form, what we have are not changes in Jesus' sayings, but rather a "highlighting of different nuances of meaning" within those sayings.<sup>49</sup>

#### Guidelines for Evaluating Critical Methods

There are some guidelines which will help preserve us from overestimating the utility and conclusiveness of critical methodologies, and from adopting inappropriate forms of them.

1. We need to be on guard against assumptions which are antisupernatural in import. For example, if the miraculous (and particularly the resurrection of Jesus) is considered unhistorical because it contradicts our uniform experience of today, we ought to be aware that something of Bultmann's "closed continuum," according to which all events are bound in a causal network, is present.

2. We need to be watchful for the presence of circular reasoning.

45. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, p. 9.

46. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 78.

47. Gerald Hawthorne, in a paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Wheaton, Illinois, December 1973.

48. Robert Gundry, *The Use of the OT in St. Matthew? Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), pp. 181-85.

49. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," pp. 313, 322.

Critics who use stories in the Gospels to help them reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church, and then use this *Sitz im Leben* to explain the origin of these same stories, are guilty of circular reasoning.<sup>50</sup>

3. We should be watchful for unwarranted inferences. A similarity of thought is sometimes understood to indicate a common origin or a causal connection. Identifying the circumstances in which an idea was taught is sometimes thought to exclude the possibility of its having been taught in other circumstances. It is supposed that a saying which expresses a belief of the church was never spoken by Jesus. There is a suppressed premise here, namely, "If something is found in the teaching of the church (or Judaism), it could not have been part of Jesus' teaching as well." Uniqueness (what Perrin calls "dissimilarity"<sup>51</sup> and Reginald Fuller calls "distinctiveness"<sup>52</sup>) is regarded as the criterion of authenticity. But this assumption, when laid bare in this fashion, begins to look rather arbitrary and even improbable.

4. We need to be aware of arbitrariness and subjectivity. For example, redaction critics often attach a considerable degree of conclusiveness to their reconstructions of the *Sitz im Leben*, to their explanations of causes and origins. Yet these conclusions really cannot be verified or checked by an independent means. One way to assess the reliability of a method would be to apply it to a contemporary or recent piece of writing, in which case it is possible to verify or falsify the analysis. C. S. Lewis complains that some of the analyses and explanations of his writings simply have not squared with the actual facts. But if this is the case with Lewis's writings, what are we to think of some of the explanations of the origins of elements of the Gospels? As Lewis says, Mark is dead. The conclusions of his critics really cannot be tested.<sup>53</sup>

5. We should be alert to the presence of assumptions regarding an antithetical relationship between faith and reason. For example, Perrin speaks of the view that the early Christian preaching was interested in historical reminiscence and the "opposite view" that it was theologically motivated.<sup>54</sup> This seems to suggest that there is a conflict between theological motivation (faith) and historical interest and concern. This

50. M. D. Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75 (1972): 570-81.

51. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 15-49.

52. Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1966), pp. 91-104.

53. C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 159-62. See also Walter Kaufmann's devastating criticism of "Quellenscheidung" and his parody analyzing Goethe's *Faust* (*Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 377-88). Coming as it does from a secular writer, Kaufmann's criticism is even more impressive than Lewis's

54. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 40.

apparent conflict is reflected in the rather sharp distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. And this in turn goes back to Søren Kierkegaard's distinction between objective and subjective thinking; he asserted that the amount of inward passion or subjectivity is inversely proportional to the amount of objective evidence or certainty.<sup>55</sup> This view of faith and reason may be correct (although I do not think so). We should be aware, however, that it is only an assumption.

6. We need to note that in all these matters we are dealing with probability rather than certainty, and that where probabilities build upon one another, there is a cumulative effect upon the conclusion. For example, if we work with a premise which has a probability of 75 percent, then the probability of the conclusion is 75 percent. If, however, we work with two such premises, the probability of the final conclusion is only 56 percent; three, 42 percent; four, 32 percent. In much of redaction criticism there is a whole series of such premises, each depending upon the preceding one, and with a correspondingly declining probability. This should be kept in mind when evaluating the conclusions of redaction criticism.

It should be apparent that biblical criticism need not be negative in its results. When the method is formulated using assumptions that are open to the possibility of the supernatural and of the authenticity of the materials, and criteria are applied that are not more severe than those used in other areas of historical inquiry, very positive results occur. Thus Joachim Jeremias says that the language and style of the Synoptic Gospels show "so much faithfulness and such respect towards the tradition of the sayings of Jesus that we are justified in drawing up the following principle of method: In the Synoptic tradition it is the inauthenticity, and not the authenticity, of the sayings of Jesus that must be demonstrated."<sup>56</sup> This of course rests upon an assumption of the reliability of the sources, but this assumption, when tested against the data, proves more tenable than the alternative.

Biblical criticism, then, if carefully used and based upon assumptions that are consistent with the full authority of the Bible, can be a helpful means of shedding further light on the meaning of Scripture. And although the Bible need not satisfy biblical criticism's criteria of authenticity to be accepted as dependable, when it does satisfy those standards, we have additional confirmation of its reliability.

55. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1941), pp. 182ff.

56. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1971), vol. 1, p. 37.

# 5

## Contemporizing the Christian Message

### The Challenge of Obsolescence

#### The Locus of Permanence in Christianity

- An Institution
- Acts of God
- Experiences
- Doctrines
- A Way of Life

#### Two Approaches to Contemporizing Theology

- Transformers
- Translators

#### Criteria of Permanence

- Constancy Across Cultures
- Universal Setting
- A Recognized Permanent Factor as a Base
- Indissoluble Link with an Experience Regarded as Essential
- Final Position Within Progressive Revelation

### The Challenge of Obsolescence

One problem of particular concern to the theologian, and of course to the entire Christian church, is the apparent difference between the world of the Bible and the present world. Not only the language and

concepts, but in some cases the entire frame of reference seems so sharply different. We begin this chapter by describing an extreme view of the difference.

Rudolf Bultmann shook the theological world with his essay "New Testament and Mythology?" In it he observed that the New Testament gives us a mythical view of the world. This is seen most obviously in its conception of cosmology. According to Bultmann, the New Testament views the world as essentially a three-storied structure, with heaven, containing God and the angels, up above; earth, the habitation of man, in between; and hell, with the devil and his demons, below. Even on the earth, what occurs is not merely a series of natural events. Miracles occur. God appears, and his angels communicate messages and assist man. Demons from the realm below afflict man, creating illnesses and other woes, and even taking possession of man on occasion. God may inspire the thoughts of man or guide his actions. He may give him heavenly visions. He may give him the supernatural power of his Spirit. The world is the battlefield on which is taking place a great struggle or combat between these forces of good and evil. But the time is coming, and coming soon, when this will come to a cataclysmic end. There will be the woes of the last time, after which the Judge will come from heaven, the dead will rise, the last judgment will take place, and everyone will enter his final state, either of eternal salvation or eternal damnation.<sup>2</sup>

According to Bultmann, this mythological view of the world was the general view of reality at the time the Bible was written. It can be found in the Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic redemption myths. There is, in other words, nothing unique in the Bible's cosmology. The Bible merely reflects a first-century perspective. As such, its ideas on these matters are obsolete for us today.<sup>3</sup>

Bultmann asserts that the three-story view of the universe is untenable for anyone today. Copernicus has made this so for any aware, alert, thinking person of our time, or, for that matter, of any time since Copernicus himself. (It simply is not possible to revive the idea of a flat earth, despite persons who hold membership in the Flat Earth Society. These people insist that the space shots are all staged in a studio, with the views of the earth purportedly transmitted from the moon being mere mockups.) For the vast majority of persons living today, it is not possible

1. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 1-44.

2. Ibid., pp. 1-2. By myth, Bultmann means imagery drawn from the perceived world by which man tries to express his understanding of himself and of the unseen spiritual powers.

3. Ibid., p. 3.

to hold to the ancient idea of a flat earth with four corners. The same is true of the idea that illnesses are caused by demon possession. Modern medicine has shown us that illnesses are caused by bacteria and viruses, not by demon possession. In view of our new understanding of natural causation, the miracles of the New Testament are no longer regarded as miraculous, just as the idea of Jesus' ascension to a heavenly place has disappeared with the loss of the mythical three-tiered universe.<sup>4</sup> The mythical biblical eschatology is similarly untenable, if for no other reason than that the second coming of Christ has not taken place. If we do expect within time an end to the universe as we know it, we undoubtedly expect it to happen through some form of catastrophe, such as a nuclear holocaust, rather than through the mythical event of the return of Christ. It is impossible to take these myths literally. What Bultmann suggests is a reinterpretation of them.<sup>5</sup>

If Bultmann raises logical objections to holding what he regards as outmoded myths, there is also a psychological difficulty. The average Christian, even the one who attends church regularly, lives in two different worlds. On Sunday morning, from eleven o'clock to noon, he lives in a world in which axheads float, rivers stop as if dammed, donkeys speak, people walk on water, dead persons come back to life, even days after death, and a child is born to a virgin mother. But during the rest of the week, the Christian functions in a very different atmosphere. Here technology, the application of modern scientific discoveries, is the norm. He drives away from church in his modern automobile, with automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, AM-FM stereo radio, air conditioning, and other gadgets. He goes to his home, which has similar up-to-date features. In practice the two worlds clash. In the Christian's biblical world, when people are ill, prayer is uttered for divine healing. In his secular world, they go to the doctor, or if worse comes to worst, to the Mayo Clinic. For how long can this kind of schizophrenia be maintained? These are the problems, as Bultmann views the situation.

### The Locus of Permanence in Christianity

Bultmann contends that the outmoded conceptions can and must be changed, but that in so doing we do not lose the genius of Christianity. It is still Christianity. But has he in fact lost the essence of the religion in so doing? Here we must ask the question, What must we retain in order to maintain genuine Christianity, or to remain genuinely Christian?

4. Ibid., p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 5.

Different theologians and segments of Christianity have suggested various answers as to what is the abiding element in Christianity: (1) an institution, (2) acts of God, (3) experiences, (4) doctrines, (5) a way of life.

#### *An Institution*

A first answer is that the permanent element in Christianity is institutional. Perhaps the purest form of this answer is the traditional Roman Catholic view. According to this view, God has given a final deposit of truth to the church. Revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle. Since that time the church has not been adding to the content of revelation, but declaring or defining what has been revealed. It adds new dogmas, but not new revelation. The church, as successor of the apostles, to whom the truth was entrusted, has the authority to promulgate these new dogmas by expounding them. It also is the infallible interpreter of these dogmas once they are promulgated. Consequently, the church is the constant factor. The truth to be believed is the current teaching of the church. While dogma may grow and modify, the church remains constant.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Acts of God*

Another answer given in recent years is that the permanent element of Christianity is certain unique historical events or mighty acts of God. This is the position taken by the "biblical theology" or "Heilsgeschichte" school of thought.<sup>7</sup> Most biblical accounts are not necessarily accurate or normative, for the Bible includes much more than these central unique acts. Biblical religion consists of the response of human persons to these acts of God. Thus, most of the narratives are merely interpretations by the covenant people of what they believed God had done. The one great event of the Old Testament, the one act of God, is the exodus. The events reported as preceding the exodus are the Hebrews' interpretations of their past as based upon the faith gained at the exodus. These are not so much literal histories of what God did as they are parables expressive of the Hebrews' faith. They represent what the Hebrews expected the kind of God that they had experienced to have performed.

6. "Dogma," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 4, pp. 947-48.

7. G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959); Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

Similarly, the postexodus accounts are to be understood as their interpretation of subsequent events through the perspective of the faith they had gained in the exodus. They saw God's hand at work in all sorts of occurrences.

For this school of thought there are, in effect, two acts of God: the exodus in the Old Testament and the "Christ event" in the New. Thus, the Bible is not so much an account of the acts of God as of Hebrew religion. A subtle shift has taken place. Emphasis is no longer on God as the subject of the verbs of the Bible, but on Hebrew religious faith and Hebrew minds as the subjects of the verbs in modern books on the meaning of the Bible. As Langdon Gilkey pointed out in a classic article, the shift is concealed by putting the verbs in the passive voice ("was seen to be," "was believed to be," i.e., by the Hebrews).<sup>8</sup>

On this basis, it is the acts of God, not biblical accounts, which are the permanent and authoritative element in Christianity. Here the distinction between biblical theology, as what the Hebrews believed, and systematic theology, as what we believe, becomes crucial. Gilkey sees this approach as a view which is half liberal and modern on the one hand, and half biblical and orthodox on the other.<sup>9</sup> For those who hold to it say that in developing our theology for today, or, for that matter, our religion, we are to retain the central acts of God as normative. They were once-for-all occurrences. On the other hand, the interpretations which were given to previous and subsequent events may be freely replaced by more appropriate and currently informed understandings.

#### *Experiences*

Yet another answer is that abiding experiences are the essence, the permanent factor, of Christianity. While doctrinal beliefs may change, people of all periods have the same experiences. A notable example of such experiences is the universal hope of immortality. Harry E. Fosdick considers the biblical idea of the resurrection of the body as the way persons living in that time gave expression to their hope of immortality. Given the Hebrew conception of Sheol, a place just beneath the surface of the earth where the dead abide in an empty and meaningless existence, it is not surprising that people hoped for a restoration to the earth, a resurrection from Sheol.<sup>10</sup> Added to this was the influence of Zoroastrianism, which during the exile became the mold into which the

8. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194-205.

9. Ibid., pp. 198, 194.

10. Harry E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p. 99.

Hebrew expectation of a life beyond death was poured. Thus, the hope that death would not be final came to take the familiar form of an intermediate state between death and judgment day, a general resurrection of righteous and unrighteous, a judgment and the consigning of these body-souls to heaven or hell. Although the New Testament makes some modifications, it still presents this basic view.<sup>11</sup>

Fosdick finds the idea of a bodily resurrection grossly materialistic. In his view it is not necessary to preserve this particular doctrine. What is essential is to retain the abiding experience out of which it arose, and which it satisfies. This experience is the expectation of future life. This expectation can be retained within a different "mental framework." Fosdick is aware that he is changing doctrinal or conceptual understandings.<sup>12</sup> This is not of any consequence to Fosdick, however, since nothing in human history seems so changeable as mental categories. They rise and fall and pass away. They are merely transient phrasings of permanent convictions and experiences. He suggests that the hope of immortality can be preserved while a different doctrinal understanding is substituted for the idea of bodily resurrection. The new understanding that he proposes is the immortality of the soul. This particular insight was first propounded by Origen. Fosdick maintains that with this conception he and others like him have comforted the bereaved, rendered the "patient continuance" of old age more joyful, and made youth's struggle for character more worthwhile. This conception helps clarify the universal experience of the ancient Hebrews and contemporary Christians.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Doctrines*

Some have contended that the permanent and unchanging in Christianity consists of certain doctrines presented in biblical times and continuing to the present. Unlike Fosdick, those who hold this view insist that modern conceptions may not be substituted for biblical doctrines. J. Gresham Machen was an articulate defender of this view. He takes particular note of the attempt to separate Jesus' ethical teaching from the doctrine which accompanied it. Some, for example, have maintained that Jesus' disciples, in rooting their faith in the event of Jesus' life and death, were actually going beyond his intentions. According to this view, Jesus simply proclaimed a kingdom of God without making himself the object of belief. He did not conceive of himself as the Messiah. This

11. Ibid., p. 100.

12. Ibid., p. 101.

13. Ibid., p. 103.

theory, however, has proved unsustainable.<sup>14</sup> Although William Wrede and Adolf von Harnack reconstructed a Jesus without the messianic self-understanding, they did so by a careful selection of passages. Yet in spite of the careful selection of certain portions such as the Sermon on the Mount, there remains an ineradicable problem. For even here, where Jesus talked much about the kind of behavior which is to characterize the citizens of the kingdom, there is a peculiar approach. Whereas the prophets said, "Thus says the Lord," Jesus announced, "I say to you." He evidently regarded himself as someone having the right to supersede the law, and on his own authority at that.<sup>15</sup>

Let us for the moment bypass such considerations and see what happens if we construct a Christianity which retains and practices only the ethical teachings of Jesus. Suppose we take the position that the doctrines are there and were taught by Jesus, but we are not bound to abide by them. We may freely ignore these doctrines (since they are now untenable) and merely practice the application of Jesus' sublime ethical teachings. But what is the result? Take the Golden Rule, for example, says Machen. If all of society applied the rule ("Do unto others as you would have others do unto you"), would that really solve society's problems? In some instances the Golden Rule might well work not for good but for evil. Take the case of someone trying to recover from alcoholism, for example. His former drinking partners, if they follow the rule, will of course offer him a drink, for that is what they would want someone to do for them. Thus, the Golden Rule becomes a powerful obstacle in the way of moral advance. The problem here, however, lies not with the rule, but with the interpretation of its scope. Like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule was not addressed to the entire world. Jesus intended it to be practiced by his disciples, citizens of the kingdom of God. (Here we get into the matter of doctrine.) They are persons who have undergone moral and spiritual transformation. If they do to others what they would have others do to them, they will do what is right, for the things they desire done to themselves are high and pure. And beyond that, the ability to do to others what one wants done to oneself presupposes a transformation and an infusion of spiritual power. The ethical teaching is insufficient without the reality which is spoken of by the doctrine lying behind the Golden Rule. If we ignore or alter the doctrine, the ethical teaching loses its validity.<sup>16</sup> And for that matter, the experiences of which Fosdick speaks so glowingly are really not possible without the doctrinal truths which guarantee them.

14. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), p. 34.

15. Ibid., p. 36.

16. Ibid., pp. 37-38.

A final view identifies the locus of permanence as a particular way of life, or, in other words, a particular ethic. Following in the direction pointed by Immanuel Kant and later by Albrecht Ritschl, those who hold to this view see the essence of religion as lying in behavior rather than belief. Walter Rauschenbusch was one of the leading exponents of this view.

To determine the real nature and purpose of Christianity, Rauschenbusch observes, we must see it in its pure and unperverted form as it was in the heart of Jesus Christ, for it has been modified in significant ways throughout church history. Jesus' understanding and expression of Christianity can be summed up in the simple phrase "the reign of God." It was the center of his parables and prophecies. It was the basis for all that he did. This is the first and most essential dogma of the Christian faith. The reign of God is the lost social ideal of Christianity (the sixteenth-century Reformation was merely a revival of Pauline theology). What Rauschenbusch is calling for is a renewal of the spirit and aims of Jesus himself.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus' teaching regarding the reign of God in human hearts was not something novel and unprecedented, according to Rauschenbusch. If this were the case, it would never have received the positive reaction which it did. Rather, he was simply continuing and elaborating the prophets' emphasis upon personal and social righteousness.<sup>18</sup> Jesus opposed the popular conceptions at those points where they were in conflict with these ideals. What he proposed was a kingdom of God on earth; he never mentioned it in connection with heaven.<sup>19</sup> It is this concern for righteousness, justice, social equality, and democracy that was the core of Jesus' teaching and practice. It should be our ideal also.

## Two Approaches to Contemporizing Theology

It should be apparent, from the view of religion adopted in the first chapter, that the doctrinal content is one of the major components of Christianity, and is therefore to be preserved. For our purposes in this volume, it will be regarded as the most important permanent element. But if we are to maintain the pertinence of the Christian religion, we

<sup>17</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> I bid., pp. 50ff.

<sup>19</sup> I bid., p. 66.

must at this point introduce an additional concern: how to contemporize theology.

There are two differing approaches taken by those who see the beliefs involved in Christianity as important but in need of contemporary statement. (In this section we are no longer considering those persons who do not consider the concepts of great importance and who are therefore somewhat indifferent as to what is done with them.) The classification used by William Hordern is helpful. He denominates the two types of approach as those of the translators and the transformers.<sup>20</sup> The translators are theologians who feel a need for reexpressing the message in a more intelligible form, but intend to retain the content, as one does when translating from one language to another. The transformers, however, as the name would indicate, are prepared to make rather serious changes in the content of the message in order to relate it to the modern world. This latter, more radical view will be examined first.

### Transformers

The transformer is convinced that the world has undergone a serious change since biblical times. Whether he is thinking of the technological transformations of the last few years or the large changes in basic science in this century and earlier, the world of today is simply no longer the world in which Christianity arose and grew. Moreover, Christianity's beliefs as they stand are so inseparably tied to that ancient world-view that they cannot be maintained independently of it. In other words, the beliefs are the dependent variable, the broader intellectual milieu the independent constant. There really is no possibility of retaining the beliefs by merely restating or modernizing them.

Liberals espouse this position. While there are some who prefer the label *modernist*, seeing themselves as updaters of the old beliefs, they do not really regard the essence of Christianity as bound up with the particular doctrines that were held by ancient believers. Thus, it is not necessary to conserve or preserve those doctrines.

The transformers also believe that man has radically changed with the passage of time. Whereas at one point the message may have been suitable and helpful to man in addition to being acceptable to him, he is now so different, his very nature so altered, that the message will fall on unresponsive or even rejecting ears.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> William Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-42.

Here modern man is made the measure of truth. Since truth is to a large extent considered relative, man today is the judge of what is right and wrong. In no real sense is there the idea of a revelation from God which somehow is the source and criterion of truth. Thus, there is nothing normative outside human experience, nothing which could sit in judgment upon man's ideas. If there is to be any alteration to produce consistency between traditional Christianity and modern man's thinking, it is Christian doctrine which must change, not man. Relevance is the key word, rather than authoritativeness. If the Christian message does not prove acceptable to man, then the message may and should be altered as necessary. The sources from which the content of Christianity is drawn will thus be considerably broader than in traditional Christianity. Not merely some sacred documents of truth, but rather the whole sweep of literature, philosophy, and the sciences is to be consulted in informing the Christian belief.

A clear case of the transformer approach is the Death of God theology, which had a brief but spectacular life in the middle 1960s. It was a distinctly American theology, although it had parallels, such as the thought of John A. T. Robinson in England. The best-known representatives of the movement were Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul Van Buren. The very name of the movement is indicative of how radically these men were willing to carry out their objective of transforming the Christian message. They would even give up the traditional belief in God if necessary. Certainly no belief of Christianity could be more basic than God.

These theologians found the conception of God untenable. For some of them, the death of God meant the unreality of the idea of God or the word *God*. Paul Van Buren, following the method of analytical philosophy, found the concept to be without meaning in an empirically oriented world.<sup>22</sup> In part, all of this resulted from what the Death of God theologians regarded as a breakdown in the neoorthodox view of revelation.<sup>23</sup> According to neoorthodoxy, God is not known through nature or through experiences generally and universally available to all men, but through and in his special personal encounter with man. But this encounter, which cannot be controlled or forced, did not seem to the Death of God theologians to be occurring any longer. There seemed to be an absence of the presence of God. Further, the familiar capacity to experience God seemed to have dried up for many modern men. Some

Christians find God meaningfully within certain settings. A quiet sanctuary, stained-glass windows, an organ playing certain types of music, evoke religious feelings for many people, simply because of their conditioned responses to these stimuli. Some persons cannot hear or sing "How Great Thou Art" without feeling pious. Increasing numbers of contemporary persons, however, do not have such a response. They have never had this type of experience. Thus, the Death of God theologians concluded, the "sense of the presence of God" must be a psychological rather than religious phenomenon.

There is also the problem here of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "a world come of age." In past times, God was the answer to puzzles and the solution to problems. Whatever could not be understood was explained as caused by God. This led to the expression the "god of the gaps"—the gaps being lacunae in man's knowledge. As knowledge has grown, however, the place of God as an explanatory principle has correspondingly shrunk. He has retreated from first one island and then another. Geology, biology, and psychology have each in turn displaced God. The other familiar function performed by God, the solution of problems, has also tended to evaporate. In biblical times, if a man's wife was barren, prayers were offered to God to "open her womb" so that children might be born to them. Sarah and Hannah are two notable biblical instances. In our day, a woman goes to a gynecologist, who prescribes fertility pills; and a child (or children) is born. In the Bible, if there was a drought, man prayed to God to send rain, and it rained. Today, modern man finds a cloud containing some moisture, flies over it and seeds it with silver iodide or something of that sort, and rain falls! God is, as it were, unemployed. The familiar place which he occupied in human experience is now filled by others. He is not needed as part of the world, and consequently the concept of God is not meaningful to man.<sup>24</sup>

There is more to the problem, however. Man's difficulty is not merely the absence of the experience of God.<sup>25</sup> It is the experience of the absence of God. The problem of evil is real and serious. To see the destructiveness of nature is disturbing to one who believes in an all-powerful divine being. And beyond that is the problem of moral evil. Man's cruelty and indifference to his fellow man are appalling. If God is really God, if he is all-powerful and all-loving, he would certainly desire to prevent this type of evil in the world and would be able to do so. The continued presence of evil in both forms seems to argue loudly and eloquently against the existence of such a God.

If Van Buren and Hamilton come at the problem from the perspective

22. Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

23. William Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 27.

24. Ibid., pp. 35-36, 39.

25. Ibid., p. 25.

of a reasoned intellectual concern, Altizer comes with a more subjective, almost mystical approach. He emphasizes not so much the cessation of the experience of God, but the death of the primordial or transcendent God. This God has voluntarily undergone transformation from a being outside the world who occasionally acts within it, to a being fully immersed within the processes of this world. While the incarnation has in orthodox theology been thought of as the act of God's becoming one with the human race, for Altizer it is but a symbol, just one of a whole series of such comings. Throughout history God has been coming to man. The process is now complete. But unlike orthodoxy, where God also continues to be the primordial being, here he changes from the transcendent to an immanent being. He leaves the primordial character of his nature behind in an irreversible step. The death of God is thus the suicide of the primordial God and the birth of an immanent one.<sup>26</sup>

A thoroughly secular faith is what the Death of God theologians recommended. Instead of finding God in transcendent fashion, in acts of worship and prayer, this movement proposed to find him again in activity, such as involvement in the civil-rights movement. This new secular Christianity was to be world-affirming, hoping to find God in secular experiences, hoping to find a way to enjoy God rather than using or needing him.<sup>27</sup>

In this way of thinking, modern man is the standard, and what seems reasonable to him is acceptable. There is no authoritative word from a God who reveals himself from outside the world. Rather, insight is sought from the visions of authors such as William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>28</sup> The truth comes in these visions rather than those of the Hebrew prophets. Altizer, in fact, when pressed on one occasion to give the ultimate basis of his belief, said, "Moby Dick"! The great white whale going down into the water for the final time is the most complete picture of the primordial God coming into the world.

#### *Translators*

To the translators, the transformers seem not to have reexpressed the message, but to have substituted another message for it. A Christianity without God, or at least without a transcendent God, and without a qualitatively unique place for Jesus Christ, scarcely seems worthy of being called Christianity any longer. The translators share with the

26. Thomas J. J. Altizer, ***The Gospel of Christian Atheism*** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 102-12.

27. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," pp. 37-42.

28. Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," in ***Radical Theology and the Death of God***, pp. 98-101.

transformers the desire to speak a fresh and intelligible word to the modern world. They emphasize much more strongly, however, the need for making certain that it is the authoritative message that is being spoken. One of their aims is to retain the basic content of the message. In this sense, translators are conservatives. Another aim is to put the message in a new form, to speak the language of the hearer. Just as one would not think of preaching a sermon in biblical Greek to someone who does not know the language, so it is crucial to get away from old and unfamiliar expressions and use synonyms drawn from contemporary experience. The translators attempt to say what the Bible would say if it were being written to us in our present situation.<sup>29</sup>

In conservative Christian circles there seems to be a real desire for this type of endeavor. The popularity of paraphrases of the Bible testifies to this perceived need. The Living Bible, the J. B. Phillips version, and even the Cotton Patch Version make the events of the Bible seem real. While biblical translators and exegetes frequently decry these paraphrases of the Bible as poor translations (they were, of course, never intended to be translations), the lay persons of our day frequently find them helpful and enlightening. The success of paraphrases may suggest that in the past biblical scholars did a better job of finding out what the Bible meant to the original hearers than of stating what it means for the present day.

The translator maintains that man is not the measure of what is true. Truth generates from above, from a higher source. It is God who speaks and man who is on trial, not the other way around. If transformation is needed, it is man, not the message, that must be transformed. While the translator aims to make the message intelligible or understandable, he does not expect to make it acceptable on modern man's grounds. There is a built-in dimension of the message that will always be a cause of offense to natural man. There is thus a sense in which the message must be antithetical to and critical of the contemporary understanding of reality. The message must challenge the contemporary mindset, not simply accommodate to it.<sup>30</sup>

It will not be merely the doctrinal teachings which cause tension between the Bible and contemporary man. Perhaps even more offensive than the belief structures of the Bible are its ethical teachings. These seem to call into question not merely what one believes, but also what he does and even what he is. Whether doctrinal or ethical in nature, a friction will be created by the biblical message, a friction which the theologian and the church should not attempt to remove.

29. Hordern, ***New Directions***, vol. 1, pp. 146-47.

30. Ibid., pp. 148-49.

The translator must carefully distinguish the message from the interpretations and traditions which have grown up about it. The latter sometimes have become as influential as the message itself. Indeed, some persons are unable to distinguish the interpretation from the message. To them, any attempt to restate the message seems to be a tampering with and a modification or abandonment of the message. They must be mindful, however, that the non-Christian may find a particular interpretation disagreeable, and hence reject the message. There is no virtue, from the translator's standpoint, in attempting to preserve for all time one way of expressing a concept. Particular interpretations are the proper subject of historical theology, what has been believed, rather than of systematic theology, what we are to believe.

Part of the difficulty in contemporizing the message stems from the fact that the biblical revelation came to particular situations. Thus, the message took on a localized form. The problem is to detect what was simply something to be believed and done in that situation, and what is of more universal application. Examples readily come to mind: is foot-washing a practice which the church is to continue, much as it does baptism and the Lord's Supper, or was it simply something appropriate to the biblical situation? Is the mode of baptism essential to the act, so that we must determine and attempt to preserve the precise mode used in biblical times? And what of church government? Does the New Testament give the normative form for all time, or are there only suggestions which we may feel free to modify as needs require?

An additional complication arises from the fact that the Bible does not address fully the issues connected with certain doctrines. In contemporizing the message, are we to limit ourselves to the explicit statements of Scripture, or may we assume that the biblical writers, had they faced the more complex issues we face, would have said more? An example is the doctrine of the Trinity, which nowhere in Scripture is explicitly and directly addressed. This is not to say that there were no conceptions about the Trinity in biblical times, but that reflection on and formulation of the doctrine had not progressed to such a point as to warrant specific expression in Scripture. Consequently, on this doctrine we do not have a biblical outworking such as Paul gives us on the doctrine of justification, for example.

Another difficulty stems from the necessity of relating the biblical revelation to our more complete current understanding of the general revelation. For example, Paul taught quite clearly that all men are sinners (he discussed in detail our corrupted, sinful nature and our consequent guilty standing before God). This he attributed in some way to Adam and his sin (Rom. 5:12-21). Today, biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and numerous other disciplines pose new questions

about human nature, the soul (including whether it exists), and the basis of personal traits. If we are to relate the biblical revelation to our modern culture, we are now required to address questions which Paul did not address. If he had by inspiration somehow discussed them, he would not have been understood by his first readers.

Further, some biblical truths are expressed in forms not meaningful to persons living today. Note that we are talking about the form of expression of a truth rather than its essence. The doctrine of the providence of God is the teaching that God watches over and guides all that is and happens. To illustrate this truth, the Bible compares God to the good shepherd who cares for his sheep; it also notes that God protects the birds of the air, feeding them and protecting them from danger. Many modern persons living in urban settings rarely see birds and may never have seen a shepherd caring for his sheep. If such persons are to be given a concrete picture of providence, imagery of a very different form will have to be selected. What is the relationship of God's providence to cybernetics or to modern nuclear war, for example?

It is sometimes said that there are two steps we must take if our aim is to preserve the essential content but give a contemporary statement of a biblical teaching: first we must determine what it meant in its original context and then we must tell what it means today. What is being advocated is a direct translation of meaning from the past situation to the present. This parallels the method of learning a foreign language to which most of us were probably exposed.

In this method, we learn what word in one language is equivalent to what word in another language. Thus, English-speaking persons learning German are taught that *der Stuhl*= the chair. We memorize this equivalent. We look up a German word in the German-English dictionary to find an English equivalent. But the meaning of *der Stuhl* is not "the chair." The real meaning is an object with a seat, a backrest, and four legs. "The chair" is only a particularization of that meaning in one language, English, just as *der Stuhl* is a particularization in German, *la chaise* in French, *la silla* in Spanish, and so on. Note that we are not here attempting to make a case for Platonism. We are not arguing that the real meaning of *der Stuhl* is "chairness." We are referring to a particular object. We are referring to the meaning which that object has in common in all cultures. Nor are we attempting to make a case for conceptual-dynamic (as opposed to verbal) inspiration.<sup>31</sup> The problem with this approach to learning a language is that it can work with only two specific languages at a time. And when in either language a word

**31.** These issues will be discussed at greater length in chapter 9.

**involved** takes on a different meaning, the expression of the truth becomes obsolete.

There is another method of language teaching, one which is usable simultaneously with people who speak many different languages. Here the instructor does not say, "*Der Stuhl* (or *la chaise* or *la silla*) means the chair." He simply points to or touches a chair and says "*der Stuhl*." (The class will usually understand by his inflections and his actions that they are to repeat the word after him.) He touches the wall and says "*die Wand*." By demonstration the words for various actions can also be taught. Abstract concepts, of which theology is largely composed, are more difficult to express, but can also be conveyed, once more basic and concrete words and meanings have been grasped.

We have brought this second type of language teaching into our discussion of theological methodology in order to make a crucial point. In the process of contemporizing a biblical statement, we must introduce a middle step between determining what it meant in its original context and telling what it means today. Thus the first type of language teaching is an inadequate metaphor. For we must find the essential meaning underlying all particular expressions of a biblical teaching. Thus, if the biblical teaching is that God is high above the earth, we must discover its permanent thrust, namely, that God is transcendent. He is not limited to a certain spot within nature. Rather, he is beyond nature. He does not have the limited knowledge which we do. His love, mercy, and other attributes go far beyond anything found in human beings. To make this truth meaningful for today will mean giving it a new concrete expression, just as was done in biblical times. Note that we are not giving a "dynamic equivalent" of the biblical statement. What we are doing instead is giving a new concrete expression to the same lasting truth that was concretely conveyed in biblical times by terms and images which were common then.

#### Criteria of Permanence

It will be seen from the foregoing that the really crucial task of theology will be to identify the timeless truths, the essence of the doctrines, and to separate them from the temporal form in which they were expressed, so that a new form may be created. How can we locate and identify this permanent element or essence? In some cases, this is quite simple, for the timeless truth is put in the form of a universal didactic statement. Examples of this are quite numerous in the Psalms. One is found in Psalm 100:5—"For the LORD is good: his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations." In other cases, the

timeless truth must be extracted from a narrative passage or from a teaching dealing with a particular problem. There are a number of criteria by which the permanent factors or the essence of the doctrine may be identified: (1) constancy across cultures, (2) universal setting, (3) a recognized permanent factor as a base, (4) indissoluble link with an experience regarded as essential, and (5) final position within progressive revelation.

#### Constancy Across Cultures

We are aware of the variety of cultures present in our world today, and of the vast span of time separating us from biblical times. What we sometimes forget is that the biblical period did not consist of a uniform set of situations. The temporal, geographical, linguistic, and cultural settings found within the canonical Scriptures vary widely. Many centuries intervened between the writing of the first books of the Old Testament and the last books of the New. Geographical and cultural situations range from a pastoral setting in ancient Palestine to the urban setting of imperial Rome. There are differences between Hebrew and Greek culture and language, which, although sometimes exaggerated, are nonetheless very real. If, then, there is a constancy of biblical teaching across several settings, we may well be in possession of a genuine cultural constant or the essence of the doctrine. Variations may be thought of as part of the form of the doctrine.

One illustration of constancy across cultures is the principle of sacrificial atonement, and with it the rejection of any type of works-righteousness. We find this principle present in the Old Testament sacrificial system. We also find it in the New Testament teaching regarding the atoning death of Christ. Another example is the centrality of belief in Jesus Christ, which spans any gap between Jew and Gentile. Peter preached it at Pentecost in Jerusalem to Jews from various cultures. Paul declared it in a Gentile setting to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31).

#### Universal Setting

Another criterion by which to determine the essence of a doctrine is to note what elements are put forth in a universal fashion. Baptism is mentioned not only with reference to the specific situations where it was practiced, but also in the universal setting of the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe

all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20). There are several counts on which we can regard this as a universal setting: (1) Jesus' statement that *all* authority had been given to him suggests that, as he transfers his functions and responsibilities to his disciples, he has in mind a task which is presumably to carry on indefinitely. (2) The "all nations" suggests a universality of place and culture (cf. the commission of Acts 1:8—"You shall be my witnesses. . . to the end of the earth"). (3) That Jesus would be with them always, even to the end of the age, suggests that this threefold commission is to apply permanently. On the basis of this type of consideration, we may conclude that baptism was not merely an isolated phenomenon, localized at one time and place. It is of permanent applicability.

On the other hand, the footwashing incident in John 13 is not put into a general or universal setting. While Jesus did say, "You also ought to wash one another's feet" (v. 14), nothing is said about the duration of the practice. While he said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (v. 15), there is reason to believe that his example was not necessarily to be extended universally ***in this precise form***. He does not indicate that the practice is to be perpetually performed. The underlying reason for his action appears in his statement regarding the servant's not being greater than the master (v. 16). What he was attempting to instill within his disciples was the attitude of a servant: humility and a willingness to put others ahead of oneself. In that culture, washing the feet of others would symbolize such an attitude. But in another culture, some other act might more appropriately convey the same truth. Because we find humility taught elsewhere in Scripture without mention of footwashing (Matt. 20:27; 23:10–12; Phil. 2:3), we conclude that the attitude of humility, not the particular act of footwashing as such, is the permanent component in Christ's teaching.

#### *A Recognized Permanent Factor as a Base*

A particular teaching based upon a recognized permanent factor may itself be permanent. For example, Jesus bases his teaching about the permanence of marriage on the fact that God made man as male and female and pronounced them to be one (Matt. 19:4–6, citing Gen. 2:24). The antecedent is assumed to be a once-for-all occurrence having permanent significance. From this, the permanent nature of the marriage relationship is deduced. Similarly, the priesthood of all believers is based upon the fact that our great High Priest has once for all "passed through the heavens." We therefore can "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:14–16). Moreover, because Jesus is a priest

forever (Heb. 7:21, 24), it is always the case that all are saved who draw near to God through him (v. 25).

#### *Indissoluble Link with an Experience Regarded as Essential*

In Rudolf Bultmann's view, the *Geschichte* of the resurrection (the renewal of hope and openness to the future which we experience) is independent of the *Historie* (the question of whether Jesus actually was raised). But Paul asserts that the experience is dependent upon the resurrection of Christ. He says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). If our experience of the resurrection is real and permanent, the resurrection of Christ must be factual, permanent, and universal. Replacing or changing this doctrine in any way will be accompanied by a similar change in the experience. If we regard this experience as essential, abandonment of what the Bible affirms to be the cause will require finding some other basis to explain the result. Our experience of believing that evil will be overcome is based upon belief in a supernatural work of God in connection with the second coming. Fosdick's experience of believing that evil will be overcome is quite different, for he bases it upon belief in progress, which requires a certain type of human effort and is accompanied by a corresponding degree of insecurity. His experience, then, is built on a less than solid foundation and will prove impermanent. Whenever, on the other hand, our experience proves to be real and permanent, we can be assured that the biblical doctrine on which it is dependent is permanent as well.

#### *Final Position Within Progressive Revelation*

A final criterion relates to the matter of progressive revelation. If we understand God to have worked in a process of accomplishing redemption for man, revealing himself and his plan gradually, we will weight later developments more heavily than earlier ones. The assumption is that we have transient forms in the earlier cases, and that the latest case is the final form. If there is an element of absoluteness about it, we may conclude that the latest case expresses the essence of the doctrine in which the earlier varieties participated by way of anticipation. An example would be the sacrificial work of Christ. Whereas the Old Testament called for continual offerings of sacrifice in the court, twice-daily offerings of incense in the outer tent, and an annual sacrifice by the high priest in the inner place, the Holy of Holies (Heb. 9:1–10), Christ brought this process to an end by fulfilling it (v. 12). His offering of his own blood was once for all. Furthermore, Jesus often said, "You have heard that it

was said . . . , but I say to you that . . ." In these instances Jesus was making a statement of the essence of the doctrine to replace earlier approximations of it.

In some cases, the essence of a doctrine was not explicitly realized within biblical times. For example, the status of women in society was elevated dramatically by Jesus. Similarly, Paul granted an unusual status to slaves. Yet the lot of each of these groups did not improve as much as it should have. So to find the essence of how such persons should be treated, we must look to principles laid down or implied regarding their status, not to accounts of how they actually were treated in biblical times.

We will attempt to get at the basic essence of the message, recognizing that all of the revelation has a point. We are not speaking here of separating the kernel from the husk, as did people like Harnack, and then discarding the husk. Nor are we talking about "discarding the cultural baggage," as some anthropologically oriented interpreters of the Bible say in our time. We are referring to finding the essential spiritual truth upon which a given portion of Scripture rests, and then making a contemporary application of it.

It is common to observe (correctly) that very few Christians turn to the genealogies in Scripture for their personal devotions. Yet even these portions must have some significance. An attempt to go directly from "what a genealogy meant" to "what it means" will probably prove frustrating. Instead, we must ask, "What are the underlying truths?" Several possibilities come to mind: (1) all of us have a human heritage from which we derive much of what we are; (2) we have all, through the long process of descent, received our life from God; (3) God is at work providentially in human history, a fact of which we will be acutely aware if we study that history and God's dealings with man. These truths have meanings for our situations today. Similarly, the Old Testament rules of sanitation speak to us of God's concern for human health and well-being, and the importance of taking steps to preserve that well-being. Pollution control and wise dietary practices would be modern applications of the underlying truth. To some exegetes this will sound like allegorizing. But we are not looking for symbolism, spiritual meanings hidden in literal references. Rather, what we are advocating is that one ask himself the real reason why a particular statement was spoken or written.

In doing all of this, we must be careful to recognize that our understanding and interpretation are influenced by our own circumstances in history, lest we mistakenly identify the form in which we state a biblical teaching with its permanent essence. If we fail to recognize this, we will absolutize our form, and be unable to update it when the situation

changes. I once heard a Roman Catholic theologian trace the history of the formulation of the doctrine of revelation. He then attempted to describe the permanent essence of the doctrine, and stated very clearly and accurately a twentieth-century, neoorthodox, existentially oriented view of revelation!

It is important to note that finding the abiding essence is not a matter of studying historical theology in order to distill out the lowest common denominator from the various formulations of a doctrine. On the contrary, historical theology points out that all postbiblical formulations are conditional. It is the biblical statements themselves from which we must draw out the essence, and they are the continuing criteria of the validity of that essence.

# 6

## Theology and Its Language

Theological Language and Verificational Analysis:  
The Accusation of Meaninglessness

Theological Language and Functional Analysis

Answers to the Accusation of Meaninglessness

The Concept of the Blk

Theological Language as Personal Language

Theological Language and Eschatological Verification

Theological Language as Metaphysical Synthesis

Theological Language as a Means to Discernment and Commitment

The church has always been concerned about its language, since it is in the business of communicating and believes that what it has to communicate is of vital importance. Thus, Augustine and even earlier theologians gave serious attention to the matter of the nature and function of theological language.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, however, this concern has taken on a new dimension of urgency. For philosophy, which has so often been a conversational partner with theology, began in the twentieth century to give primary and in some cases virtually exclusive attention to the analysis of language.

1. Augustine On *Christian Doctrine* 3.

### Theological Language and Verificational Analysis: The Accusation of Meaninglessness

Early in the twentieth century, philosophers such as G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell engaged in the analysis of language.<sup>2</sup> In part this was an offshoot of an interest in mathematics and symbolic logic. It was with the rise of the movement known as logical positivism, however, that real momentum was added to this interest in language. Logical positivism began with a seminar led by Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna in 1923.<sup>3</sup> The seminar was made up of two groups: practicing scientists with an interest in the philosophy of science, and philosophers interested in science. They focused upon the meaning of meaning. They observed that there are two basic types of cognitive propositions. One type is *a priori*, analytic statements, such as two plus two equals four. When combined in this fashion, the symbols *two* and *plus* have the meaning of four. The predicate is contained, by definition, within the subject of the sentence. Such mathematical-type statements are necessarily true, but they are uninformative regarding the empirical world.<sup>4</sup>

The other type of statement is more interesting. These are the synthetic statements, in which there is something in the predicate which was not contained within the subject. Whereas “all bachelors are unmarried” is an example of the first type of statement, “all bachelors are tall” is an example of the latter type. This is not a tautology, for nothing about height is contained inherently within the definition of bachelor. The truth or falsity of such a statement can be determined only by an examination of the real world. Nothing less will do.

What is it that makes a statement meaningful? Analytical, *a priori* statements are meaningful in that they define terms. But what about synthetic, *a posteriori* (scientific-type) statements? The answer given by logical positivism is that such statements are meaningful in that there is a set of sense data that will verify (or falsify) them.<sup>5</sup> The statement, “the stone in my left hand is heavier than the stone in my right hand,” is meaningful, for it can be tested by sense data. If I put the first stone in the left pan of a balance scale and the other in the right pan of the scale, I will have the sense experience of seeing the left pan go down and the

2. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), chapter 31.

3. *The Age of Analysis*, ed. Morton White (New York: New American Library, 1955), pp. 203–05.

4. Ibid., pp. 207–08. *A priori* statements are logically prior to and independent of sensory experience; *a posteriori* statements are logically posterior to and dependent upon sensory experience.

5. ibid., p. 209.

right pan go up. That is what is meant by “heavier than.” That is exactly what is meant by the expression, and that is all that is meant by it.

It is not necessary on these grounds that a statement be true in order to be meaningful. It may be false, but we can specify what would count for or against the truth of the statement. Nor is it actually necessary to be able to perform the test, as long as the statement is in principle verifiable. Thus the statement, “the other side of the moon is made of green cheese,” was a meaningful statement even before space travel made the other side of the moon observable. Although it was not possible to inspect the other side of the moon, one could specify what would be seen there if the statement were true and one were able to take a look. The mere technical difficulty did not render the statement meaningless, just as lacking a telescope would not make statements about Saturn’s rings meaningless. On the other hand, any statement that purports to be synthetic (i.e., factually informative), but is not at least in principle verifiable by sense data, must be discarded as literally non-sense.<sup>6</sup>

This means that some statements which seem to be factual may be meaningless. Only verifiability or falsifiability counts for anything here. This principle, known as the verifiability principle, became highly important to philosophers. Many otherwise impressive sentences were cast on the discard heap of meaninglessness as a result.

William Hordern somewhat facetiously asks whether there is any meaning to statements like “there is a fairy in my watch.”<sup>7</sup> Ostensibly, this statement means a fairy is sitting inside my watch and making its hands go around. He even makes a tick-tick sound as he works. If asked how I know that the statement is true, I would be hard pressed to answer. Does it mean that if I removed the back of my watch, I would see the fairy all hunched up in there, happily working away? No, for this is an invisible fairy. Does it mean that I would not find the usual movement and escapement within? No, my watch has all of the usual mechanical apparatus, for this fairy works immanently, through the usual process of the escapement. Then what does the statement mean? It means simply that there is a fairy in my watch. Quite likely no one else will understand, for there is nothing to which I can point that would in any way count for or against the truth of the statement. Since it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, it is meaningless.

When examined this way, many far more serious topics that philosophy has traditionally attended to are now seen to be meaningless. The argument as to whether reality is basically mental or material is

6. Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (New York: AMS, 1979), p. 17.

7. William Hordern, *Speaking of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 61.

meaningless, as is the argument about whether reality is composed of one or two ultimate principles. These problems, like all problems that cannot be resolved by appeal either to definitions or conventions on the one hand, or to sense data that would confirm or disconfirm on the other, are simply pseudoproblems. While they seem to be amenable to debate, involving, as they do, contrary positions, they cannot be resolved. It is not that one of the positions may not be true; the difficulty is that both are meaningless.

The same problem attaches to many theological propositions. Although they bear the form of valid synthetic statements, they are meaningless. What does theology mean by its propositions? Take, for example, the statement, "God is a loving Father," or "God loves us as a father loves his children." What is the meaning of this? What counts for the truth of this statement? And equally important, what counts against it?

John Macquarrie tells of a man who was crossing a street one day when a bus came around the corner and narrowly missed him. "God loves me," he exclaimed, "for the bus did not hit me." On another occasion he was struck and injured by a bus, but said, "God loves me, for the bus did not kill me." Later a bus struck and killed him. The mourners were philosophical, however: "God loves him, for he has called him out of this unhappy and sinful world." Everything that occurred was seen as evidence of God's fatherly love. Nothing counted against it. And in such a situation, nothing could really count for it either. With such an approach, "God is a loving Father" is a non-sense statement. It really has no meaning at all.<sup>8</sup>

Other instances can be thought of. Take the statement, "God answers prayer." What is its meaning? Does it mean that if we take a relatively homogeneous group and divide it into two equal subgroups and have one half pray about matters of great concern to them, and the other group simply think intently about and wish for matters of concern to them, the results will significantly favor the former group? Here again nothing will be allowed to count against the proposition. For if the request is not granted, the Christian usually replies, "It wasn't God's will," or "God answered, but his answer was no." What is the difference, then, between these beliefs and assertions, and "there is a fairy in my watch"? All of them are meaningless.

John Wisdom put this quite succinctly in a parable.<sup>9</sup> Two explorers once happened upon a clearing in the jungle. The clearing contained

8. John Macquarrie, *God-Talk An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 108-09.

9. John Wisdom, "Gods," in *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1957), pp. 154-55.

many flowers and also many weeds. One explorer said, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagreed. So they pitched their tents and watched, but they did not see any gardener. The believer suggested that the gardener must be invisible. So they set up a barbed-wire fence, electrified it, and patrolled with bloodhounds. Still no gardener was found. "There is no gardener," said the skeptic. "He is invisible and intangible," retorted the believer. "He has no scent, makes no sound, and comes secretly to tend the garden." Here is another instance in which no counterevidence is allowed. Antony Flew comments: "A fine brash hypothesis [belief in the gardener, or in God] may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications."<sup>10</sup> That is, a position which requires constant qualifications in order to keep from being falsified (which is, in effect, not open to falsification) is meaningless.

This is the situation of the major propositions of Christian theology. The Christian and non-Christian work with the same facts but disagree on their interpretation. Since the Christian, whether theologian or not, cannot explicate the meaning of his propositions (prove his interpretations) by recourse to sensory data, these propositions have to be regarded as meaningless.

Logical positivism is an attempt to set up a definite standard of meaning by which all language is to be measured. On the basis of this standard, the only meaningful uses of language (what logical positivism labels representative language) are the mathematical-type or tautological language, and the scientific type, which meets the verifiability principle. But what of all the other propositions which appear within Christian theology? What is their status?

Logical positivism recognizes a use of language other than the representative. That is the expressive or emotive use. Here language does not actually describe or denote anything, but rather expresses the feelings of the speaker or writer. While such propositions may have the grammatical form and hence appearance of assertions, they are actually expressing the feelings, the mood, the attitudes of the speaker. They are more like "Wow!" "Hurrah!" "Ouch!" and similar expressions. They are not susceptible to verification and falsification. The major portion of the history of philosophy has apparently been a highly sophisticated series of grunts and groans.<sup>11</sup>

What is true of philosophy's utterances is also true of theology's. Since they do not meet the criteria required of all representative use of language, they must be expressive. The theologian may think he is telling us

10. Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in New *Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 97.

11. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, pp. 26-31.

something about how things are, but in reality he is merely giving vent to his feelings. The statement, "God watches over us as a loving father watches over his children," appears to describe God. In reality, however, it is expressing one's warm and positive feelings about the universe. There is no harm in such use of language as long as people are not misled into thinking that something factual is expressed by it. It may be highly cathartic for the preacher, and therapeutic for the hearers as well.<sup>12</sup> Such a classification of religious and theological language may be surprising and distressing to theologians, preachers, and ordinary believers alike. They have believed themselves to be actually referring to something as they spoke. Yet, if logical positivism's assumptions are granted, they have only been expressing their own emotions.

Many philosophers grew uneasy regarding logical positivism, however. There was a certain neatness to this approach in that all statements could be classified into one category or the other. Yet this very neatness appeared artificial. It virtually discarded many traditional uses of language despite the fact that those who employed ethical and religious language found them serviceable and highly meaningful. It appeared to have arbitrarily set up its own standards of what language must be, and, unfortunately, in the process used terminology not as descriptive and representative as might have been wished. For terms such as "meaningless" and "emotive" themselves involve emotive connotations.<sup>13</sup>

There was another very basic and serious problem as well. It concerned the status of the verifiability principle. Is it an analytic statement? If so, it is merely a definition, and one could refute it simply by saying, "I do not define the criterion of meaningfulness that way." On the other hand, if it is a synthetic statement, actually informing us of something not implicit in the definition, it must meet its own criterion of meaningfulness. But what is the set of sensory data that would verify or falsify this proposition? Since there is none, the proposition would seem meaningless and self-contradictory as well.

The logical positivists saw this problem and attempted to respond. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, suggested that the propositions of his philosophy were merely elucidative. One finally recognizes them as senseless when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. One "must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up over them."<sup>14</sup> One must use these propositions and then surmount them. This hardly seemed satisfactory, however. Rudolf Carnap maintained

12. Ibid.

13. Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), chapter 4.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), p. 189.

that a good many of these propositions are meaningful, but did not specify in what way.<sup>15</sup> A. J. Ayer claimed that the verifiability principle is really a definition.<sup>16</sup> But then it is subject to the difficulty noted above. This solution seemed no more satisfactory than the others, with the result that logical positivism in its original form had to be abandoned or greatly modified.

### Theological Language and Functional Analysis

Analytical philosophy thus moved to another stage. The earlier form, which Frederick Ferré has referred to as "verificational analysis," attempted to *prescribe* how language should be used. The later form, which he calls "functional analysis," attempted instead to *describe* how language actually is used.<sup>17</sup> Here a wide diversity of uses of language becomes apparent. These varieties of language are approached with a curiosity as to how language has arisen and grown. The mindset of the biologist, whose aim is to observe and classify, should characterize the philosopher of language. This approach substitutes for the dogmatic assertions of the logical positivists a question—"What is the logic of statements of this kind?" To put it differently, philosophers focusing on functional analysis ask: "How are these statements to be verified, or tested, or justified? What are their use and function; what jobs do they do?"

Wittgenstein in his later work was a pioneer in this area. In his *Philosophical Investigations* he spoke of various "language games." He listed such varied uses of language as giving orders, reporting an event, making up and telling a joke, cursing, praying.<sup>18</sup> He used the term 'language game' to point up the fact that language is an activity. The problem with the verifiability principle does not lie in the criterion it sets for the empirical type of sentence. The problem consists in failure to recognize other forms of language as legitimate and meaningful.

A major role of philosophy, then, is to examine the way language actually functions in context. And beyond that, the philosopher attempts to uncover misuses of language when they occur. Wittgenstein says that "philosophical problems arise when language goes *on holiday*."<sup>19</sup> "The

15. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, p. 38.

16. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), p. 16.

17. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 58.

18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 11e, 12e.

19. Ibid., p. 19e.

confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.”<sup>20</sup>

Functional analysis utilizes two methods for elucidating the functions of language which is unclear: the paradigm-case technique and the technique of significant comparison. The paradigm-case technique involves finding a clear, straightforward use of the very word or sentence which is unclear. This will enable one to see how the word or sentence which is causing difficulty is actually functioning. For example, Ferré notes that the word *solid* might not be clear in view of the fact that modern science tells us everything is really a whirling mass of electrical charges. But picturing stone walls or desks when one encounters the word *solid* will resolve the difficulty.<sup>21</sup>

The other technique, significant comparison, involves comparing a particular phrase with other forms of language or even nonverbal activities that do the same work. Ferré uses the example of a mayor who says, “I hereby declare this expressway open” (or simply, “this expressway is now open”). While on the surface this statement seems to inform us of a fact, close examination will reveal that it actually performs the same role as would cutting a ribbon or removing a barrier. It actually effects something rather than reporting something.<sup>22</sup>

To the functional analyst it is apparent that the different language games each have their own rules. Problems arise either when these rules are violated, or when one slips from one form of language game into another without realizing it, or tries to apply the rules of one game to another. A basketball player attempting to punt a basketball or a football team attempting to fast break down the field with a series of forward passes is making an illicit transfer from one game to another. The functional analyst says treating theological language about divine creation as a statement about the empirical origin of the universe is a switch from one language game to another, from theological language to empirical language.

Failure to recognize such transitions will result in confusion. For example, it is important to observe the change in language usage in sentences like, “I was driving down the street and another driver cut me off, and I became hot under the collar.” Someone who fails to observe the change may regard the expression “hot under the collar” as a description of the temperature of the skin on my neck. Actually, such transitions occur quite frequently in ordinary language. Mixing the uses of language in one game with those of another is called a category transgression. It leads to confusion and constitutes a misuse of language.<sup>23</sup>

20. Ibid., p. 51e.

21. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, pp. 64-65.

22. Ibid., p. 65.

23. Horder-n, *Speaking Of God*, pp. 49-52.

Instead of telling theologians and practicing Christians what their language is and does, the later analytical philosophers have allowed the theologians to explain religious language. The philosopher's task is to assess the appropriateness of the explanation, and to judge whether the language is being used correctly or incorrectly, that is, to look for possible category transgressions.

### Answers to the Accusation of Meaninglessness

Theologians have responded in several ways to this challenge to clarify their language usage. The criticism against logical positivism had been that it was unduly restrictive in ruling out a number of cognitively meaningful uses of language. It is now incumbent upon the theologians to indicate what these other varieties are, and to prove that they do in fact function meaningfully. Jerry Gill, in a helpful overview, has described the problem posed by logical empiricism (or logical positivism) in terms of a syllogism:

1. All cognitively meaningful language is either definitional or empirical in nature.
2. No religious language is either definitional or empirical in nature.
3. No religious language is cognitively meaningful language.<sup>24</sup>

There are, according to Gill, three main responses which theologians have made to this syllogism (of course those who accept its conclusion without qualification dismiss religious language as non-sense):

1. Some accept the premises and the conclusion, but maintain that while religious language is not cognitively meaningful, it is nonetheless significant in some other sense.
2. Some reject the first premise but accept the second. These people believe that cognitively meaningful language is not restricted to the analytical and empirical.
3. Others accept the major premise, but reject the minor premise. They contend that religious propositions are actually empirical in character.<sup>25</sup>

24. Jerry Gill, “The Meaning of Religious Language,” *Christianity Today*, 15 January 1965, pp. 16-21.

25. Ibid.

*The Concept of the Blik*

The first group has to a large extent been made up of professional philosophers who have reflected upon the nature of religious discourse. R. M. Hare responded to Antony Flew's analysis of religious language by developing the concept of the *blik*. A blik is a frame of reference, an interpretation of a situation, which is accepted without question. Nothing can alter it. Hare tells of a lunatic who is convinced that all dons are out to murder him.<sup>26</sup> Nothing that can be adduced regarding the cordiality of any dons serves to dissuade him from this conviction. Rather, he simply regards their cordiality as evidence of how diabolical dons really are. Hare also mentions the blik he has that maneuvering the steering wheel will always be followed by a corresponding change of direction of his car. Someone with the opposite blik believes that the steering system will break down; and, accordingly, he will never travel in a car. In the first case, the blik is not based upon investigation of the parts of the car; and in the latter case, no amount of inspection of the mechanical operation will alter the conviction. The blik, then, refers to the frame of reference within which knowing, thinking, and acting take place. But the blik itself is not subject to the kind of verification to which the specific statements within it must submit.

Actually there is some variation among the bliks. Some do not seem to involve any inquiry at all. The blik that the steering system of Hare's car is intact, for example, is a matter of ignorance as it were. He has not examined the mechanism. Technically, a genuine blik will not be established until he has looked at the evidence and maintains the blik irrespective of data.

Hare contends that the major difference between his concept of the blik and Flew's use of Wisdom's parable of the gardener is that bliks *mutter very much* to those who have them, whereas the existence or nonexistence of the gardener presumably was not of great importance to the two explorers. Nonetheless, the time and effort that the men in Wisdom's parable invested in the search do suggest that the existence or nonexistence of the gardener was a matter of some concern to them.

The point in all this is that a blik is not a factual belief. It is an unverified and unverifiable perspective on things. It is almost an attitude, and matters very much to the person who holds it. The concept of the blik is of use to some of those philosophers and theologians who accept the conclusion that religious language is not cognitively meaningful, but who nevertheless maintain that it is significant. In their view

**26.** R. M. Hare, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Flew and MacIntyre, pp. 99–103. A don is a head, tutor, or fellow in a college of Oxford or Cambridge, or, more broadly, a college or university professor. *Blik* is a neologism.

religious language is very meaningful within the framework and as an expression of particular bliks.

*Theological Language as Personal Language*

The second group rejects the first premise of the syllogism, which limits cognitively meaningful statements to the definitional and the empirically verifiable. They see a unique status for religious statements. They believe that the personal nature of religious language makes it cognitively meaningful.

An example of this position is William Hordern, who has most fully enunciated his views in his book *Speaking of God*. After reviewing the various kinds of language games which there are, he notes that religious and theological language follows the pattern of personal language. It is not merely that language about God is like language about human persons. Rather, there is *overlap* between our language about God and our language about other persons. As Hordern puts it, "although no human language game can be translated into language about God, the language game that points with the least obscurity to God is that of personal language."<sup>27</sup>

Horder-n insists that the positivist limitation of meaning is too narrow. For one thing, it requires intersubjectivity, that is, that the evidence be accessible to other persons. Now in the case of a baseball pitcher who throws a pitch too close to a batter, the umpire, the crowd, and the batter himself cannot really verify whether the pitcher intentionally attempted to hit the batter. Since the pitcher's intention cannot be verified by others, logical positivism assumes that any charge that his action was deliberate is not meaningful. Hordern points out, however, that the pitchers intention is completely verifiable by one person—the pitcher himself.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Hordern is in effect arguing that sense experience is not the sole means of gaining knowledge; introspection must also be allowed. Further, the scientific approach does not result in knowledge about individuals per se. It is interested in individuals only as specimens of universals. Its very aim is to generalize. When science identifies an individual human person, it puts him into a series of classes or categories. A man may be described as a middle-aged businessman, a graduate of Yale, Protestant, honest, with an intelligence quotient of 125. But this does not tell us about the unique individual. Hordern's dependence upon existentialism is apparent at this point. When we have listed all the categories under which a chemical can be classified, we have said all that

**27.** Hordern, *Speaking of God*, p. 132.

**28.** Ibid., p. 139.

can be said about it. But man is not a chemical. "To know persons we need a different methodology from that used in getting to know things," says Hordern.<sup>29</sup>

Science also is limited in that it attempts to explain everything in terms of cause without any explanation in terms of purpose. To put this in Aristotelian language, science explains in terms of efficient cause rather than final cause. In attempting to deal with human actions in this way, however, it misses something major. It gives us behaviorism. But behaviorism's picture of man is like the description of a billiard game that would be given by someone who knows the laws of mechanics but nothing of the rules of billiards or the strategies of billiard players. Hordern's conclusion is clear: "Questions of fact are not limited to science."<sup>30</sup>

How are persons known? Hordern is quite clear that he is talking about knowledge which is not scientific. It is neither verifiable nor falsifiable within the language game of science, but is verifiable within its own game. Our knowledge of other persons comes primarily, and even exclusively, through their bodily actions. These bodily actions include what they say.<sup>31</sup> We know other persons only as they reveal themselves through word or deed, whether intentionally or unconsciously.<sup>32</sup> Further, there is knowledge of another person only as we respond to him. We must empathize, we must reveal ourselves in order to know the other person. We must trust him. And we must ask about his motives and intents.

When Hordern comes to apply this model of the personal-language-game to his understanding of the nature and function of theological language, he turns to revelation. Just as we know persons only as they reveal themselves, so the personal God is known only through his revelation of himself. It is God's acts in history and words given through the prophets that constitute his self-manifestation. The typical biblical event of revelation involves a historical situation interpreted by the inspired prophet as God's word to men.<sup>33</sup> As such it "opens the way to a personal relationship with God," and thus "the Bible becomes the word of God."<sup>34</sup> It is in its particularity, not in general truths, that God is understood. God is loving. What does that mean? The Bible tells us what it means through the particular and personal story of Jesus' death on the cross—he

29. Ibid., pp. 148-49.

30. Ibid., p. 154.

31. Ibid., pp. 140-41.

32. Ibid., p. 142.

33. Ibid., p. 161.

34. Ibid., p. 162.

looked down upon those who were responsible for his being there and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."<sup>35</sup>

Further, knowledge of God is a knowledge of his purposes. In the parable of the invisible gardener, if the gardener had once told one of the explorers something about his purpose, it would have been possible to detect that purpose, although perhaps dimly, in the garden.<sup>36</sup> In considering God's purposes it is important for us to realize that theological explanations are of a different nature than scientific explanations. The creation account in Genesis 1, according to Hordern, is not to be understood as a causal explanation of the origin of the universe, which could potentially be in conflict with the scientific theory of evolution. What it gives us instead is a statement of intent and purpose—that the universe was created for the purposes of God.<sup>37</sup>

Because God is a person, he can be known only as we respond to him. This involves a trusting response of our whole heart. Because an I-Thou relationship requires mutual self-revelation, a necessary part of our response is confession.<sup>38</sup> And our response must also involve obedience, since the relationship with God is such that we will want to do what pleases him.<sup>39</sup>

Is this knowledge of which Hordern speaks empirical? In some ways it appears to be, in light of what he has said about our knowledge of other persons coming primarily, or even exclusively, through their bodily actions, including speech. Yet this is not really knowledge which can be verified or falsified by sense data. (The statement that the creation account should not be so understood as to result in conflict with scientific causal statements seems to indicate that.) Similarly, he states that we cannot verify Christian faith simply by a reference to history. But while history alone cannot verify the truth, there can be no verification without history either. Personal statements are verified by entering into a personal relationship with, responding to, the person about whom the statements are made. While this depends upon history, it goes beyond history.<sup>40</sup> When one responds to God, as centuries of Christians will testify, the gospels promise is fulfilled, the Holy Spirit comes, and a personal relationship with God is created in which one's life is renewed. Hordern makes quite clear what the basis of meaningfulness is in this situation: "This relationship itself is the verification of theological statements."<sup>41</sup> He says, "Like all verifiable statements, theological statements

35. Ibid., pp. 164-65.

36. Ibid., p. 166.

37. Ibid., p. 153.

38. Ibid., p. 170.

39. Ibid., p. 172.

40. Ibid., pp. 174-75.

41. Ibid., p. 176.

are verified in our experience."<sup>42</sup> Yet he is careful to avoid relating this to some kind of mystical or ineffable religious feeling.

Hordern's statement has built upon the important observation that God is a person, a subject, rather than a thing, an object. There are dimensions to our knowledge of a person which simply do not have any parallels in our knowledge of a physical object. But one great problem causes our analogy between knowledge of the divine person and knowledge of human persons to break down. We have knowledge of other human persons, but it comes through sense experience of the other. I can know something about you without your telling me any propositions about yourself. I can observe you, note your physical characteristics, and how you behave. If there is a dimension of the relationship that goes beyond the mere physical perception, at least it arises through and in connection with that sense experience. But what about the I-Thou relationship with God? Surely neither Horder-n nor virtually any other Christian, theologian or not, claims to have sensory experience of God. While disavowing mysticism, Hordern still so distinguishes our experience of God from our knowledge of human persons that the parallelism upon which the analogy depends breaks down. Horder-n's meaning of experience is evidently broader than the sense experience with which science works. It is a gestalt experience involving the whole person. But unless Hordern can make clearer and more specific the nature of this experience, it would seem that he has committed the sin which the analytical philosopher dreads: a category transgression, moving from sense experience to a broader meaning of experience.

Another problem enters with theological language that is not about the person of God per se. What of the statements about man, about the church, about God's creation? How are these derived from the relationship? For that matter, what of some of the aspects (attributes) of God's nature? If we know God within and through the relationship, what is it to have an I-Thou relationship with a Triune God? Thus the question of the derivation of a fair amount of theological propositions deserves and needs more complete treatment. Are these propositions not meaningful? Are they not legitimate? Or are they different from the personal-language statements, their meaningfulness established on some other basis?

#### *Theological Language and Eschatological Verification*

The final group of approaches to the accusation of meaninglessness accepts the limitation of cognitive meaningfulness to the definitional

42. Ibid., p. 177.

and the empirical, while rejecting the contention that religious language is neither empirical nor definitional. These persons set themselves the task of demonstrating an empirical basis for religious language. It is this approach which I personally find most satisfactory.

One very bold attempt was made by John Hick.<sup>43</sup> Accepting the verifiability principle, and seeking to retain meaningfulness for the language of Christianity, he introduces the concept of "eschatological verification." Although we do not currently have verification of our theological propositions, we will one day. If there is life after death, we will experience it. We will see God the Father as he really is, and all of the propositions about him will be experientially verified. The same is true about Jesus. Thus the situation with respect to theological propositions is quite similar to the status of affirmations about the other side of the moon which were made prior to successful moon shots. They are in principle verifiable empirically and hence meaningful. All that is necessary to verify them is death, if we are willing to take that step. Hick, it must be admitted, has in many ways formulated a genuinely creative breakthrough. Yet there are certain conceptual difficulties here. Just what does it mean to speak of this eschatological occurrence as empirical? In what way will we have sensory experience of God in the future, if we do not now? And what is the nature of the bodily condition in which this will occur? The conceptual difficulties appear sufficiently great that it might be preferable to broaden the concept of experience rather than argue that there will be empirical verification in the future.

There are two other significant attempts to claim an empirical status for theology. One concerns the Christian theological scheme as a metaphysical synthesis; the other concerns it as a means to discernment and commitment. Together they are of great help in answering the accusation that theological language is not empirical and therefore not cognitively meaningful.

#### *Theological Language as Metaphysical Synthesis*

Frederick Ferré has insisted that Christianity is cognitive, that is, that the truth status of its tenets is determinable. But we must still ask what this means. If theological discourse refers to reality, to some state of affairs, to facts of some kind, just how does it do so? What is the nature of those facts? It is not dealing with merely natural facts, which can be stated in simple concrete sentences such as the specific gravity of lead is greater than the specific gravity of water. Rather, the reference of theology's symbols is to metaphysical fact of some kind. The nature of

43. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1966), pp. 169-99.

metaphysics is *conceptual synthesis*.<sup>44</sup> And a metaphysical fact, then, is a concept which plays a key role within that system.

A further word of explanation is in order. A metaphysic is a world-view. And everyone has a world-view, for everyone has an idea of what reality is about. A world-view is a scheme that ties together the varied experiences we have. It is the frame of reference which enables us to function by making sense of the manifold of experience. It is to the whole of reality what the rules and strategies of football are to the sometimes confusing and even seemingly contradictory events that go on in a game.

Imagine a person seeing a football game for the first time without ever having received any explanation of football. When the ball is kicked, sometimes all the players frantically pounce on it. At other times, it is kicked and the players stand around watching it bounce. What is happening? Sometimes it appears that everyone wants the ball; at other times no one wants it. When the two teams line up facing each other, one player bends over one of the other players who then hands the ball back between his legs to the first player after the first player has shouted a lot of numbers. The subsequent behavior of this first player is erratic and unpredictable. At times he clutches the ball tightly, as if it were made of pure gold, or he may hand it to a teammate who grasps it tenaciously. At other times, however, he runs backward and throws the ball as quickly and as far as he can, giving the impression that the ball must be burning his hand. The spectator might well wonder what is happening. (Another example is one of my graduate-school professors, who said he could not understand golf. If a man wants the ball, why does he keep hitting it away? And if he does not want it, why does he keep following it and looking for it?) But there is an explanation which will make sense of the confusion down on the playing field. It is the rules and general strategy of football. There is a pattern to what is occurring on the field, tying it together into a coherent whole.

What the rules of football are to the events on the football field, one's world-and-life view is to the whole manifold of life's experiences. It is an attempt to tie them together into some pattern which will enable the person to function in a reasonable fashion; it will enable him to understand what is going on about him and to act accordingly. Consciously or unconsciously, in crude or sophisticated fashion, everyone has some sort of world-view. And Ferre maintains that, despite widespread denials, not only is it possible and necessary to formulate such syntheses, but it is also possible to evaluate them, grading some as preferable to others. He

44. Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 161. See also his *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Scribner, 1967).

suggests criteria for evaluating the way in which a synthesis relates to the facts that it synthesizes.

Ferre develops a general theory of signs (in this case, the units of language which compose the synthesis), following and at points adapting the scheme of Charles W. Morris.<sup>45</sup> There are three elements involved. There is the relationship between the sign and its referent, or *semantics*. While this term has come in popular usage to designate virtually the whole of the theory of signs, it is helpful to retain the narrower meaning. There is the relationship among the several signs in the system, or *syntactics*. There is also the relationship between the sign and the interpreter, or, as Ferre terms it, *interpretics*.<sup>46</sup> (Morris had used the term *pragmatics*, and I find that preferable.<sup>47</sup>) In dealing with Christian theology as a metaphysical conceptual synthesis, Ferre is referring to its semantic dimension. In evaluating its semantic sufficiency, however, the other two dimensions enter in as well.

It is probably appropriate that Ferre speaks of grading metaphysical systems.<sup>48</sup> Apart from the terminology's being appealing to a professor, it also reflects the mentality that he brings to the task. Older metaphysical endeavors frequently sought to prove the truth of their system and refute the competitors. Ferre sees the task as less clear-cut, the preferences not so categorical. Every metaphysical system with any cogency and appeal has some points of strength, and all have weaknesses. The question is which has more strengths and fewer weaknesses than the others.

Ferré suggests two classes of criteria, with two criteria in each class. There are the classes of internal criteria and external criteria.<sup>49</sup> The former relate particularly to the syntactic dimension, the relationships among the signs, whereas the latter pertain to the more strictly semantic. The first of the internal criteria is *consistency*, the absence of logical contradiction among the symbols in the system. This is of course a negative test. Inconsistency is a definite demerit, but as Ferre points out, few major metaphysical syntheses are easily vulnerable to this charge. He is taking his stance here against some Christian thinkers and systems of thought that seem virtually to revel in paradox. He sees consistency as a characteristic of systematic theology as contrasted with what he terms "the paradox-ridden 'biblical theology often supported by the

45. Charles W. Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1938), pp. 1-9.

46. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 148.

47. Morris, *Theory of Signs*, pp. 6, 29-42.

48. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 162.

49. Ibid., pp. 162-63.

logic of obedience.”<sup>50</sup> In the long run, everyone finds it impossible to believe a contradictory statement or position, if for no other reason than that its meaning cannot really be determined. Sooner or later, all who attempt to remain in touch with reality, or to communicate cognitive material, become rationalists in the sense of believing that two contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time and in the same respect. Consistency is, as Ferré points out, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for acceptance of a metaphysical system. That is, a system cannot be considered true if it is not consistent, but it may be false even if it is.

The second internal criterion is *coherence*. It is not sufficient for the symbols in a system merely to be consistent. Absence of contradiction may be due to the fact that the statements are unrelated. For example, consider the following three statements: the price of bananas at the supermarket just went up; the wind is blowing from the west this morning; my dog is sleeping in the corner of the room. All three statements may be true. Certainly there is no logical inconsistency among them. But there also is no coherence among them. They are simply three unrelated, isolated statements. Coherence means a genuine unity, an interrelatedness among the components of a system. This is particularly important in a metaphysical system, which is a scheme of unlimited generality. There must not be fragmentation within the system.

Some have tried to make these internal criteria the sole basis for assessing a theory. This has been especially true of certain idealists, and to some extent, a contemporary conservative Christian philosopher, Gordon Haddon Clark.<sup>51</sup> Yet if Christianity is indeed to be judged as empirically meaningful it must meet the external criteria as well. Otherwise the system may refer only to what Morris calls *designata* (possible states of affairs) and not to *denotata* (actual states of affairs). Such a system would be like a piece of fictional writing, which is meaningful only in a limited sense because it does not deal with actualities.<sup>52</sup>

The first external criterion is *applicability*. The synthesis “must be capable of illuminating some experience naturally and without distortion.” It must “ring true” to life, as it were.<sup>53</sup> It must correspond with and serve to explain some reality. What it describes, it must describe accurately. For example, inclusion (within one’s world-view) of an understanding of the human as a psychosomatic unity must reflect what one

50. Ibid., p. 154. Ferré is using “biblical theology” in the first sense described in chapter 1, namely, the biblical-theology movement.

51. Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 29–31.

52. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 147.

53. Ibid., p. 163.

actually finds happening to his emotions when he is tired, hungry, or ill. The synthesis has direct applicability to a specific situation. But beyond that there is the second external criterion, *adequacy*. Since a world-view is intended to be a conceptual *synthesis*, it must in theory be capable of accounting for *all* possible experience. A view which can tie together a large sweep of experience with less distortion than an alternative view must be graded higher, and hence be regarded as preferable to the other. In a psychology class during my undergraduate days, the behaviorist professor was asked for his opinion of the Duke University studies of extrasensory perception. “Those data do not fit within our frame of reference,” was his reply, “so we ignore them.” His frame of reference was in need of enlargement, for it could not account for all possible experience. A naturalist may have a very consistent theory of what a human being is, but *find* that theory strained by what he feels at the birth of his first child. As Ferré puts it, an adequate world-view will be able, on the basis of its key concepts, to interpret all experience—“without oversight, distortion, or explaining away.”<sup>54</sup>

If these criteria are fulfilled by a particular world-view, then may we not claim truth for the system? If it serves more effectively than alternative models to cast light upon our experience-moral, sensory, aesthetic, and religious—may we not conclude that reality itself is best described and interpreted by this particular model?

This is not a mere theoretic model we are talking about. The system we have in mind has a practical relationship to its knower or interpreter. The content of the metaphysical synthesis found in the system of Christian theology possesses great power to affect the person who knows it. It has, as Ferré says, immense responsive significance, this model of the creative, self-giving, personal love of Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup> It offers the promise of forgiveness, purpose, guidance, and much else for all of human life. This is not to advocate pragmatism, the philosophy that something is true because it is workable. But it is reasonable to expect that if something is true, it will be practical.

We need finally to note that the nature of the description of reality found in a conceptual synthesis is not quite the same as that present within scientific statements or protocol empirical statements such as “the book is on the chair.” The relationship between language and referent will not always be obvious.<sup>56</sup> Because the meaning of a “fact” is related to the system of interpretation within which it is placed, it will not always be possible to establish the meaning of each symbol

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., pp. 155, 157.

56. Ibid., pp. 164–65.

individually in isolation from the system, or to verify each proposition independently. But to the extent that the whole is shown to be meaningful and each proposition coheres with the whole, each of the parts is meaningful also.<sup>57</sup>

The contention here, then, has been that the language of Christian theology is cognitively meaningful, for its truth status is as a metaphysical system. Its truthfulness can be tested by the application of the several types of criteria. Demonstration that the Christian theological system meets these criteria is the task of apologetics, and therefore lies beyond the scope of this book. The point here is that when one makes the basic presupposition described in chapter 1 (God and his self-revelation) and works out the system that follows from that by implication, that system can be regarded as cognitively meaningful.

#### *Theological Language as a Means to Discernment and Commitment*

Ferré has made the whole class of religious propositions respectable by observing that they are cognitively meaningful as signs of a metaphysical synthesis. But the problem of the meaning of individual religious propositions remains. While the meaning of these propositions depends upon their relationship to the system as a whole, there is still the problem of how to comprehend just what they are saying. How can we assess the applicability and adequacy of the components in the system unless we know precisely what these components are saying? The problem here is in many ways parallel to that which Kai Nielsen pointed out with respect to fideism. Fideism says that we must accept certain tenets on faith. Yet if we cannot understand those tenets, we cannot know what it is we are to accept on faith.<sup>58</sup>

Ian Ramsey notes that religious language is not a set of labels for a group of hard, objective facts whose complete meaning can be immediately perceived by passive observers.<sup>59</sup> There are, in fact, two levels of meaning. One is the empirical reference which lies on the surface and is quickly understood. The other is a deeper meaning which is also objectively there, but must be drawn out.

Ramsey gives numerous examples of what he calls "the penny dropping," "the light dawning," or "the ice breaking."<sup>60</sup> He is referring to

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

58. Kai Nielsen, "Can Faith Validate God-Talk?" *Theology Today* 20, no. 1 (July 1973): 158-73.

59. Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 28.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 30. See also his *Models and Mystery* (New York: Oxford University, 1964).

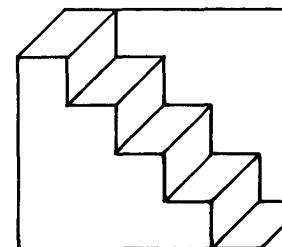


Figure 2

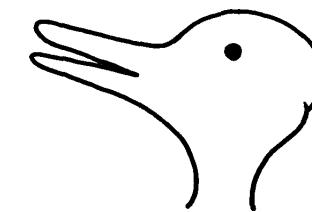


Figure 3

situations in which a second level of meaning becomes apparent as one's perspective changes. A tongue-in-cheek illustration is drawn from Gestalt psychology<sup>9</sup>

There are different kinds of bread sold in French shops.

Some is shaped like w,  
some like

some like

and some like

But if we put them all together,

we do not have French bread,  
but a Frenchman

Other examples come to mind. At one time we seem to be viewing the reversible staircase (see Figure 2) from above, at another time from below. When we see it one way, the other perspective is not evident; yet it also is objectively there. Another illustration is the duck-rabbit (see Figure 3).<sup>62</sup> On first sight it appears clearly to be a duck. But if we turn the page slightly, we see a rabbit. Both are objectively there, but only one is seen at a time.

In each case there is more than one meaning to be found, but discernment must occur for the second meaning to be seen. It is not obvious to everyone. Anyone who has attempted to teach mathematics to elementary-school children knows that a process of discernment must take place, although truth is objectively present. Another example

61. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 26.

62. Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 418.

is the experience of viewing a mosaic at very close range and seeing only the individual pieces, then stepping back and seeing the overall pattern.

Religious language is much the same. There are two perspectives, two levels of meaning. Language which has an obvious empirical referent also signifies an objective situation which is not so apparent. An example is the new birth. The word *birth*, which is immediately understood on the sensory level, is qualified or modified in logically odd ways. Thus it is shown to signify something more than the mere literal meaning of the symbol. If the language of the author successfully accomplishes his purposes, it will evoke a discernment of this "something more." Yet the something more was always objectively present. Theological language resembles expressions like "the army marches on its stomach." If we take this literally, we may conceive of the army as some odd sort of animal, a crossbreed between a snake and a dachshund.<sup>63</sup> This is, of course, ridiculous, but there is an objective meaning to which the expression refers. The odd qualifiers help us discern that meaning.

What all of this suggests is that religious language will be based upon empirical referents, but will employ odd methods to bring the readers or hearers to an understanding of the full meaning. It will commit whatever category transgressions are necessary to convey the meaning that cannot simply be unpacked by an exegesis of the literal meaning. Thus, in referring to the Trinity, one may find it helpful to utilize faulty grammar, such as "He are three," and "They is one." Or one may use riddles, puns, analogies, illustrations, all of which will "nibble at the edges," as it were, of the deeper, fuller meaning, in the hope that discernment will occur. At this point Ramsey's emphasis that this is not subjectivism needs to be reiterated. The fuller meaning is always objectively present, although not obviously so.<sup>64</sup>

One additional element should be added to Ramsey's analysis. The discernment of which he speaks should be attributed to the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the endeavor to effect discernment in another, the Christian may rely upon, and utilize the assistance of, the Holy Spirit.

Note that the goal of religious language is not merely discernment. It is also intended to elicit commitment.<sup>65</sup> Here we find a common element present in the thought of Ferré and many others.<sup>66</sup> Religious language, at least that of the Christian religion, is not merely informative. True Christianity is present only when commitment is present, and a total

commitment at that. The process of discernment is a means, and a necessary means, to that end.

To summarize: we have rejected the narrow criterion of meaningfulness proposed by logical positivism. We have, however, maintained that although knowledge is not gained exclusively through sense experience (there is such a thing as direct revelation from God to man), its meaning is grasped on an empirical basis. Meaning is found in symbols which on the surface refer to sense experiences. But the meaning of theological language goes beyond anything literal in those symbols. While that meaning is objectively present in the symbols, it must be discerned. It cannot be extracted by a strictly scientific method. We have seen that Hordern makes this very point, although from a slightly different angle. He asserts that religious language is basically personal and hence is not amenable to scientific analysis. And yet, as Ferré has shown, the propositions of religious language are cognitively meaningful, not as isolated statements of fact concerning sense experience, but as parts of a broad metaphysical synthesis.

63. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 14.

64. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 30.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 30ff.

66. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, pp. 165–66.

---

---

## PART TWO

### Knowing God

- 7. God's Universal Revelation
  - 8. God's Particular Revelation
  - 9. The Preservation of the Revelation: Inspiration
  - 10. The Dependability of God's Word: Inerrancy
  - 11. The Power of God's Word: Authority
-

## God's Universal Revelation

- The Nature of Revelation
- The Loci of General Revelation
- The Reality and Efficacy of General Revelation
  - Natural Theology
  - A Critique of Natural Theology
  - The Denial of General Revelation
  - Examination of Relevant Passages
  - General Revelation, But Without Natural Theology
- General Revelation and Human Responsibility
- Implications of General Revelation

### **The Nature of Revelation**

Because man is finite and God is infinite, if man is to know God it must come about by God's revelation of himself to man. By this we mean God's manifestation of himself to man in such a way that man can know and fellowship with him. There are two basic classifications of revelation. On the one hand, general revelation is God's communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places. Special revelation, on the other hand, involves God's particular communications and

manifestations of himself to particular persons at particular times, communications and manifestations which are available now only by consultation of certain sacred writings.

A closer examination of the definition of general revelation discloses that it refers to God's self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. It is general in two senses: its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times) and the content of the message (it is less particularized and detailed than special revelation). A number of questions need to be raised. One concerns the genuineness of the revelation. Is it really there? Further, we need to ask regarding the efficacy of this revelation. If it exists, what can be made of it? Can one construct a "natural theology," a knowledge of God from nature?

### The Loci of General Revelation

The traditional loci of general revelation are three: nature, history, and the constitution of the human being. Scripture itself proposes that there is a knowledge of God available through the created physical order. The psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). And Paul says, "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). These and numerous other passages, such as the "nature psalms," suggest that God has left evidence of himself in the world he has created. General revelation is most frequently thought of in connection with the amazing and impressive character of the creation, which seems to point to a very powerful and wise person who is capable of designing and producing intricate variety and beauty. The person who views the beauty of a sunset and the biology student dissecting a complex organism are exposed to indications of the greatness of God.

The second locus of general revelation is history. If God is at work in the world and is moving toward certain goals, it should be possible to detect the trend of his work in events that occur as part of history. The evidence here is less impressive than that of nature. For one thing, history is less accessible than is nature. One must consult the historical record. Either he will be dependent upon secondhand materials, the records and reports of others, or he will have to work from his own experience of history, which will often be a very limited segment, perhaps too limited to enable him to detect the overall pattern or trend.

An example often cited of God's revelation in history is the preservation of the people of Israel. This small nation has survived over many centuries within a basically hostile environment, often in the face of severe opposition. Anyone who investigates the historical records will find a remarkable pattern. Some persons have found great significance in individual events of history, for instance, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the battle of Midway in World War II. Individual events, however, are more subject to differing interpretations than are the broader, longer-lasting trends of history, such as the preservation of God's special people.

The third locus of general revelation is God's highest earthly creation, man himself. Sometimes God's general revelation is seen in the physical structure and mental capacities of man. It is, however, in the moral and spiritual qualities of man that God's character is best perceived.

Humans make moral judgments, that is, judgments of what is right and wrong. This involves something more than our personal likes and dislikes, and something more than mere expediency. We often feel that we ought to do something, whether it is advantageous to us or not, and that others have a right to do something which we may not personally like. Despite the metaphysical skepticism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant asserts in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the moral imperative requires the postulate of a life hereafter and of a divine guarantor of values. Others, such as C. S. Lewis,<sup>1</sup> Edward Carnell,<sup>2</sup> and Francis Schaeffer,<sup>3</sup> have in more recent years called attention to the evidential value of the moral impulse which characterizes human beings. These theologians and philosophers do not contend that all persons hold to a given moral code. Rather they stress simply the existence of the moral impulse or moral consciousness.

General revelation is also found in man's religious nature. In all cultures, at all times and places, humans have believed in the existence of a higher reality than themselves, and even of something higher than the human race collectively. While the exact nature of the belief and worship practice varies considerably from one religion to another, many see in this universal tendency toward worship of the holy the manifestation of a past knowledge of God, an internal sense of deity, which, although it may be marred and distorted, is nonetheless still present and operating in human experience.

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 17-39.

2. Edward Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 80-116.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1968), pp. 119-25.

## The Reality and Efficacy of General Revelation

### Natural Theology

Regarding the nature, extent, and efficacy of general revelation, there are some rather sharply contrasting views. One of these positions is natural theology, which has had a long and conspicuous history within Christianity. It maintains not only that there is a valid, objective revelation of God in such spheres as nature, history, and human personality, but that it is actually possible to gain some true knowledge of God from these spheres—in other words, to construct a natural theology apart from the Bible.

Certain assumptions are involved in this view. One is, of course, that there is an objective, valid, and rational general revelation—that God actually has made himself known in nature (for example) and that patterns of meaning are objectively present—independently of whether anyone perceives, understands, and accepts this revelation. In other words, truth about God is actually present within the creation, not projected upon it by a believer who already knows God from other sources, such as the Bible. And this view assumes that nature is basically intact—that it has not been substantially distorted by anything that has occurred since the creation. In short, the world we find about us is basically the world as it came from the creative hand of God, and as it was intended to be.

A second major assumption of natural theology is the integrity of the person perceiving and learning from the creation. Neither the natural limitations of humanity nor the effects of sin and the fall prevent him from recognizing and correctly interpreting the handiwork of the Creator. In terms of categories to be developed at greater length later in this work, natural theologians tend to be Arminian or even Pelagian in their thought rather than Calvinistic or Augustinian.

There are other assumptions as well. One is that there is a congruity between the human mind and the creation about us. The order of the human mind is basically the same as the order of the universe. The mind is capable of drawing inferences from the data it possesses, since the structure of its thinking processes coheres with the structure of what it knows. The validity of the laws of logic is also assumed. Such logical principles as the law of identity, the law of contradiction, and the law of excluded middle are not merely abstract mental constructs, but they are true of the world. Natural theologians assiduously avoid paradoxes and logical contradictions, considering them something to be removed by a more complete logical scrutiny of the issues under consideration. A paradox is a sign of intellectual indigestion; had it been more completely chewed, it would have disappeared.

The core of natural theology is the idea that it is possible, without a prior commitment of faith to the beliefs of Christianity, and without relying upon any special authority, such as an institution (the church) or a document (the Bible), to come to a genuine knowledge of God on the basis of reason alone. Reason here refers to man's capacity to discover, understand, interpret, and evaluate the truth.

Perhaps the outstanding example of natural theology in the history of the church is the massive effort of Thomas Aquinas. According to Thomas, all truth belongs to one of two realms. The lower realm is the realm of nature, the higher the realm of grace. While the claims pertaining to the upper realm must be accepted on authority, those in the lower realm may be known by reason.

It is important to note the historical situation out of which Thomas's view developed. In seeking the answers to major questions, the church had for centuries appealed to the authority of the Bible and/or of the church's teaching. If one or both of these taught something, it was taken as true. Certain developments challenged this, however. One was a treatise by Peter Abelard entitled *Sic et non*. It had been customary to consult the church fathers as a means of resolving issues facing the church. Abelard, however, compiled a list of 158 propositions on which the Fathers disagreed. He cited statements on both sides of each of these propositions. Thus it was apparent that resolving issues was not so simple as merely quoting the Fathers. It would be necessary to find some way to choose whenever the Fathers offered conflicting opinions. Reason is essential even in the utilization of authority.

If this was an internal problem within the church, there was an external problem as well: the contact of the church with heterogeneous cultures. For the first time, the church was encountering Jews, Moslems (especially in Sicily and Spain), and even complete pagans on a large scale. It was of no value to quote one's authority to these persons. The Jew would simply quote his Torah, and the Moslem his Koran, and all of them, including the pagan, would simply look puzzled when the Christian theologian cited the Bible or the church. If any real impact was to be made upon these persons, it would be necessary to enter some neutral arena where no special authority need be appealed to, and to settle the matter on terms accepted by all rational men. This Thomas attempted to do.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas contended that he could prove certain beliefs by pure reason: the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the supernatural origin of the Catholic Church. More specific elements of doctrine—such as the triune nature of God—could not be known by

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 1, question 2.

unaided reason, but must be accepted on authority. These are truths of revelation, not truths of reason. (Of course, if one of the natural truths established by reason is the divine origin of the Catholic Church, then by inference one has established its authority and, consequently, the truth of the higher or revealed matters on which it speaks.) Reason rules the lower level, while the truths on the upper level are matters of faith.

One of the traditional arguments for the existence of God is the cosmological proof. Thomas has three or possibly even four versions of this proof. The argument proceeds somewhat as follows: In the realm of our experience, everything that we know is caused by something else. There cannot, however, be an infinite regress of causes, for if that were the case, the whole series of causes would never have begun. There must, therefore, be some uncaused cause (unmoved mover) or necessary being. And this we (or all men) call God. Anyone looking honestly at the evidence must reach this conclusion.

Another argument frequently employed, and found in Thomas as well, is the teleological argument. This focuses particularly upon the phenomenon of orderliness or apparent purpose in the universe. Thomas observes that various parts of the universe exhibit behavior which is adaptive or which helps bring about desirable ends. When such behavior is displayed by human beings, we recognize that they have consciously willed and directed themselves toward that end. Some of the objects in our universe, however, cannot have done any purposive planning. Certainly rocks and atmosphere have not chosen to be as they are. Their ordering according to a purpose or design must come from somewhere else. Some intelligent being must, therefore, have ordered things in this desirable fashion. And this being, says Thomas, we call God.

Sometimes the whole universe is considered in the teleological argument. In such cases the universe is often compared to some mechanism. For example, if we were to find a watch lying on the sand, we would immediately recognize it as a watch, for all of its parts are ideally suited to the purpose of recording and displaying the time. We would certainly not say, "What a remarkable coincidence!" We would recognize that some able person(s) must have planned and brought about the amazing way in which each part fits in with the other parts. Similarly, the way in which each part of nature meshes so well with every other part, and the striking fashion in which various components of the whole seem adapted to the fulfilment of certain functions, cannot be dismissed as a "fortuitous concatenation of circumstances." Someone must have designed and constructed digestive systems, eyes, properly balanced atmospheres, and much else in our world. All of this argues for the existence of a supreme Designer, a wise and capable Creator. There must be a God.

These are two major arguments which have historically been employed in developing a natural theology. Two others which appear in the history of philosophy and theology, although perhaps less prominently than the cosmological and the teleological arguments, are the anthropological and the ontological.

The anthropological argument is not found explicitly in Thomas's thought, although it may be implicit in the fourth proof.<sup>5</sup> It sees some of the aspects of human nature as a revelation of God. In Kant's formulation (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*) it appears somewhat as follows. We all possess a moral impulse or a categorical imperative. Following this impulse by behaving morally is not very well rewarded within this life, however. Being good does not always pay! Why should one be moral then? Would it not be wiser to act selfishly at times? There must be some basis for ethics and morality, some sort of reward, which in turn involves several factors-immortality and an undying soul, a coming time of judgment, and a God who establishes and supports values, and who rewards good and punishes evil. Thus, the moral order (as contrasted with the natural order) requires the existence of God.

All of these are empirical arguments. They proceed from observation of the universe by sense experience. The major *a priori* or rational argument is the ontological argument. This is a pure-thought type of argument. It does not require one to go outside his own thinking, out of the realm of abstract thought, into the realm of sensory experience. In the *Proslogion* Anselm formulated what is undoubtedly the most famous statement of the argument. René Descartes also presented a version of it,<sup>6</sup> as did Georg Hegel in a considerably different form.<sup>7</sup> In more recent times, Charles Hartshorne has argued for its validity,\* and there has been renewed discussion of it in the twentieth century by both theologians and philosophers?

Anselm's statement of the argument is as follows. God is the greatest of all conceivable beings. Now a being which does not exist cannot be the greatest of all conceivable beings (for the nonexistent being of our

5. Thomas's fourth proof in effect argues that because there are degrees of perfection in the universe, there must somewhere be the ultimate perfection.

6. René Descartes, *Meditations*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1911), vol. 1, pp. 180-81.

7. Georg Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Appendix: "Lectures on the Proofs of the Existence of God"; *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, "Logic," paragraph 51; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, part 2, section 2.

8. Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String, 1941); "Formal Validity and Real Significance of the Ontological Argument," *Philosophical Review* 53 (1944): 225-45.

9. E.g., *The Many-Faced Argument*, ed. John H. Hick and Arthur C. McGill (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

conceptions would be greater if it had the *attribute* of existence). Therefore, by definition, God must exist. There have been several responses to this, many of which follow Kant's contention that, in effect, existence is not an attribute. A being that exists does not have some attribute or quality lacked by a similar being which does not exist. If I imagine a dollar and compare it with a real dollar, there is no difference in their essence, in *what* they are. The only difference is in whether they are. There is a logical difference between the sentence "God is good" (or loving, or holy, or just) and the sentence "God is." The former predicates some quality of God; the latter is a statement of existence. The point here is that existence is not a necessary predicate of the greatest of all conceivable beings. Such a being may exist—or it may not. In either case its essence is the same. (It should also be noted that Anselm was working within a Platonic framework, in which the ideal is more real than the physical or material.)

#### *A Critique of Natural Theology*

Despite natural theology's long and hallowed history, its present effects do not seem overly impressive. If the arguments are valid and are adequately presented, any rational person should be convinced. Yet numerous philosophers have raised criticisms against the proofs, and many theologians have joined them. This may seem strange to some Christians. Why should any Christian be opposed to an effort to convince non-Christians of the truth of Christianity, or at least of the existence of God? The answer is that use of these proofs may actually work to one's disadvantage if his desire is to make the most effective presentation possible of the claims of Christ. If the proofs are inadequate, then the unbeliever, in rejecting the proofs, may also reject the Christian message, assuming that these proofs are the best grounds that can be offered for its acceptance. In rejecting one form of advocacy of the Christian message, a form which is not a matter of biblical revelation, there is the danger that the unbeliever will reject the message itself.

Some of the problems with the arguments relate to assumptions which they contain. Thomas assumed that there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. To Thomas this was not an assumption, but rather virtually an axiom or a first truth which is known intuitively. But numerous persons today would disagree. A linear sequence of causes is not the only way to view causation. Some would question the necessity of asking about ultimate causation. Even if one does ask, however, there is the possibility of a circle of causes, with one cause within the closed system causing another. Similarly, the assumption that motion has to

have a cause or explanation is not universally held today. Reality may well be dynamic rather than static.

There is also criticism of the procedure of extending the argument from the observable to that which goes beyond experience. In the case of the watch found in the sand, we have something which can be verified by sense experience. We can actually check with the company whose name appears (coincidentally?) on the watch, and inquire as to whether they manufactured it. We might verify that they did, and perhaps even ascertain the date of manufacture and the identities of those who worked on it. Furthermore, we recognize that the watch is similar to other watches which we have seen before, being worn, offered for sale, and perhaps even manufactured. Thus, we can extrapolate from past experience. In the case of the world, however, we do not have something which can be so easily verified by sense experience. How many worlds have we observed being created? The assumption is that the universe is a member of a class of objects (including such things as watches and cameras) to which we can compare it, and thus we can make rational judgments about its design. This, however, must be established, not assumed, if the argument from the analogy of the watch is to succeed.

A further problem was alluded to earlier. Suppose one succeeds in proving, by a valid argument, that this world must have had a cause. One cannot, however, conclude from this that such a cause must be infinite. One can affirm only that there was a cause sufficient to account for the effect.<sup>10</sup> That one can lift a 100-pound weight does not warrant the conclusion that he can lift any more than that. Because of the ease with which he lifted it, it might be speculated that he could certainly have lifted much more, but this has not been demonstrated. Similarly, one cannot prove the existence of an infinite Creator from the existence of a finite universe. All that can be proved is a creator sufficiently powerful and wise to bring into being this universe, which, great though it is, is nonetheless finite. In creating the universe, God may have done absolutely all he could, utterly exhausting himself in the process. In other words, what has been established is the existence of a very great but possibly limited god, not the infinite God that Christianity presents. A further argument is needed to prove that this is the God of Christianity and, indeed, that the gods which constitute the conclusions of Thomas's several arguments are all the same being. If we are to have a natural theology, this must be argued on the basis of our human reason (without resort to some other authority).

Since the time of David Hume, the whole concept of cause has had a

10. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 11; Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 29.

somewhat uncertain status. Cause, in some people's thinking, suggests a sort of absolute connection: if A is the cause of B, then, whenever A occurs, B must necessarily also occur. Hume pointed out the flaw in this idea of necessary connection. The most we have is a constant conjunction: whenever A has occurred in the past, it has always been followed by B. Yet there is no empirical basis for saying that the next time A occurs, B must necessarily occur also. All that we have is a psychological disposition to expect B, but not a logical certainty.<sup>11</sup>

The teleological argument has come in for special criticism. Since Charles Darwin, the usual appeal to the intricacy and beauty of the organic realm has not carried a great deal of persuasiveness for those who accept the theory of organic evolution. They believe changes in characteristics have arisen through chance variations called mutations. Some of these were advantageous and some were disadvantageous. In the struggle for survival occasioned by the fecundity of nature, any characteristic which enables a species to survive will be transmitted, and those branches of the species which lack this characteristic will tend to die out. Thus, the process of natural selection has produced the remarkable qualities which the teleological argument claims point to a design and a designer. To be sure, this criticism of the teleological argument has its shortcomings (e.g., natural selection cannot explain away the inorganic adaptation observed in the universe), but the point is simply that those persons who accept evolution disagree with Thomas's assertion that there is a compelling and necessary character to the conclusion of the teleological argument.

The teleological argument also encounters the problem of what might be termed the "dysteleological." If the argument is to be truly empirical, it must, of course, take into account the whole sweep of data. Now the argument proceeds on the basis of seeming indications of a wise and benevolent God controlling the creation. But there are some disturbing features of the world as well, aspects of nature that do not seem very good. Natural catastrophes, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and a host of other "acts of God," as the insurance companies term them, cause us to wonder what sort of designer planned the universe. Heart disease, cancer, cystic fibrosis, multiple sclerosis and other destructive maladies wreak havoc upon humankind. In addition, man inflicts destructiveness, cruelty, injustice, and pain upon his fellows. If God is all-powerful and completely good, how can these things be? It is possible by emphasizing these features of the universe to construct an argument for either the nonexistence of God or the existence of a nongood God. Perhaps the teleological

11. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 1, part 3, sections 2-4.

argument would then turn out to be an argument, not for the existence of God, but of the devil. When these considerations are taken into account, the teleological argument appears less than impressive.

#### *The Denial of General Revelation*

In addition to these philosophical objections, there are theological objections as well. Karl Barth, for example, rejected both natural theology and general revelation. Barth was educated in the standard liberalism descending from Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, and was particularly instructed by Wilhelm Herrmann. Liberalism did not take the Bible very seriously, resting many of its assertions upon a type of natural theology. Barth had good reason, on an experiential basis, to be concerned about the belief in a general revelation, and the liberals' attempt to develop a natural theology from it. He had seen the effect of too closely identifying developments in history with God's working. In 1914, he was shocked when a group of ninety-four German intellectuals endorsed Kaiser Wilhelm's war policy. The names of several of Barth's theology professors appeared on this list. They felt that God would accomplish his will in the world through the war policy. Their view of revelation had made them extremely undiscriminating regarding historical events. Together with the shift of Ernst Troeltsch from the faculty of theology to that of philosophy, this disillusioning experience indicated to Barth the shallowness and bankruptcy of liberalism. Thus, from a theological standpoint, August 1914 in a sense marked the end of the nineteenth century in Europe.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1930s the process was virtually repeated. In desperate economic straits, Germany saw the hope of salvation in Adolf Hitler's National Socialist party. A major segment of the state church endorsed this movement, seeing it as God's way of working in history. Barth spoke out against the Nazi government and, as a result, was forced to leave his teaching post in Germany. In each case, later political developments proved that Barth's apprehensions about the theological conclusions of liberalism were well founded.

It is important for us to note Barth's understanding of revelation. For Barth, revelation is redemptive in nature. To know God, to have correct information about him, is to be related to him in a salvific experience. Disagreeing with many other theologians, he comments that it is not possible to draw from Romans 1:18–32 any statement regarding a "natural union with God or knowledge of God on the part of man in himself and as such."<sup>13</sup> In his debate with Emil Brunner, Barth said: "How can

12. Karl Barth, *God, Grace, and Gospel* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), pp. 57–58.

13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), vol. 2, part 1, p. 121.

Brunner maintain that a real knowledge of the true God, however imperfect it may be (and what knowledge of God is not imperfect?), does not bring salvation?"<sup>14</sup>

Barth is very skeptical of the view that man is able to know God apart from the revelation in Christ. This would mean that man can know the existence, the being of God, without knowing anything of the grace and mercy of God. This would injure the unity of God, since it would abstract his being from the fullness of his activity.<sup>15</sup> If man could achieve some knowledge of God outside of his revelation, which is in Jesus Christ, man would have contributed at least in some small measure to his salvation, his spiritual standing with God. The principle of grace alone would be compromised.

For Barth, revelation is always and only the revelation of God in Jesus Christ: the Word become flesh.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the incarnation there is no revelation. Behind this position lies (probably unrecognized by Barth) an existentialist conception of truth as person-to-person and subjective, going back both to Soren Kierkegaard and to Martin Buber. The possibility of knowledge of God outside the gracious revelation in Christ would eliminate the need for Christ.

Barth must, however, face the problem of the existence of natural theology. Why has it arisen and persisted? He recognizes that several biblical passages have traditionally been cited as justification for engaging in natural theology (e.g., Ps. 19 and Rom. 1). What is to be done with them? He states that the "main line" of Scripture teaches that what unites man with God is, from God's side, his grace. How can there be, then, some other way by which man can approach God, another way of knowing him? There are three possible ways of handling the apparent discrepancy between this main line and the "side line" of Scripture (those passages which seem to speak of a natural theology):

1. Reexamine the main line to see whether it can be interpreted in such a way as to allow for the side line.
2. Consider both valid but contradictory.
3. Interpret the side line in such a way as not to contradict the main line.

The first possibility has already been eliminated. What about maintaining that there simply are two contradictory notes here, producing a

14. Karl Barth, "No!" in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fracnkel (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946), p. 62.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part I, p. 93.

16. Karl Barth, in *Revelation*, ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 49.

paradox? Contrary to what many people had expected, Barth rejected that alternative. Since the biblical witness is God's revelation rather than a human idea, contradictions cannot be present.<sup>17</sup> That leaves only the third possibility: interpreting the side line so as not to contradict the main line.

In interpreting Psalm 19 Barth understands verse 3, "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard," as adversative to verses 1 and 2. Thus the psalmist denies in verse 3 what he seems to be affirming in verses 1 and 2. The heavens, the days and nights, are actually mute. Barth also maintains that the first six verses of the psalm must be understood in the light of verses 7-14. Thus, the witness which man sees in the cosmos "does not come about independently, but in utter co-ordination with and subordination to the witness of God's speaking and acting [the law of the Lord, the testimony of the Lord, etc.] in the people and among the people of Israel."<sup>18</sup>

Barth must admit that Romans 1:18-32 definitely states that man has knowledge of God. Barth denies, however, that this knowledge of God is independent of the divine revelation of the gospel. Rather, he maintains that the people Paul has in view have already been presented with the revelation which God declared.<sup>19</sup> After all, Paul does say the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against them (v. 18). And in this same context he says that he is eager to preach the gospel to the Romans (v. 15), and that he is not ashamed of this gospel, since it is the power of God to them.

Essentially, then, Barth's interpretation of both passages is the same. The persons in view do find God in the cosmos, but they do so because they already know God from his special revelation. Therefore, what has happened is that they have read into, or projected upon, the created order, what they have known of him from the revelation.

It is true that in later portions of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth seemed to modify his position somewhat. Here he granted that although Jesus Christ is the one true Word and Light of life, the creation contains numerous lesser lights that display his glory. Barth, however, does not speak of these as revelations, reserving that designation for the Word. He retains the term *lights*. It is also notable that in his later summary statement, *Evangelical Theology*, Barth made no mention of a revelation through the created order.<sup>20</sup> Thus it seems to have made little or no real practical impact upon his theology.

17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part I, p. 105.

18. Ibid., p. 108.

19. Ibid., p. 119.

20. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1936).

Barth's offensive against natural theology is understandable, especially given his experience with it, but he has overreacted. As we shall note in the next section, Barth engaged in some rather questionable exegesis. Apparently his interpretations followed necessarily from his presuppositions, some of which are dubious:

1. That God's revelation is exclusively in Jesus Christ.
2. That genuine revelation is always responded to positively, rather than being ignored or rejected.
3. That knowledge of God is always redemptive or salvific in nature.

Barth brought these assumptions to his interpretation of biblical passages which seem to speak of general revelation. That these assumptions lead to an overall conceptual scheme which has difficulty accounting for the data brings us to the conclusion that one or more of them are inappropriate or invalid.

#### *Examination of Relevant Passages*

We need now to examine more closely several key passages dealing with the issue of general revelation, and attempt to see exactly what they say. We will then draw the meanings of these several passages together into a coherent position on the subject.

Of the many nature psalms, all conveying the same basic meaning, Psalm 19 is perhaps the most explicit. The language used is very vivid. The verb translated "are telling" is מְסַפֵּרִים (*mesapperim*). This is a Piel participle form of סִפְרָה (*saphar*). In the Qal or simple stem, the verb means to count or reckon or number; in the Piel, it means to recount or relate. The use of the participle suggests an ongoing process. The verb מְגַדֵּל (*maggid*), from נָגַד (*nagad*), means to declare or show. The verb יְבִיאָה (*yabbia'*), the Hiphil imperfect of בָּבָעַ (*naba'*), means to pour forth or emit, cause to bubble, or belch forth. It especially conveys the idea of free-flowing, spontaneous emission. The verb יְחַנֵּן (*yechawweh*) from חָנָה (*chawah*) means simply to declare, tell, make known. On the surface, these verses assert that created nature tells forth God's glory.

The real interpretive question here involves the status of verse 3 (verse 4 in the Hebrew text), which literally says, "There is no speech, there are no words; their voice is not heard." Five major interpretations as to how this verse relates to the preceding verse have been offered:<sup>21</sup>

1. Verse 3 is saying that there are no words, that the witnesses are

21. For additional comments on these several approaches see Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), vol. 1, pp. 281-83.

silent, speechless witnesses. They are inaudible but everywhere intelligible. If this were the case, however, verse 3 would have the effect of interrupting the flow of the hymn, and the following verse ought to begin with a waw-adversative.

2. Verse 3 should be taken as a circumstantial clause modifying the following verse; this is the interpretation of Georg Ewald. The verses would then be rendered: "Without loud speech ... their sound has resounded throughout all the earth." There are both lexical and syntactical problems with this interpretation. רֹאשׁ ('omer) does not mean "loud speech" and מִקְרָא (qawwam) does not mean "their sound." Also verse 3 contains nothing to betray any designed subordination to the next verse.

3. Verse 3 should be made independent and adversative. Thus it effectively denies what the first two verses had affirmed. This is Barth's position. Yet one wonders what in the context suggests such an antithesis. In addition, one would expect the verb יָצַא (*yatsa'*) of verse 4 to appear already in verse 3. Furthermore, while some other interpretations of the verse require the supplying of one element of speech, Barth's interpretation would require both the waw-conjunctive and the preposition **with**, neither of which is found here. Thus his interpretation seems unduly complicated. The law of Ockham's razor would suggest looking for and then adopting a simpler treatment which will yet adequately explain the verse.<sup>22</sup>

4. The interpretation of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others was that verse 3 should be rendered, "There is no language and there are no words in which this message is not heard." This would emphasize the universality of the message, coming to every nation and language group. In that case, however, we would expect to find אֲנָלִשְׁׂׂון ('en lashon) or שָׁפָחָה ('en saphah).

5. The rendering followed by the Septuagint, Campegius Vitringa, and Ferdinand Hitzig is: "There is no language, and there are no words, whose voice is unheard, that is, inaudible," or simply, "There is no speech and there are no words inaudible."

The last interpretation appears most desirable for several reasons. In the form "There is no speech and there are no words inaudible," there is no need to supply missing words. Much depends here upon the translation of the negative particle בֶּלִי (*beli*). This particle is used chiefly to negate an adjective or participle, thus functioning as does the prefixed alpha in Greek and "a-" in English. An example of this usage is בֶּלִי מֶשְׁיחָה (*beli mashiach*) in 2 Samuel 1:21, which the Revised Standard Version

22. The law of Ockham's razor, named after William of Ockham, is the equivalent of the modern law of parsimony: no more concepts ought to be introduced than are necessary to account for the phenomena.

translates “not anointed [with oil].” Such a rendering of Psalm 19:3 is perfectly natural, one not requiring insertion of any missing words; moreover, not only does this rendering not contradict the preceding verses, but it actually accentuates or supports them.

There remains the question of the relationship between verses 7-14 and the first six verses of the psalm. Barth suggests that the first part be interpreted in the light of the latter part. In general, interpreting a verse in the light of its context is a sound exegetical principle. In this case, however, suggesting (as Barth does) that the persons who find the witness in nature do so because they know the law of God seems artificial. There is no indication of such a link or transition; consequently, what we have in the latter part of the psalm is an ascension to another topic, showing how the law goes beyond the revelation in the cosmos.

Romans 1 and 2 is the other major passage dealing with general revelation. The particularly significant portion of chapter 1 is verses 18-32, which emphasizes the revelation of God in nature, whereas 2:14-16 seems especially to elaborate the general revelation in human personality. The theme of the epistle is enunciated in verses 16 and 17 of the first chapter, that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. This righteousness of God in providing salvation, however, presupposes the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men (v. 18). Paul is concerned to indicate how this wrath of God can be just. The answer is that the people on whom God's wrath is visited have the truth but suppress it by their unrighteousness (v.18b). God has plainly shown them what can be known about him. This self-manifestation has continued since the creation of the world, being perceived in the things that God has made. God's invisible qualities of eternal power and divinity are clearly perceived, and consequently the wicked are without excuse (v. 20). They had known God but did not honor or thank him; rather, their minds were darkened and they became futile in their thinking (vv. 21-22).

The language of this passage is clear and strong. It is hard to interpret expressions like “what can be known about God” (*τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ*) and “has shown” (*έφανέρωσεν*—v. 19) as pointing to anything other than an objectively knowable truth about God. Similarly, “although they knew God” (*γνόντες τὸν θεόν*—v. 21) and “the truth about God” (*τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ*—v. 25) indicate possession of genuine and accurate knowledge.

Barth's suggestion that the people in view are not man in the cosmos (man in general) is wrong. His argument is that the passage under consideration must be seen in the context of the gospel spoken of by Paul in verses 15 and 16. Thus the latter part of the chapter (vv. 18-32) has in view those Jews and Gentiles who were objectively confronted by

the divine revelation in the gospel (v. 16). Note, however, that Paul does not say that the *righteousness* of God has been revealed to the ungodly. What he does say is that the wrath of God is against (*ἐπὶ*) or upon them, while the things which can be known of him (v. 19—it is significant that Paul does not use the term gospel or *righteousness* here) are in (*ἐν*) them and revealed to them (*αὐτοῖς*, dative case). This distinction between the supernatural revelation of the wrath of God (which is a part of special revelation) and the revelation of his eternal power and deity in creation is further underscored by Paul's statement that the former is revealed against the ungodly because (*διότι*) the latter is plain to them. Thus, it appears that they had the general revelation but not the special revelation, the gospel. They were aware of the eternal power and deity of God; they were not aware of his wrath and righteousness. To be sure, it was through special revelation that Paul knew of the judgment of these people, but they were in that condition simply because of their rejection of general revelation. Barth is confused on this point.

The second chapter continues the argument. The point here seems to be that all, Gentile and Jew alike, are condemned: the Jews because they fail to do what they know the law to require; the Gentiles because, even without having the law, they also know enough to make them responsible to God for their actions, yet they disobey. When they do by nature (*φύσει*) what the law requires, they are showing that what the law requires is written on their hearts (vv. 14-15). Thus, whether having heard the law or not, these people know God's truth.

Acts 14:15-17 also deals with the issue of general revelation. The people of Lystra had thought Paul and Barnabas were gods. They began to worship them. In attempting to divest the people of this idea, Paul pointed out that they should turn to the God who had made heaven and earth. He then observed that even while God had allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, he had left a witness of himself to all peoples, by doing good, providing rain and fruitful seasons, and satisfying their hearts with food and gladness. The point is that God had given witness of himself by the benevolent preservation of his creation. Here the argument appears to relate to God's witness to himself in nature and (perhaps even more so) in history.

The final passage of particular significance for our purposes is Acts 17:22-31. Here Paul appears before a group of philosophers—the Athenian Philosophical Society as it were on the Areopagus. Two points are of particular significance in Paul's presentation. First, Paul had noticed an altar “to an unknown god” in the Athenians' place of worship. He proceeded to proclaim this god to them. The god whom they sensed from their speculations, without having had special revelation, was the same God whom he knew from special manifestation. Second, he

quoted an Athenian poet (v. 28). The significant item here is that a pagan poet had been able to come to a spiritual truth without God's special revelation.

#### *General Revelation, But Without Natural Theology*

When we begin to draw these several passages together, the position proposed by Calvin appears more consistent with the biblical data and with the philosophical observations than do the positions proposed by Thomas and Barth. Basically, this is the view that God has given us an objective, valid, rational revelation of himself in nature, history, and human personality. It is there for anyone who wants to observe it. Regardless of whether anyone actually observes it, understands it, and believes it, it is nonetheless present. Although it may well have been disturbed by the fall of man, it is objectively present. This is the conclusion to be drawn from passages like Psalm 19:1–2 and Romans 1:19–20. General revelation is not something read into nature by those who know God on other grounds; it is already present, by the creation and continuing providence of God.

Paul asserts, however, that man does not clearly perceive God in the general revelation. Sin—we are thinking here of both the fall of the human race and our continuing evil acts—has a double effect upon the efficacy of the general revelation. On the one hand, sin has marred the witness of the general revelation. The created order is now under a curse (Gen. 3:17–19). The ground brings forth thorns and thistles for the man who would till it (v. 18); women must suffer the multiplied anguish of childbearing (v. 16). Paul speaks in Romans 8:18–25 about the creation's having been subjected to futility (v. 20); it waits for its liberation (vv. 19, 21, 23). As a result, its witness is somewhat refracted. While it is still God's creation and thus continues to witness to him, it is not quite what it was when it came from the hand of the Maker. It is a spoiled creation. The testimony to the Maker is blurred.

The more serious effect of sin and the fall is upon man himself. Scripture speaks in several places of the blindness and darkness of man's understanding. Romans 1:21 has already been noted, where Paul says that men knew God but rejected this knowledge, and blindness followed. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul attributes this blindness to the work of Satan: "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God." Although Paul is here referring to ability to see the light of the gospel, this blindness would doubtless affect the ability to see God in the creation as well.

General revelation evidently does not enable the unbeliever to come

to the knowledge of God. Paul's statements about general revelation (Rom. 1–2) must be viewed in the light of what he says about sinful man (Rom. 3—all men are under sin's power; none is righteous) and the urgency of telling people about Christ (10:14): "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" Thus in Paul's mind the possibility of constructing a full-scale natural theology seems seriously in question.

What is necessary, then, is what Calvin calls "the spectacles of faith." Calvin draws an analogy between the condition of the sinner and a man who has a sight problem.<sup>23</sup> When the latter looks at an object, he sees it but indistinctly. It is blurry to him. But when he puts on spectacles, he can see clearly. Similarly, the sinner does not recognize God in the creation. But when the sinner puts on the spectacles of faith, his sight improves and he can see God in his handiwork.

When one is exposed to the special revelation found in the gospel and responds, his mind is cleared through the effects of regeneration, enabling him to see distinctly what is there. He then is able to recognize in nature what he has more clearly seen in the special revelation. The psalmist who saw a declaration of the glory of God in the heavens saw it clearly because he had come to know God from the special revelation, but what he saw had always been genuinely and objectively there. He did not merely project it upon the creation, as Barth would have us believe.

It is worth noting that we do not find within Scripture anything constituting a formal argument for the existence of God from the evidences within the general revelation. There is an assertion that God is seen in his handiwork, but this is scarcely a formal proof of his existence. And it is notable that when Paul made his presentation and appeal to the Athenians, some believed, some rejected, and some expressed interest in hearing more on another occasion (Acts 17:32–34). Thus the conclusion that there is an objective general revelation, but that it cannot be used to construct a natural theology, seems to fit best the full data of Scripture on the subject.

#### **General Revelation and Human Responsibility**

But what of the judgment of man, spoken of by Paul in Romans 1 and 2? If it is just for God to condemn man, and if man can become guilty without having known God's special revelation, does that mean

23. John Calvin, *Institutes Of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapter 6, section 1.

that man without special revelation can do what will enable him to avoid the condemnation of God? In Romans 2:14 Paul says: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law." Is Paul suggesting that they could have fulfilled the requirements of the law? But that is not possible even for those who have the law (see Gal. 3:10-11 as well as Rom. 3). Paul also makes clear in Galatians 3:23-24 that the law was not a means of justifying us, but a *παιδαγωγός* to make us aware of our sin and to lead us to faith by bringing us to Christ.

Now the internal law which the unbeliever has performs much the same function as does the law which the Jew has. From the revelation in nature (Rom. 1), man ought to conclude that there exists a powerful eternal God. And from the revelation within (Rom. 2), man should realize that he does not live up to the standard. While the content of the moral code will vary in different cultural situations, everyone has an inner compulsion that there is something to which he ought to adhere. And everyone should reach the conclusion that he is not fulfilling that standard. In other words, the knowledge of God which all men have, if they do not suppress it, should bring them to the conclusion that they are guilty in relationship to God.

What if someone then were to throw himself upon the mercy of God, not knowing upon what basis that mercy was provided? Would he not in a sense be in the same situation as the Old Testament believers? The doctrine of Christ and his atoning work had not been fully revealed to these people. Yet they knew that there was provision for the forgiveness of sins, and that they could not be accepted on the merits of any works of their own. They had the form of the gospel without its full content. And they were saved. Now if the god known in nature is the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as Paul seems to assert in Acts 17:23), then it would seem that a person who comes to a belief in a single powerful God, who despairs of any works-righteousness to please this holy God, and who throws himself upon the mercy of this good God, would be accepted as were the Old Testament believers. The basis of acceptance would be the work of Jesus Christ, even though the person involved is not conscious that this is how provision has been made for his salvation.<sup>24</sup> We should note that the basis of salvation was apparently the same in the Old Testament as in the New. Salvation has always been appropriated by faith (Gal. 3:6-9); this salvation rests upon Christ's deliverance of us from the law (vv. 10-14, 19-29). Nothing has been changed in that respect.

**24.** For a fuller statement of this possibility, see Millard J. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Haven't Heard? Yes, but," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 2 (1975): 122-26.

What inference are we to draw, then, from Paul's statement in Romans 2:1-16? Is it conceivable that one can be saved by faith without having the special revelation? Paul seems to be laying open this theoretical possibility. Yet it is merely a theoretical possibility. It is highly questionable how many, if any, actually experience salvation without having special revelation. Paul suggests in Romans 3 that no one does. And in chapter 10 he urges the necessity of preaching the gospel (the special revelation) so that men may believe. Thus it is apparent that in failing to respond to the light of general revelation which they have, men are fully responsible, for they have truly known God, but have willfully suppressed that truth. Thus in effect the general revelation serves, as does the law, merely to make guilty, not to make righteous.

### Implications of General Revelation

1. There **is** a common ground or a point of contact between the believer and the nonbeliever, or between the gospel and the thinking of the unbeliever. All persons have a knowledge of God. Although it may be suppressed **to** the extent of being unconscious or unrecognizable, it is nonetheless there, and there will be areas of sensitivity to which the message may be effectively directed as a starting point. These areas of sensitivity will vary from one person to another, but they will be there. There are features of the creation to which the believer may point, features which will enable the unbeliever to recognize something of the truth of the message. It is therefore neither necessary nor desirable to fire the message at the hearer in an indiscriminate fashion.

2. There is a possibility of some knowledge of divine truth outside the special revelation. We may understand more about the specially revealed truth by examining the general revelation. We understand in more complete detail the greatness of God, we comprehend more fully the image of God in man, when we attend to the general revelation. This should be considered a supplement to, not a substitute for, special revelation. Sin's distortion of man's understanding of the general revelation is greater the closer one gets to the relationship between God and man. Thus, sin produces relatively little obscuring effect upon the understanding of matters of physics, but a great deal with respect to matters of psychology and sociology. Yet it is at those places where the potential for distortion is greatest that the most complete understanding is possible.

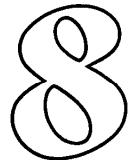
3. God is just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel in the full and formal sense. No one is completely without opportunity. All have known God; if they have not effectually perceived him, it is because they have suppressed the truth. Thus all are responsible. This

increases the motivation of missionary endeavor, for no one is innocent. All need to believe in God's offer of grace, and the message needs to be taken to them.

4. General revelation serves to explain the worldwide phenomenon of religion and religions. All persons are religious, because all have a type of knowledge of God. From this indistinct and perhaps even unrecognizable revelation have been constructed religions which unfortunately are distortions of the true biblical religion.

5. Since both creation and the gospel are intelligible and coherent revelations of God, there is harmony between the two, and mutual reinforcement of one by the other. The biblical revelation is not totally distinct from what is known of the natural realm.

6. Genuine knowledge and genuine morality in unbelieving (as well as believing) man are not his own accomplishment. Truth arrived at apart from special revelation is still God's truth. Knowledge and morality are not so much discovery as they are "uncover-y" of the truth God has structured into his entire universe, both physical and moral.



## God's Particular Revelation

The Definition and Necessity of Special Revelation

The Style of Special Revelation

The Personal Nature of Special Revelation

The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation

The Analogical Nature of Special Revelation

The Modes of Special Revelation

Historical Events

Divine Speech

The Incarnation

Special Revelation: Propositional or Personal?

Scripture as Revelation

### The Definition and Necessity of Special Revelation

By special revelation we mean God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him; The Hebrew word for "reveal" is *גַּלְּה* (*galah*). A common Greek word for "reveal" is *ἀποκαλύπτω*. Both express the idea of uncovering what was concealed. The Greek *φανερώω*, which especially conveys the idea of manifesting, is also frequently used.

Why was special revelation necessary? The answer lies in the fact that man had lost the relationship of favor which he had with God prior to the fall. It was necessary for man to come to know God in a fuller way if the conditions of fellowship were once again to be met. This knowledge had to go beyond the initial or general revelation which was still available to man, for now in addition to the natural limitation of human finiteness, there was also the moral limitation of human sinfulness. It was now insufficient simply to know of God's existence and something of what he is like. In the original state of innocence man had been positively inclined (or, at the very least, neutral) toward God, and could respond in a direct fashion. But after the fall man was turned away from God and in rebellion against him; man's understanding of spiritual matters was obscured. His relationship with God was not merely inactive; it was lost and in need of rebuilding. So man's situation was a more complicated matter than had originally been the case, and more complete instruction was consequently needed.

Note that the objective of special revelation was relational. The primary purpose of this revelation was not to enlarge the general scope of knowledge. The knowledge *about* was for the purpose of knowledge *of*. Information was to lead to acquaintance; consequently, the information revealed was often quite selective. For example, we know relatively little about Jesus from a biographical standpoint. We are told nothing about his appearance, his characteristic activities, his interests, or his tastes. Details such as are ordinarily found in biographies were omitted, because they are not significant for faith. How we relate to Jesus is quite independent of whether he was tall or short, or whether he spoke in a tenor or a bass voice. The merely curious are not accommodated by the special revelation of God.

A further introductory word is needed regarding the relationship of special to general revelation. It is commonly assumed that special revelation is a postfall phenomenon necessitated by man's sinfulness. It is frequently considered *remedial*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is not possible for us to know the exact status of the relationship between God and man before the fall. We simply are not told much about it. Adam and Eve may have had such an unclouded consciousness of God that they were constantly conscious of him everywhere, in their own internal experience and in their perception of nature. If so, this consciousness of him could be thought of as general revelation. There is no indication that such was the case, however. The account of God's looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden subsequent to their sin (Gen. 3:8) gives the impression that this

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), p. 74.

was one in a series of special encounters which occurred. Further, the instructions given to man (Gen. 1:28) regarding his place and activity in the creation suggest a particular communication from Creator to creature; it does not seem that these instructions were merely read off from observation of the created order. If this is the case, special revelation antedated the fall.

When sin entered the human race, however, the need for special revelation became more acute. The direct presence of God, the most direct and complete form of special revelation, was lost. In addition, God now had to speak regarding matters which were previously not of concern. The problems of sin, guilt, and depravity had to be resolved; means of atonement, redemption, and reconciliation had to be provided. And now sin diminished man's comprehension of general revelation, thus lessening its efficacy. Therefore, special revelation had to become remedial with respect to both man's knowledge of and his relationship to God.

It is common to point out that general revelation is inferior to special revelation, both in the clarity of the treatment and the range of subjects considered. The insufficiency of general revelation therefore required the special revelation. The special revelation, however, requires the general revelation as well.<sup>2</sup> Without the general revelation, man would not possess the concepts regarding God which enable him to know and understand the God of the special revelation. Special revelation builds upon general revelation. The relationship between them is in some ways parallel to that which Immanuel Kant found between the categories of understanding and sense perception: "Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind." The two mutually require each other. And the two are harmonious. Only if the two are developed in isolation from one another does there seem to be any conflict between them. They have a common subject matter and perspective, yielding a harmonious and complementary understanding.

### The Style of Special Revelation

#### *The Personal Nature of Special Revelation*

We need to ask about the style of special revelation, the nature or fashion of it. It is, first of all, personal. A personal God presents himself to persons. This is seen in a number of ways. God reveals himself by telling his name. Nothing is more personal than one's name. When Moses asked

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

who he should say has sent him to the people of Israel, Jehovah responded by giving his name, “I am who I am [or I will be who I will be]” (Exod. 3:14). Moreover, God entered into personal covenants with individuals (Noah, Abraham) and with the nation of Israel. And note the benediction which Aaron and his sons were to pronounce upon the people: “The **LORD** bless you and keep you: The **LORD** make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The **LORD** lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Num. 6:24–26). The Psalms contain numerous testimonies of personal experience with God. And the goal of Paul’s life was a personal acquaintance with God: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10).

The whole of Scripture is personal in nature. What we find is not a set of universal truths, like the axioms of Euclid in geometry, but rather a series of specific or particular statements about concrete occurrences and facts. Neither is Scripture a formal theological presentation, with arguments and counterarguments, such as one would find in a theological textbook. Nor are there systematized creedal statements. There are elements of creedal affirmation, but not a thoroughgoing intellectualization of Christian belief.

There is little speculation about matters not directly concerned with God’s redemptive working and his relationship with man. Cosmology, for example, does not receive the scrutiny sometimes found in other religions. The Bible does not digress into matters of merely historical concern. It does not fill in gaps in the knowledge of the past. It does not concentrate on biographical details. What God reveals is primarily himself as a person, and especially those dimensions of himself that are particularly significant for faith.

#### *The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation*

The God who is revealed is, however, a transcendent being. He lies outside our sensory experience. The Bible claims that God is unlimited in his knowledge and power; he is not subject to the confines of space and time. Consequently the revelation must involve a condescension on God’s part (in the good sense of that word). Man cannot reach up to investigate God and would not understand even if he could. So God has revealed himself by a revelation in *anthropic* form. This should not be thought of as anthropomorphism as such, but as simply a revelation coming in human language and human categories of thought and action.<sup>3</sup>

3. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 36–37.

This anthropic character means the use of human languages common at the time. Koine Greek was once believed to be a special, divinely created language since it is so different from classical Greek. We now know, of course, that it was simply the vernacular language. Idioms of the day appear in the Scripture. And it utilizes ordinary ways of describing nature, of measuring time and distance, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

The revelation is also anthropic in the sense that it often came in forms which are part of ordinary, everyday human experience. Dreams, for example, were a frequent means used by God to reveal himself. Yet few experiences are as common to mankind as are dreams. It was not the particular type of experience employed, but rather the unique content supplied and the unique utilization of this experience which distinguished revelation from the ordinary and natural. The same is true of the incarnation. When God appeared to man, he used the modality of an ordinary human being. Sometimes artists have tried to set Jesus’ humanity apart from that of other persons by portraying him with a halo or some other visible sign of distinctiveness. But apparently Jesus carried no visible sign of distinctiveness. Most persons took him for an ordinary, average human being, the son of Joseph the carpenter. He came as a human, not an angel or a being clearly recognizable as a god.

To be sure, there were revelations which clearly broke with typical experience. The voice of the Father speaking from heaven (John 12:28) was one of these. The miracles were striking in their effect. Yet much of the revelation was in the form of natural occurrences.

#### *The Analogical Nature of Special Revelation*

God draws upon those elements in man’s universe of knowledge that can serve as a likeness of or partially convey the truth in the divine realm. His revelation employs analogical language, which is midway between univocal and equivocal language. In univocal usage, a term is employed in only one sense. In equivocal usage, a term possesses completely different meanings. Thus, if we use the word *row* as a noun to describe a configuration of trees and as a verb to refer to propelling a boat by means of oars, we are using the word equivocally. In univocal usage, a term employed predicatively with two different subjects has the same meaning in both instances, as when we say, for example, that a man is tall and a building is tall. In analogical usage, there is always at least some univocal element, but there are differences as well, as when we say that Jeff runs the 100-yard dash and that the Chicago and Northwestern commuter train runs between Chicago and Elmhurst.

4. Ibid., p. 39.

Whenever God has revealed himself, he has selected elements which are univocal in his universe and ours. Langdon Gilkey has pointed out that, in the orthodox view, when we say that God acts or loves, we have the very same meaning in mind as when we say that a human acts or loves.<sup>5</sup> When we say that God stopped the Jordan River, we have the very same thing in mind as when we say that the Army Corps of Engineers stopped a river from flowing. While there would be differences of method and materials, the action is basically the same in its effect: the water in the river would cease to flow beyond a certain point. The acts of God are occurrences within a space-time universe. The death of Jesus was an event observably the same as that of James, John, Peter, Andrew, or any other human. A physician examining Jesus when he was taken down from the cross would have discovered no respiration or pulse. An electrocardiogram or an electroencephalogram would have given no discernible reading. And when the Bible says that God loves, it means just the same sort of qualities that we refer to when we speak of humans loving (in the sense of *agape*): a steadfast, unselfish concern for the welfare of the other person.

As we are here using the term *analogical*, we mean “qualitatively the same”; in other words, the difference is one of degree rather than of kind or genus. God is powerful as man is powerful, but much more so. When we say that God knows, we have the same meaning in mind as when we say that man knows—but while man knows something, God knows everything. God loves just as man loves, but God loves infinitely. We cannot grasp how much more of each of these qualities God possesses, or what it means to say that God has man’s knowledge amplified to an infinite extent. Having observed only finite forms, we find it impossible to grasp infinite concepts. In this sense, God always remains *incomprehensible*. It is not that we do not have knowledge of him, and genuine knowledge at that. Rather, the shortcoming lies in our inability to encompass him within our knowledge. Although *what we know of him* is the same as his knowledge of himself, the degree of our knowledge is much less. It is not exhaustive knowledge of him, as is his knowledge of himself, and in that respect it will be incomplete or non-exhaustive even in the eschaton.

What makes this analogical knowledge possible is that it is God who selects the components which he uses. Unlike man, God is knowledgeable of both sides of the analogy. If man by his own natural unaided reason seeks to understand God by constructing an analogy involving

5. Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 196.

God and man, the result is always some sort of conundrum, for he is in effect working with an equation containing two unknowns. For instance, if one were to argue that God’s love is to man’s love what God’s being is to man’s being, it would be tantamount to saying  $x/2 = y/5$ . Not knowing the relationship between God’s being (or nature, or essence) and that of humanity, man cannot construct a meaningful analogy.

God, on the other hand, knowing all things completely, therefore knows which elements of human knowledge and experience are sufficiently similar to the divine truth that they can be used to help construct a meaningful analogy. Since we do not have any way of verifying such an analogy independently, it will always remain a presupposition and in that sense a matter of faith that it indeed corresponds to the truth God is portraying. We should note in this connection that how closely our ideas approximate what they are supposed to represent is also unprovable and therefore taken on faith. In this respect, the theologian working with special revelation is in a situation similar to that of the empiricist, who cannot be certain that his sensory perceptions accurately correspond to the objects they are purported to represent.

### The Modes of Special Revelation

We now turn to examine the actual modes or means or modalities by which God has revealed himself: historical events, divine speech, and the incarnation.

#### *Historical Events*

Much has been made in the twentieth century of the idea that God’s self-revelation is to be found in his personal action in history or his “mighty deeds.” This is appropriate, for God has been at work in concrete historical ways within our world, affecting what occurs.

The Bible emphasizes the whole series of divine events by which God has made himself known. From the perspective of the people of Israel, a primary event was the call of Abraham, to whom they looked as the father of their nation. The Lord’s provision of Isaac as an heir, under most unlikely conditions, was another significant divine act. God’s provision in the midst of the famine during the time of Joseph benefited not only the descendants of Abraham, but the other residents of the whole area as well. Probably the major event for Israel, still celebrated by Jews, was the deliverance from Egypt through the series of plagues culminating in the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. The conquest of the Promised Land, the return from captivity, even the captivity itself, were

God's self-manifestation. The birth of Jesus, his wondrous acts, his death and particularly his resurrection, were God at work. In the creation and expansion of the church God was also at work bringing his people into being.

All of these are acts of God and thus revelations of his nature. Those which we have cited here are spectacular or miraculous. The acts of God are not limited to such events, however. God has been at work both in these greater occurrences and also in the more mundane events of the history of his people.

While we have spoken of historical events as a mode of special revelation, it is still necessary to ask just what is meant by this. What exactly is the relationship between revelation and historical occurrences? We will examine three different views: (1) revelation in history, (2) revelation through history, and (3) revelation as history.

1. The first view to be examined is that of revelation in history. Here we place the thought of G. Ernest Wright as it is represented in his well-known book *God Who Acts*. He insists that what is authoritative about the Bible is the narrative, which is to be understood as a recital of the historical events confessed by the people of Israel (in the Old Testament) and the Christian church (in the New). Revelation occurs in a series of historical events. Wright is eager to distinguish between understanding the Bible as a collection of doctrines and as a historical recital. The Bible, strictly speaking, is not the Word of God, but rather a record of the Acts of God and the human response to those acts. Biblical doctrine is inferred from the historical recital.<sup>6</sup> The attributes of God, as they are termed, are not timeless truths given to us in didactic form in Scripture. Rather, they are inferences drawn from the way God has acted. Thus, the very concept of God is thought of not in terms of his being and essence, but rather of his acts.

This historical recital can be seen in the kerygma which runs through both the Old and New Testaments. An excellent example in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 26:5–9. In the New Testament, we find an example in Paul's message in Acts 13:16–41, which, beginning with the patriarchs, continues through David to Jesus Christ. The common element uniting the two Testaments is the one history of the acts of God. Although the history of God's acts is set within the context of universal history, it is not this universal history from which the attributes of God are inferred. Wright notes three major attributes of God, which he maintains the people of Israel inferred as they attempted to explain the events leading to the establishment of their nation. A first inference, which was

6. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 107.

derived from the election of Israel, is that God is a God of grace. A second inference is that the elected people are a "covenant community" united to a God of law who governs communal life. A third inference is that God is Lord of nature, his control of nature being primarily a witness to his relation to history and human society.<sup>7</sup>

Wright cautions that we should not assume, however, that the biblical account is simply to be taken at face value. The reports of historical events include a number of conceptions which are not to be taken literally. The reason for this is that the interpretations placed upon these events were not specially revealed by God. The events are the locus of the revelation; the inferences are nothing but inferences. As such, the inferences drawn by the biblical writers are subject to correction and revision. There are within the biblical accounts materials which historical criticism finds inauthentic. Thus, the use of all the biblical data to shape theology will be, as David Kelsey puts it, somewhat misleading. For some features of the understanding of God were inferred by the biblical writers in the course of narrating the history; some were inferred from the history of the development of the narratives themselves; yet others were inferred from the way in which the narratives are structured and organized. It is the concepts found within the historical narrative or legitimately drawn from it that are the authoritative factor.<sup>8</sup> It is the task of biblical studies to determine how much within what is presented as history is actual history. The task of the theologian then is to determine what characteristics of God can be inferred from that actual history. The revelation, then, is within the history; it is not to be equated with the history.

There is a problem of inconsistency with Wright's approach. On the one hand, he seems to say that because the categories of today are those of act and history rather than being, essence, or substance, we should restate the biblical concepts, that is, in a form that makes sense for persons today. This seems to imply that Wright finds concepts of God's being and essence in Scripture. Yet all along he has insisted that the biblical writers did not think in terms of being and essence. A further difficulty is that to restate biblical concepts in today's categories is to allow a twentieth-century presupposition to control the interpretation of biblical events.

2. The second position on the relationship between revelation and history could be characterized as revelation through history. Here we find the view known popularly as neoorthodoxy. God has worked within

7. Ibid., pp. 50–58.

8. David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 37.

history, manifesting himself to man. Historical events should not be identified with revelation, however.<sup>9</sup> They are merely the means through which revelation came. For revelation is not seen as the communication of information to man. Rather, it is God's presentation of himself.<sup>10</sup> Revelation is a personal encounter between God and man. For example, in the incident of the burning bush (Exod. 3), Moses actually met with God and knew him in a direct way. And in the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God in all his majesty and grandeur (Isa. 6). But the accounts of these events are not revelation, for the events themselves were not revelation. Thus, one may record the words spoken by God, as the Book of Exodus claims that Moses did, and another may read those words, and read of the circumstances of the event, but one will not thereby have obtained revelation. The revelation of God came through the words and deeds of Jesus, but those words and deeds were not the revelation per se. Thus, the Pharisees did not meet God when Jesus performed miraculous deeds. Rather, they maintained that he did what he did by the power of Beelzebub. There were many who saw and heard Jesus, but did not meet God. They simply came away convinced that he was a remarkable man. A particularly striking occurrence is the incident reported in John 12. When the Father spoke from heaven, some said that an angel had spoken to Jesus. Some said it had thundered. Only a few actually met with God as a result.

Revelation, then, is not perceived as an occurrence of history. The event is merely the shell in which the revelation was clothed. Rather, the revelation is something extra added to that event.<sup>11</sup> It is God's direct coming to someone through that event. Without this direct coming, the historical event is opaque; indeed this was the case for numerous persons who observed but stood by unmoved. Thus, the narrative of the Bible (or for that matter, any other part of the Bible) is not revelation as such, for the simple reason that the revelation cannot be captured and recorded. The Bible is a record that revelation has occurred in the past. The popular conception that neoorthodoxy views the Bible as the record of revelation is, strictly speaking, not correct. The Bible is a report that there has been revelation, but is not a record of what that revelation was. It is also a pointer and a promise that revelation may again occur.<sup>12</sup> As someone is reading the Bible, or hearing it proclaimed, the God who manifested himself to a person in the biblical incident

9. John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University, 1956), p. 64.

10. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), p. 25.

11. Ibid., p. 33.

12. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 124-25.

being considered may renew his revelation and repeat what he did in the biblical situation. He may present himself in an encounter with the person reading or hearing the Bible. In that moment one may truthfully say that the Bible is the Word of God, but not through some inherent quality which it has. It becomes the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> When, however, God withdraws his presence, the Bible is simply what it was before: the words of Moses, Isaiah, Luke, or whomever.

God is completely sovereign in revelation, according to this view. Man can do nothing to compel God to reveal himself.<sup>14</sup> Nor can man even predict when or where God will again "speak." The best one can do is to lay himself open to the words of Scripture, with a desire and prayer that God will manifest himself. But God chooses the time, place, and person to whom he will reveal himself. He is not restricted to the use of the Bible for that matter. God may speak through a bush, a dead dog, or even the words of an atheist. This does not mean that the church is commissioned to go about proclaiming the words of atheists. Rather, it is called to declare the words of Scripture, for these particularly bear witness to what God has done and what he promises to do.<sup>15</sup> No self-respecting neoorthodox preacher, however, would preface the reading of Scripture by saying, "We will now hear the Word of God." That would be blasphemy, presuming to tell God when and to whom he is to speak.

Here again, much as with Wright's position, is a view that reality and truth are dynamic rather than static or substantive. Truth is personal, not propositional. Revelation is something that *happens*, not something that is. Thus, when the neoorthodox speak of revelation, they have in mind the *process* as opposed to the *product* of revelation (what is said or written about it), and the *revealing* as opposed to what is revealed. The historical event and, for that matter, the account of it are not the revelation. The historical event as that which is observable and reportable is merely the vehicle through which revelation comes. Revelation is a direct relationship to God rather than an observable event which can be examined through the methods of historical research. Revelation comes *through* the occurrences of history, but not as them. One should never identify the channel or means with the revelation, except under those conditions when, as we have described, it becomes the Word of God.

This view allows for any amount of historical criticism. Criticism works on the historical events. But since those events are not the revelation, revelation is safeguarded from the potentially corrosive effect of criticism. Whereas those who hold Wright's position engage in historical

13. Ibid., p. 127.

14. Ibid., pp. 158-59.

15. Ibid., pp. 60-61.

criticism in an attempt to find revelation within the historical, the neo-orthodox view allows historical criticism to sift through the material to ascertain as much as possible about the record, but this does not yield revelation. Revelation always remains in the control of God himself, whence it cannot be extracted by any efforts of man. It comes only as God makes it accessible by his sovereign grace.

3. The final position on the relationship between revelation and history sees revelation not in or through, but *as* history. In the 1960s a resurgence of this view took place through the efforts of the so-called Pannenberg circle. Their cooperative endeavor, *Revelation as History*,<sup>16</sup> was correctly named, for these men maintained that God has acted in history in such a way that the events actually were and are revelation of himself. The attributes of God are actually seen in, not simply inferred from, his actions in history. Langdon Gilkey has pointed out that the biblical-theology movement had problems with the idea of God as acting in history; they did not view the acts of God in history as having the same sense as the acts of a human person in history.<sup>17</sup> Pannenberg and his followers, however, use the word *actions univocally* when they speak of the actions of God in history and ordinary human actions. They regard God's actions in history as literal, not figurative or metaphorical.<sup>18</sup> And since these actions are historical events like any other events, they can be proven by the means of historical research. The resurrection of Jesus, perhaps the supreme act of God in history, can be proved by reason, just as any other fact of history, says Pannenberg.

We should note that Pannenberg and his circle have universal history in mind; they regard the whole of history, not simply or exclusively the events which are recorded in Scripture, as a revelation of God.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, they have virtually obliterated the distinction between general and special revelation. Nevertheless, with respect to the relationship between history and revelation, they have restored a correct understanding. The view that historical events do not merely promise or contain or become revelation, but actually are revelation seems close to the claim advanced by the biblical witness itself.

Moreover, Jesus maintained that there was an objective revelation associated with historical events. Thus he said in response to Philip's request to be shown the Father, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Furthermore, Jesus placed responsibility upon those who had heard him (and had also seen his miracles): "He who has ears

16. *Revehtion as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

17. Gilkey, "Cosmology," pp. 198-200.

18. *Revelation as History* pp. 45-46.

19. Ibid., p. 133.

to hear, let him hear" (e.g., Matt. 11:15). He inveighed against the Pharisees for attributing to Beelzebub the deeds he had done, which were actually the works of the Holy Spirit through him. Thus he seemed to be saying that the historical events actually were revelation. For that matter, the psalmists and prophets speak as if they and the people of Israel had actually seen the works of God (e.g., Ps. 78).

#### *Divine Speech*

The second major modality of revelation is God's speech. A very common expression in the Bible and especially in the Old Testament is the statement, "The word of the **LORD** came to me, saying, . . ." (e.g., Jer. 18:1; Ezek. 12:1, 8, 17, 21, 26; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 3:1). The prophets had a consciousness that their message was not of their own creation, but was from God. In writing the Book of Revelation, John was attempting to communicate the message which God had given to him. The writer to the Hebrews noted that God had spoken often in times past, and now had particularly spoken through his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). God does not merely demonstrate through his actions what he is like; he also speaks, telling us about himself, his plans, his will.

We may be inclined to think that God's speech is really not a modality at all. It seems so direct. Yet we should note that it is necessarily a modality, for God is spiritual and thus does not have bodily parts. Since speech requires certain bodily parts, it cannot be an unmediated communication from God. Furthermore, it always comes in some human language, the language of the prophet or apostle, whether that is Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. Yet God presumably does not have a language in which he speaks. Thus, the use of language is an indication that God's speech is mediated rather than direct revelation.<sup>20</sup>

Divine speech may take several forms.<sup>21</sup> It may be an audible speaking. It may be a silent, inward hearing of God's message, like the sub-vocal process which slow readers engage in (they "hear" in their heads the words they are reading). It is likely that in many cases this was the mode used. Often this inaudible speech was part of another modality, such as a dream or vision. In these instances, the prophet heard the Lord speaking to him, but presumably anyone else present at the time heard nothing. Finally, there is "concurrent" inspiration-revelation and inspiration have merged into one. As the author of Scripture wrote, God placed within his mind the thoughts that he wished communicated. This was not a case of the message's already having been revealed, and the

20. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, p. 54.

21. Ibid., pp. 59-60.

Holy Spirit's merely bringing these matters to remembrance, or directing the writer to thoughts with which he was already familiar. God created thoughts in the mind of the writer as he wrote. The writer could have been either conscious or unconscious of what was happening. In the latter case, he may have felt that the ideas were simply dawning upon him. Although Paul occasionally indicates that he "thinks" he has the Spirit of God (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:40), there are other times when he is more definite that he has received his message from the Lord (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23). There are also some cases, such as the letter to Philemon, where Paul does not indicate that he is conscious of God's directing his writing, although God was doubtless doing so.

Quite frequently, the spoken word of God was the interpretation of an event. While this event was usually something past or contemporary with the writing, there were times when the interpretation preceded the event, as in predictive prophecy. The contention being advanced here, despite some strong recent disagreements, is that not only the event but also the interpretation was revelation from God; the interpretation was not merely the insight or product of the reflection of a biblical writer. Without this specially revealed interpretation, the event itself would often be opaque and thus quite mute. It would be subject to various interpretations, and the explanation given by the Scripture might then be merely an erroneous human speculation. Take such a central event as the death of Jesus. If we knew that this event had occurred, but its meaning had not been divinely revealed to us, we might understand it in widely differing ways, or find it simply a puzzle. It might be regarded as a defeat, a position which apparently was held by the disciples immediately after Jesus' death. Or it might be considered a sort of moral victory, a martyr dying for his principles. Without the revealed word of explanation we could only guess that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice. The same is true of the resurrection. It could be interpreted merely as God's vindication of Jesus' cause, proving him to have been unjustly condemned by the Jews.

The question here is whether the interpretation or explanation given by the biblical writers is to be accorded the same status as the event itself. A number of contemporary scholars have observed that the biblical writers themselves seem to regard their interpretations as possessing the same status of divine origin as the events of which they are speaking. James Barr in particular has pointed out the difficulty of trying to fit all of revelation into the model of revelation as divine acts within history. He points out three salient types of materials which do not fit:

1. The wisdom literature presents a particular problem. What are the events to which these writings refer? Barr notes that even G. Ernest

Wright himself had to concede the difficulty with this material.<sup>22</sup> Wright wrote that wisdom literature "does not fit into the type of faith exhibited in the historical and prophetic literature."<sup>23</sup>

2. Even those events regarded as examples of the "revelation in history" view present difficulties.<sup>24</sup> Wright's "God who acts" school considers certain aspects of the present form of the tradition as interpretations of or meditations upon God's acts. Take, for instance, the account of the burning bush. Wright would regard the statement that God manifested himself and spoke to Moses as Moses' interpretation of the event; in other words, these were not matters of divine revelation. In the original account, however, God's manifesting himself and speaking are presented not as Moses' thoughts upon the event, but as a direct communication from God to Moses of his purposes and intentions. Barr comments that we may continue to hold the other position (that we have here Moses' insights, not divine revelation) and that this position may be correct, but we should be aware that in holding this position we would be proceeding on *critical* rather than *biblical* grounds.<sup>25</sup>

3. Finally, apart from the type of biblical book involved, there is a good deal of material in the Bible where a narrative deals with divine actions, but the circumstances are such that the term *history* is appropriate only if we stretch the meaning of the word beyond its normal usage. The flood or even the creation are examples of this. Who, for example, was present to observe the acts of God at the creation and to report them? These accounts certainly have a somewhat different status than do the record of the exodus or the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Barr therefore asserts that revelation goes beyond the acts of God in history:

Direct communication from God to man has fully as much claim to be called the core of the tradition as has revelation through [in] events in history. If we persist in saying that this direct, specific communication must be subsumed under revelation through [in] events in history and taken as subsidiary interpretation of the latter, I shall say that we are abandoning the Bible's own representation of the matter for another which is apologetically more comfortable.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup>. James Barr, "The Interpretation of Scripture. II. Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 196.

<sup>23</sup>. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup>. Barr uses the expressions "in history" and "through history" interchangeably; in this context he means what we have been labeling "revelation in history."

<sup>25</sup>. Barr, "Interpretation of Scripture," p. 197.

<sup>26</sup>. Ibid., pp. 201-02.

Two others who have made similar observations are Vincent Taylor and C. H. Dodd. Taylor says: "On *a priori* grounds there is no compelling reason why Revelation should be found in 'mighty acts' of God, but not in words. Indeed, words can be a better medium of communication than events which need to be explained."<sup>27</sup> Dodd observes that the biblical writers "firmly believed that God spoke to them, spoke to the inward ear in the spiritual sense. ... The interpretation which they offered was not invented by a process of thought. It was the meaning which they experienced in the events when their minds were open to God as well as open to the impact of the outward facts."<sup>28</sup> We must conclude that the position which best accords with the biblical writers' own understanding and claims is that direct communication of truth from God is a modality of revelation as genuine as that of his acts in history.

#### *The Incarnation*

The most complete modality of revelation is the incarnation. The contention here is that Jesus' life and speech were a special revelation of God. We may again be inclined to think that this is not a modality at all, that God was directly present in unmediated form. But since God does not have human form, Christ's humanity must represent a mediation of the divine revelation. This is not to say that his humanity concealed or obscured the revelation. Rather, it was the means by which the revelation of deity was conveyed. Scripture specifically states that God has spoken through or in his Son. Hebrews 1:1-2 contrasts this with the earlier forms of revelation, and indicates that the incarnation is superior.

Here revelation as event most fully occurs. The pinnacle of the acts of God is to be found in the life of Jesus. The miracles, his death, and the resurrection are redemptive history in its most condensed and concentrated form. Here too is revelation as divine speech, for the messages of Jesus surpassed those of the prophets and apostles. Jesus even dared to place his message over against what was written in the Scriptures, not as contradicting, but as going beyond or fulfilling them (Matt. 5:17). When the prophets spoke, they were bearers of a message from God and about God. When Jesus spoke, it was God himself speaking. There was a directness about his message.

Revelation also took place in the very perfection of Jesus' character. There was a godlikeness about him which could be discerned. Here God was actually living among men and displaying his attributes to them. Jesus' actions, attitudes, and affections did not merely mirror the Father.

27. Vincent Taylor, "Religious Certainty," *The Expository Times* 72 (1960): 51.

28. C. H. Dodd, *The Bible Today* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 351.

They showed that God was actually living among men. The centurion at Calvary, who presumably had seen many persons die of crucifixion, apparently saw something different in Jesus, which caused him to exclaim, "Truly this was a son of God!" (Matt. 27:54). Peter, after the miraculous catch of fish, fell on his knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). These were people who found in Jesus a revelation of the Father.

Here revelation as act and as word come together. Jesus both spoke the Father's word and demonstrated the Father's attributes. He was the most complete revelation of God, because he was God. John could make the amazing statement, "That which was from the beginning... we have heard... we have seen with our eyes... we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1). And Jesus could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

#### Special Revelation: Propositional or Personal?

The primary result of special revelation is knowledge of God. By this we mean knowledge not only of the person of God, but also of what he has done, of his creation, of the nature and situation of man, of the relationship between God and man. It should also be noted that this is real, objective, rational information communicated from God to man.

It is necessary at this point to carefully examine and evaluate a position which has become very popular in the twentieth century. This is the view that revelation is not the communication of information (or propositions), but God's presentation of himself. Revelation, then, is not propositional; it is personal. To a large extent, one's view of faith will reflect his understanding of revelation.<sup>29</sup> If revelation is regarded as the communication of propositional truths, then faith will be viewed as a response of assent, of believing those truths. If, on the other hand, revelation is regarded as the presentation of a person, then faith will correspondingly be viewed as an act of personal trust or commitment. According to this latter view, theology is not a set of doctrines that have been revealed. It is the church's attempt to express what it has found in God's revelation of himself. This view of revelation has been especially identified with neoorthodoxy, but it has been fairly widespread throughout the rest of the twentieth-century theological scene as well. It was found in precursors of neoorthodoxy, and it lingered on in somewhat diminished form after the pinnacle of that movement had passed.

It should be noted that there is still room in neoorthodoxy for doctrinal

29. Baillie, *Idea of Revelation*, pp. 85ff.

propositions. William Temple has said that while there are no revealed truths, for God does not reveal truths as such, there are, however, truths of revelation.<sup>30</sup> For Emil Brunner this is something quite different from propositional revelation. Doctrine is indissolubly connected with the encounter "as instrument, as framework, as token."<sup>31</sup> But this is not to say that these truths are divinely communicated. When one has encountered God, one may then speak out of what has been encountered. This grows out of the personal relationship or communion between God and man. When one shifts from the person-to-person relationship which constitutes revelation to the description of this relationship, which is the doing of theology (or preaching, for that matter), a subtle shift has taken place in the nature of the language. In the former case, the language is expressive of an I-Thou relationship, personal in character. In the latter, the language is expressive of an I-it relationship, impersonal in nature. The former is the language of prayer and worship. The latter is the language of discourse.<sup>32</sup>

As we have noted earlier, a result of this view of revelation is an ability to embrace biblical criticism in its fullest sense, while still safeguarding the revelation. For the Bible is the fallible witness of humans to the God who presented himself to them. As such, there may be flaws in what they wrote, some of them quite major. Brunner has used an analogy involving a phonograph record and the old RCA Victor trademark, "His Master's Voice." Suppose, he says, that one buys a phonograph record of Enrico Caruso. He is told that he will hear the voice of Caruso. When he plays the record there is much surface noise, the scratching of the needle against the record. One should not become impatient with the record, however, for it is only through it that one can hear the master's voice. Similarly, the Bible is the means by which the Master's voice can be heard. It is what makes his voice audible. There is, to be sure, much within the Bible that is imperfect. There are the incidental noises, for God's voice is heard through the voices of men, imperfect men. Peter, Paul, Isaiah, and Moses are such men. But notwithstanding these imperfections, the Bible is still in its entirety the Word of God, for God speaks through these witnesses. Only a fool would listen to the incidental noises when he can hear the voice of God. "The importance of the Bible is that God speaks to us through it."<sup>33</sup>

The view that revelation is personal is indebted to Soren Kierkegaard's distinction between objective and subjective truth, and to the

30. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 316.

31. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), pp. 112-13.

32. Ibid., pp. 84-89.

33. Emil Brunner, Our *Faith* (New York: Scribner, 1936), p. 10.

later existentialist discussions. In seeking objective truth (which comes in the form of propositions) one attempts to define an item by putting it into various classes. In so doing, however, one is inevitably limiting the item, making it finite ("defining" it). The aim of gaining objective information about an item is basically to bring it under one's control. Thus, if we conceive of our knowledge of God as basically objective (propositional), we are making him into something less than God. We are making him a *thing*, an object.

The focus of subjective truth, on the other hand, is personal relationship rather than objective information. In emphasizing subjective knowledge, Barth and others of his school of thought have been wary of falling into the trap of subjectivism—the position that truth is nothing but one's subjective reaction or response. To avoid this trap, they assert that faith as trust also requires faith as assent. Barth, for example, insists that faith is *fiducia* (trust), but that it also includes *notitio* (knowledge) and *assensus* (assent) as well.<sup>34</sup> Edward Carnell has expressed this by saying that all vital faith rests upon general faith. General faith is believing a fact; vital faith is trusting in a person. He maintains that wherever there is trust, there is at least an implicit belief. He points out that he does not simply embrace the first woman he meets. Rather, before embracing a woman, he ascertains that she is his wife. The process of determining that she is his wife may not be a very lengthy, detailed, or formal one. It does, nonetheless, occur.<sup>35</sup>

That there must be belief before there can be trust is evident from our own experiences. Suppose I have to make a bank deposit in cash, but am unable to do so in person. I must ask someone else to do this for me. But whom will I ask? To whom will I entrust myself, or at least a portion of my material possessions? I will trust or commit myself to someone whom I believe to be honest. Believing in that person depends upon believing something *about* him. I will probably select a good friend whose integrity I do not question. If my situation is so desperate that I must ask for help from a stranger, I will certainly make at least some sort of preliminary assessment of his honesty, crude and incomplete though such a judgment must necessarily be.

Similarly, the advocates of the view that revelation is personal (as well as those who advocate the view that it is propositional or informational) recognize that their faith must rest on some basis.<sup>36</sup> The question is whether the nonpropositional view of revelation provides a sufficient

34. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 268-69.

35. Edward Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), pp. 29-30.

36. William Hordern, *The Case for a New Reformation Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 72.

basis for faith. Can the advocates of this view be sure that what they encounter is really the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? In the nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach pointed out (in *The Essence of Christianity*) that the object of faith may be nothing more than one's own self-projection. Or perhaps one's trust may be simply in a father image, one's superego, or something of that type. For Carnell and others who hold to the propositional or informational view of revelation, faith consists in believing certain affirmations about God—that he is all-powerful, loving, everywhere present, triune—and then placing one's trust in the God so defined. In theory, it is possible to offer evidence which would serve to confirm or verify these affirmations.

In neoorthodoxy's view, however, God does not tell us anything about himself. We simply know him in the encounter. But how do we know that it is the Christian God that we encounter, unless he tells us who he is, and what he is like? Are there any criteria by which we can recognize that our encounter is an encounter with the Christian God? Bear in mind our earlier discussion of the personal nature of religious language (chapter 6). Because of this personal nature, we can come to know God as we know other humans. The parallel eventually breaks down, however, for while we have sensory experiences of other humans, presumably we do not have any of God. We can recognize a person we know by a glance at his face, without his telling us who he is. But this is not true of God. How do we recognize him as being triune instead of single in person? While neoorthodoxy maintains that God is genuinely known in the encounter, and that faith evokes implicit belief in the truth of certain claims or propositions, it does not make clear just how this happens. The most common answer is that the revelation is self-certifying (not self-evident). In addition, the neoorthodox suggest that just as the best response to the question, "How will I know when I am in love?" is, "You will simply know," the answer to the question, "How do I know it is God I am encountering?" is, "You simply know."<sup>37</sup>

Emil Brunner has faced this problem in *Our Faith*. He raises the question of books other than the Bible which also claim to be God's word. What about the god met through them? Is it the Christian God? Brunner's first response is that these books simply do not apply to non-Moslems or non-Hindus. His second response is that the voice of a stranger is heard in these books, that is, a voice other than that which we hear in the Bible. But is this really an adequate answer? He says that the voice heard in these other books may somehow be God's voice, too, but it is scarcely recognizable. Hundreds of millions of Moslems and Hindus find reality in the encounter with the god they meet through

37. Ibid., pp. 80-82.

their books, some as emphatically as any Christian. Are they wrong, or are we all encountering the same thing? Again his answer seems merely to be, "We are not Muslims or Hindus."<sup>38</sup> Apparently God and truth can be encountered in various ways. But does this not teeter on the brink of subjectivism?

This poses another problem, the problem of theology. Those who maintain that revelation is personal are nevertheless very concerned about correctly defining belief, or stating correct doctrinal understandings, while of course insisting that faith is not belief in doctrinal propositions. Barth and Brunner, for example, argued over such issues as the nature and status of the image of God in man, as well as the virgin birth and the empty tomb. Presumably, each felt he was trying to establish the true doctrine in these areas. But how are these doctrinal propositions related to, or derived from, the nonpropositional revelation? There is a problem here. Brunner has insisted that there are no "revealed truths" but there are "truths of revelation." Doctrine, he insists, as token is "indissolubly connected with the framework it represents," that is, our personal encounter with God.<sup>39</sup> He also says that God "does not deliver to us a series of lectures in dogmatic theology or submit a confession of faith to us, but He *instructs us* authentically about Himself. He tells us authentically who He is and what He wills for us and from us."<sup>40</sup> This almost sounds like the revealed truths which Brunner has taken great pains to avoid. And what is the nature of the indissoluble connection between doctrine and encounter if there is no revealed truth? His response is to introduce an analogy between doctrine and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As the Lord himself is present in, with, and under the elements (which are the token of the sacrament), so the Lord is present in, with, and under the doctrine, which is the token of the encounter.<sup>41</sup> His presence cannot be maintained without the doctrine.

There are several problems with this analogy. One is that it tries to explain the obscure by the more obscure—a conception of the Lord's Supper based upon a now obsolete or at least incomprehensible metaphysic. But apart from this there is still a difficulty. It is one thing to say that the presence of the Lord cannot be maintained without the doctrine. But how is this doctrine arrived at? How is it derived from the encounter? How does one establish that the form of the doctrine presented by Brunner is more correct than that of Barth? Bernard Ramm has pointed out that Barth has somehow derived six million words of propositions (in the *Church Dogmatics*) from nonpropositional encounter. Ramm remarks that "the relationship of doctrinal statements and

38. Brunner, *Our Faith*, p. 11.

39. Brunner, *Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 110.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., pp. 111-12.

the encounter is in a poor state of integration within neo-orthodoxy.<sup>42</sup> John Newton Thomas speaks of the “anomalous state of Scripture” in Barth’s thinking-revelation is maintained to be nonpropositional, and yet the words of Scripture somehow express its cognitive content. Thomas complains that Barth proceeds to settle doctrinal issues by quoting the Bible in the same fashion as does the fundamentalist, whose views he has rejected.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to suggest that there cannot be a connection between nonpropositional revelation and propositions of truth, but that this connection has not been adequately explicated by neoorthodoxy. The problem derives from making a disjunction between propositional and personal revelation. Revelation is not *either* personal or propositional; it is *both/and*. What God primarily does is to reveal *himself*, but he does so at least in part by telling us something *about* himself.

But do we not face the problem of impersonality when we consider propositions about God? Does not this give us I-it relationships rather than I-Thou? The analysis implied by these two expressions is both incomplete and misleading. There are actually two variables involved here, for the shift from I-Thou to I-it involves a shift not only from personal to impersonal, but also from second to third person. Two other categories are needed, which we will call “I-you” and “I-he/she.”

It is possible to have second-person language (or language of address) which is very impersonal (I-you). The expression, “Hey, you!” is an example. It is also possible to speak about a third person in personal terms. The language of discourse can display concern, respect, warmth, and even tenderness. That is “I-he/she” language. We need not turn persons into things when we shift from speaking *to* them to speaking *about* them. Thus, propositions about God need not be impersonal.

### Scripture as Revelation

If revelation includes propositional truths, then it is of such a nature that it can be preserved. It can be written down or *inscripturated*. And this written record, to the extent that it is an accurate reproduction of the original revelation, is also by derivation revelation and entitled to be called that.

The definition of revelation becomes a factor here. If revelation is defined as only the actual occurrence, the process or the *revealing*, then

42. Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 98.

43. John Newton Thomas, “How Barth Has Influenced Me,” *Theology Today* 13 (1956): 368-69.

the Bible is not revelation. Revelation is something that occurred long ago. If, however, it is also the product, the result or the *revealed*, then the Bible may also be termed revelation.

In similar fashion the word *speech* may mean the actual occurrence, the mouthing of words, the gestures (the “speaking”). It may also mean that which was spoken. Thus, we might well argue as to whether a transcript (or an audio or video recording) can be called the speech. Someone might maintain that it is not the speech. That took place last Tuesday between 7:30 and 8:00 p.m. Nevertheless, it is the speech, for it preserves the content of what was said.

Kenneth Pike, the linguist, has noted that denial of propositional revelation is based upon too narrow a view of language. Certainly language has social relevance and purpose, and is designed to communicate with and affect other people. But it also serves other purposes: talking with oneself, formulating ideas for oneself, storing these ideas. The neo-orthodox insistence that there is no revelation without response ignores the fact that while a message may be available for others, they might not as yet be prepared to receive it. Pike uses the illustration of a great scientific scholar who gives a lecture to a group of graduate students, none of whom understand what is said. A tape recording is made of the lecture, however, and after three years of study the students listen to it again and now understand it. Nothing, however, has happened to the content of the tape. It was truth on both the earlier and later occasions.<sup>44</sup>

The larger issue is the nature of revelation. If revelation is propositional, it can be preserved. And if this is the case, then the question of whether the Bible is in this derivative sense a revelation is a question of whether it is inspired, of whether it indeed preserves what was revealed. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

We should also note that this revelation is *progressive*. Some care needs to be exercised in the use of this term, for it has sometimes been used to represent the idea of a gradual evolutionary development. This is not what we have in mind. That approach, which flourished under liberal scholarship, regarded sections of the Old Testament as virtually obsolete and false; they were only very imperfect approximations of the truth. The idea which we are here suggesting, however, is that later revelation builds upon earlier revelation. It is complementary and supplementary to it, not contradictory. Note the way in which Jesus elevated the teachings of the law by extending, expanding, and internalizing them. He frequently prefaced his instruction with the expression, “You have heard ... but I say to you.” In a similar fashion, the author of

44. Kenneth L. Pike, “Language and Meaning: Strange Dimensions of Truth,” *Christianity Today* 8 May 1961, p. 27.

Hebrews points out that God, who in the past spoke by the prophets, has in these last days spoken by a Son, who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature (Heb. 1:1-3). The revelation of God is a process even as is redemption, and a process which moved to an ever more complete form.<sup>45</sup>

We have seen that God has taken the initiative to make himself known to us in a more complete way than general revelation, and has done so in a fashion appropriate to our understanding. This means that lost and sinful humans can come to know God and then go on to grow in understanding of what he expects of and promises to his children. Because this revelation includes both the personal presence of God and informational truth, we are able to identify God, to understand something about him, and to point others to him.

45. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, pp. 161ff.

## The Preservation of the Revelation: Inspiration

- Definition of Inspiration
- The Fact of Inspiration
- Issues in Formulating a Theory of Inspiration
- Theories of Inspiration
- The Method of Formulating a Theory of Inspiration
- The Extent of Inspiration
- The Intensiveness of Inspiration
- A Model of Inspiration

### Definition of Inspiration

By inspiration of the Scripture we mean that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.

If, as we have contended in the preceding chapter, revelation is God's communication to man of truth that he needs to know in order to relate

properly to God, then it should be apparent why inspiration also is necessary. While revelation benefits those who immediately receive it, that value might well be lost for those beyond the immediate circle of revelation. Since God does not repeat his revelation for each person, there has to be some way to preserve it. It could, of course, be preserved by oral retelling or by being fixed into a definite tradition, and this certainly was operative in the period which sometimes intervened between the occurrence of the initial revelation and its inscription. Certain problems attach to this, however, when long periods of time are involved, for oral tradition is subject to erosion and modification. Anyone who has ever played the parlor game in which the first person whispers a story to the second, who whispers it to the next person, and so on until the story has been retold to all the players, has a good idea of how easily oral tradition can be corrupted. And so does anyone who has observed the way in which rumors spread. While the unusual tenacity of the Oriental memory and the storyteller's determination to be faithful to the tradition should not be underestimated, it is apparent that something more than oral retelling is needed.

While revelation is the communication of divine truth from God to man, inspiration relates more to the relaying of that truth from the first recipient(s) of it to other persons, whether then or later. Thus, revelation might be thought of as a vertical action, and inspiration as a horizontal matter. We should note that although revelation and inspiration are usually thought of together, it is possible to have one without the other. There are cases of inspiration without revelation. The Holy Spirit in some instances moved Scripture writers to record the words of unbelievers, words which certainly were not divinely revealed. Some Scripture writers may well have written down matters which were not specially revealed to them, but were pieces of information readily available to anyone who would make the inquiry. The genealogies, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament (the listing of Jesus' lineage), may well be of this character. There also was revelation without inspiration: instances of revelation which went unrecorded because the Holy Spirit did not move anyone to write them down. John makes this very point in John 21:25, when he says that if everything that Jesus did were written down, "I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." If, as we asserted in the previous chapter, all of Jesus' words and actions were the words and actions of God, the Spirit was apparently very selective in what he inspired the biblical authors to report.

### The Fact of Inspiration

We begin by noting that throughout Scripture there is the claim or even the assumption of its divine origin, or of its equivalency with the

actual speech of the Lord. This point is sometimes spurned on the grounds of its being circular. There is a dilemma which any theology (or any other system of thought for that matter) faces when dealing with its basic authority. Either it bases its starting point upon itself, in which case it is guilty of circularity, or it bases itself upon some foundation other than that upon which it bases all its other articles, in which case it is guilty of inconsistency. Any graduate student quickly learns to play dialectical dirty tricks of this kind. Note, however, that we are guilty of circularity only if the testimony of Scripture is taken as settling the matter. But surely the Scripture writer's own claim should be taken into consideration as part of the process of formulating our hypothesis of the nature of Scripture. Other considerations will of course be consulted by way of evaluating the hypothesis. What we have here is somewhat like a court trial. The defendant is permitted to testify on his or her own behalf. This testimony is not taken as settling the matter, however; that is, after hearing the defendant's plea of "not guilty," the judge will not immediately rule, "I find the defendant not guilty." Additional testimony is called for and evaluated, in order to determine the credibility of the defendant's testimony. But his testimony is admitted.

One other item needs to be observed in answering the charge of circularity. In consulting the Bible to determine the authors' view of Scripture, one is not necessarily presupposing its inspiration. One may consult it merely as a historical document which informs us that its authors considered it the inspired Word of God. In this case one is not viewing the Bible as its own starting point. One is guilty of circularity only if he begins with the assumption of the inspiration of the Bible, and then uses that assumption as a guarantee of the truth of the Bible's claim to be inspired. One is not guilty of circularity if he does not present the Scripture writers' claim as final proof. It is permissible to use the Bible as a historical document and to allow it to plead its own case.

There are several ways in which the Bible gives witness of its divine origin. One of these is the view of New Testament authors regarding the Scriptures of their day, which we would today term the Old Testament. Second Peter 1:20–21 is a cardinal instance: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Here Peter is affirming that the prophecies of the Old Testament were not of human origin. They were not produced by the will or decision of man. Rather they were moved or borne along (*φερόμενοι*) by the Spirit of God. The impetus which led to the writing was from the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Peters readers are to pay heed to the prophetic word, for it is not simply man's word, but God's word.

A second reference is that of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." This is part of a passage in which Paul is exhorting Timothy to continue in the teachings which he has received. Paul assumes Timothy is familiar with the "sacred writings" (v. 15) and urges him to continue in them since they are divinely inspired (or more correctly, "God-spired" or "God-breathed"). The impression here is that they are divinely produced, just as God breathed the breath of life into man (Gen. 2:7). They therefore carry value for building up the believer into maturity, so that the man of God may be "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). Nothing is said about the authority or lack of authority of the Scriptures for matters other than these practical spiritual concerns, such as their dependability with respect to historical and scientific issues, but this omission is not significant given the context.

When we turn to the early church's preaching, we find a similar understanding of the Old Testament. In Acts 1:16 Peter says, "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David. . . ." and then proceeds to quote from Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 regarding the fate of Judas. It is notable here that Peter not only regards the words of David as authoritative, but that he actually affirms that God spoke by the mouth of David. David was God's "mouthpiece," so to speak. The same thought, that God spoke by the mouth of the prophets, is found in Acts 3:18, 21, and 4:25. The kerygma, then, identifies "it is written in the scripture" with "God has said it."

This fits well with the testimony which the prophets themselves gave. Again and again they declared, "Thus says the Lord." Micah wrote: "But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken" (4:4). Jeremiah said: "These are the words which the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah" (30:4). Isaiah affirmed: "For the LORD spoke thus to me . . . saying" (8:11). Amos declared: "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel" (3:1). And David said: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2). Statements like these, which appear over and over again in the prophets, indicate that they were aware of being "moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Finally, we note the position that our Lord himself held regarding the Old Testament writings. In part, we may infer this from the way he related to the view of the Bible held by his dialogical opponents, the Pharisees. (This was also the view held by most Jews of that day.) He never hesitated to correct their misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Bible. He never challenged or corrected their view of the

nature of the Scripture, however. He merely disagreed with them regarding the interpretations which they had placed upon the Bible, or the traditions which they had added to the content of the Scriptures themselves. In his discussions and disputes with his opponents, he repeatedly quoted from the Scriptures. In his threefold temptation, he responded to Satan each time with a quotation from the Old Testament. He spoke of the authority and permanence of the Scripture: "scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35); "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Two objects were regarded as sacred in the Israel of Jesus' day, the temple and the Scriptures. He did not hesitate to point out the transiency of the former, for not one stone would be left upon another (Matt. 24:2). There is, therefore, a striking contrast between his attitude toward the Scriptures and his attitude toward the temple.\*

We may conclude from the foregoing that the uniform testimony of the Scripture writers is that the Bible has originated from God and is his message to man. This is the fact of the Bible's inspiration; we must now ask what it means. It is here that differences in view begin to occur.

### Issues in Formulating a Theory of Inspiration

Several questions should be on the agenda of anyone attempting to formulate a theory of inspiration. These are questions which need to be addressed if there is to be a full understanding of the nature of inspiration.

1. Can we really formulate a theory of inspiration? It should be apparent that such a question is necessary before even beginning the procedure. There are some who would say that such a procedure is neither necessary nor helpful. We should instead simply use the Bible rather than theorize regarding its nature. We should be content with the fact that the Bible is inspired rather than ask how it was inspired. This argument, however, is faulty. The fact is that our utilization of the Bible will be influenced by what we think about its nature. We will, whether consciously or unconsciously, be dealing with it on the basis of an implicit theory of its nature. It would therefore be desirable to think out our view of inspiration.

Another objection is that the Bible does not present a full-fledged doctrine of Scripture. We should simply limit ourselves to the use of

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 441.

biblical terminology and concepts. If this advice were followed consistently, however, our biblical and theological understanding would be considerably impoverished. The Bible does not use the term *Trinity*, but this concept is called for if we are to understand the material. Similarly, the biblical writers do not discuss "Q" or the *Logia*, nor does the term *salvation history* (*Heilsgeschichte*) appear in the canon. These, however, are part of the analytical mechanism which we employ to better understand biblical truth. In similar fashion, a more complete understanding of the nature of inspiration (even though the topic is not fleshed out in Scripture) is both desirable and necessary for a more complete understanding of the Bible.

Our aim here is not primarily a statement of how the Bible was inspired; that is, we are not inquiring into the process or method by which God brought it into being. There is room for such an inquiry, but we are primarily asking about the extent to which the Bible is inspired. Our question lies between the questions *whether* and *how* the Bible is inspired; namely, *what precisely* in the Bible is inspired.

2. Does the Bible supply us with a basis for formulating an understanding of its inspiration? If there is not a full theory stated in the Bible, is there at least a sufficient basis from which we can develop such a theory? And if this is the case, are we bound to accept and follow the Scripture writers' views on this subject, or are we at liberty to criticize, modify, or even reject the understanding which they present?

3. Should we, in formulating our understanding, give primary weight to the Bible's teaching about itself, or should we primarily emphasize the nature of Scripture, the characteristics which it displays? We might term these, respectively, the didactic material and the phenomena of Scripture. The two approaches are sometimes referred to, respectively, as the deductive and inductive approaches, but this terminology is somewhat misleading. Most theories of inspiration utilize both types of material. The crucial question is, Which type will be interpreted in the light of the other? Perhaps the most significant differences among evangelical theories of inspiration occur at this point.

4. Is inspiration uniform throughout the Bible, or are there different degrees or differing levels of inspiration? We are not asking here about the nature of the material, but rather the nature and degree of inspiration. Can it be that at some points in the Bible the words which were written were actually dictated, while at other points there was merely a directing of the writer's thoughts, and at still others perhaps there was only an impulse to write?

5. Is inspiration a detectable quality? Is there something about inspired material that presents itself uniquely so that we can perceive or recognize it as inspired? In answering this question affirmatively, some

liberals have gone to the extreme of saying in effect that "inspired" equals "inspiring." One can measure the degree of inspiration by the degree to which a portion of written material inspires the reader. On this basis, the Sermon on the Mount was deemed more inspired than the genealogies. Can canonicity be determined by this method; can one, for example, detect qualitative differences between the Book of Hebrews and the *Shepherd of Hermas*? If one holds that there are also degrees of inspiration within the canon, it should be possible to sort out those differences as well.

6. How does inspiration relate to the use of sources? Does it mean that everything written was somehow given in an immediate fashion by the Holy Spirit? Or does it allow for drawing upon historical documents, perhaps even engaging in extensive research?

7. If inspiration includes the use of sources, does inspiration guarantee their accuracy? If the Scripture writer used a historical source which contained an error, did the Holy Spirit so guide and direct him that he corrected the error? Or does inspiration merely mean that the author reported precisely what was found in the document used, even if that involved reporting an error?

8. Does inspiration relate to the shaping and preparing of the material prior to its actual utilization by the author of Scripture? In some cases long periods of time elapsed from the occurrence of the event until its recording in Scripture. During this period, the community of faith was transmitting, selecting, modifying, amplifying, and condensing the received tradition. Does inspiration affect these processes as well? Did divine guidance extend to what happened with this received tradition or was all of this merely governed by normal laws of group psychology and the formation of tradition?

9. Is inspiration broadly or narrowly related to the Scripture writer? That is, is inspiration something which characterizes only the actual moment of writing, or does it involve earlier experiences which prepare the author for that moment? Does inspiration also involve formation of the author's personality, his background, his vocabulary, his whole way of viewing things?

10. Is inspiration a quality permanently attached to the Scripture writer, or to the office of prophet or apostle as it were; or is it a special influence at a particular time? If it is the former, then by virtue of the office, whatever a prophet or apostle wrote on a matter of spiritual or religious concern would be inspired and hence authoritative. Thus, anything that Paul wrote, any letter dealing with the Christian life, would be inspired and ought therefore to be included in the canon simply because of its author. In the latter case, only what Paul wrote under the special influence of the Holy Spirit would be considered Scripture.

11. Is inspiration properly to be attributed to the Scripture writer or to the Scripture which he writes? In the former case, inspiration would apply especially to the relationship between God and the author. It would be something that God does to the apostle or prophet. In the latter case, the emphasis is placed more upon the resulting product. Another possibility is to combine these two options: it is primarily the author that is inspired, and secondarily the writing.

12. Finally, to how much of the material dealt with by the author does inspiration apply? Does it pertain only to salvific matters, so that when the writer deals with supporting matters, such as science and history, he is largely on his own? Or does inspiration operate with respect to the other matters as well?

### Theories of Inspiration

A number of views have arisen regarding the nature of inspiration. A brief survey will help us see the various ways in which the issues we have just raised have been worked out.

1. The intuition theory makes inspiration largely a high degree of insight. Some within left-wing liberalism hold such a view. Inspiration is the functioning of a high gift, perhaps almost like an artistic ability, but nonetheless a natural endowment, a permanent possession. The Scripture writers were religious geniuses. The Hebrew people had a particular gift for the religious, just as some groups seem to have special aptitude for mathematics or languages. On this basis, the inspiration of the Scripture writers was essentially no different from that of other great religious and philosophical thinkers, such as Plato, Buddha, and others. The Bible then is great religious literature reflecting the spiritual experiences of the Hebrew people.<sup>2</sup>

2. The illumination theory maintains that there is an influence of the Holy Spirit upon the authors of Scripture, but that it involves only a heightening of their normal powers. There is no special communication of truth, nor guidance in what is written, but merely an increased sensitivity and perceptivity with regard to spiritual matters. The effect of the Spirit is to heighten or elevate the author's consciousness. It is not unlike the effect of stimulants sometimes taken by students to heighten their awareness or amplify the mental processes. Thus, the work of inspiration is different only in degree, not in kind, from the Spirit's work with all

2. James Martineau, *A Study of Religion: Its Sources and Contents* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), pp. 168–71.

believers. The result of this type of inspiration is increased ability to discover truth.<sup>3</sup>

3. The dynamic theory emphasizes the combination of divine and human elements in the process of inspiration and of the writing of the Bible. The work of the Spirit of God is in directing the writer to the thoughts or concepts he should have, and allowing the writer's own distinctive personality to come into play in the choice of words and expressions. Thus, the person writing will give expression to the divinely directed thoughts in a way that is uniquely characteristic of him.<sup>4</sup>

4. The verbal theory insists that the influence of the Holy Spirit extends beyond the direction of thoughts to the selection of words used to convey the message. The work of the Holy Spirit is so intense that each word is the exact word which God wants used at that point to express the message. Ordinarily, great care is taken to insist that this is not dictation, however.<sup>5</sup>

5. The dictation theory is the teaching that God actually dictated the Bible to the writers. Passages where the Spirit is depicted as telling the author precisely what to write are regarded as applying to the entire Bible. This means that there is no distinctive style attributable to the different authors of the biblical books. The number of people who actually hold this view is considerably smaller than the number to whom it is attributed, since most adherents of the verbal view do take great pains to dissociate themselves from the dictation theorists. There are, however, some who would accept this designation of themselves.<sup>6</sup> Although John Calvin and other Reformers used the expression *dictation* when describing inspiration, it seems unlikely that they meant what is actually denoted by this term.<sup>7</sup>

### The Method of Formulating a Theory of Inspiration

We must, before continuing further, examine the two basic methods of formulating a theory of inspiration. The first method, represented, for

3. Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion* (New York: James Pott, 1916), p. 90.

4. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 211ff.

5. J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 79.

6. John R. Rice, *Our God-Breathed Book-The Bible* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord, 1969), pp. 192, 261ff., 277ff. Rice accepts the term *dictation* but disavows the expression *mechanical dictation*.

7. E.g., Calvin, commenting on 2 Tim. 3:16, says that "the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasures of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit"-*Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand

**example**, in the writings of B. B. Warfield and the "Princeton School" of theology that took its inspiration from him and from Charles and A. A. Hodge, places its primary emphasis upon what the biblical writers actually say about the Bible and the view of it which is revealed in the way they use it.<sup>8</sup> The second approach is to look at what the Bible is like, to analyze the various ways in which the writers report events, to compare parallel accounts. This characterizes the method of Dewey Beegle.<sup>9</sup>

The method used in constructing the doctrine of inspiration should parallel the method used to formulate other doctrines. With respect to the question of the sanctification of the believer, the first method would emphasize the didactic biblical passages which describe and define sanctification. The second approach would look at actual cases of Christians and try to determine what sanctification actually produced in their lives. This approach would use biblical instances (narrative and description) as well as historical and contemporary biographies of Christians. Regarding the question of perfection, the first method would look at what Paul and other Scripture writers teach as doctrine on the subject; the second method would examine whether Christians actually display a life of perfection. If the issue is whether Jesus was sinless in his life on earth, the former method would consult didactic doctrinal passages such as Hebrews 4:15. The latter approach would instead examine the narrative accounts of Jesus' life, and would ask whether his cursing of the fig tree, his casting the moneychangers out of the temple, his denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees, his behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal, and other similar actions were really the actions of a sinless person, or whether they should rather be interpreted as instances of petulance, anger, and fear, which in an ordinary human would be termed sin.

With respect to the doctrines just enumerated, the approach in this volume (and of most theologians who emphasize the supreme authority of the Bible) is to place the major emphasis upon the didactic material and make the phenomena secondary. Thus, the latter will be interpreted in the light of the former. Any good systematic theologian will be consistent with regard to the method he uses. Thus, our major basis for the

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 137-42; cf. J. I. Packer, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 102-03; Marvin W. Anderson, *The Battle for the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 76-78.

8. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), pp. 131-65.

9. Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

doctrine of inspiration will be the didactic material. The actual phenomena of Scripture will be used to help determine the meaning of the didactic material. A parallel example is the doctrine that Jesus was without sin. Passages like Hebrews 4:15 establish the doctrine; the narratives of Jesus' life help us understand just what is consistent with and what is excluded by the concept of sinlessness. Both aspects are needed, but one must carry greater emphasis, and consistency of theological methodology dictates beginning with the teachings rather than the phenomena. The teachings will give us the formal nature of the doctrine, while the phenomena help fill out the content.

A few words need to be said about the difference between the biblical teaching about Scripture and the phenomena which illumine the nature of Scripture, for there is considerable confusion about these two matters. By the former we mean the doctrine held by Jesus and the apostles (and other biblical authors) about the nature of the Bible. With respect to the degree of inspiration or the intensiveness of inspiration, this doctrine is usually not stated explicitly, but can often be inferred from what they said about the Scriptures or how they regarded what the Scriptures taught. Jesus and the apostles regarded Scripture as authoritative because they believed that God had directed the biblical writer-what he wrote was what God said. That they regarded even minute details as binding indicates that they felt that inspiration by God extended even to the smallest particulars. From this we can infer the doctrine that Christ and the apostles held regarding the degree and intensiveness of God's inspiration of the Scriptures.

The phenomena, on the other hand, concern what the Scriptures are actually like rather than what the authors thought about their own or anyone else's writing. Here we become engaged in comparing parallel passages, evaluating the degree of accuracy of the writings, and similar activities. Note carefully the distinction between didactic material and phenomena in the following example, which pertains to the doctrines of sanctification and perseverance. That John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas, and later returned to usefulness, is a phenomenon (i.e., what Mark did) which may shed light on these doctrines. Paul's official position on this is part of the didactic material; that Paul was reconciled with Mark and received him back, although it makes no explicit comment on sanctification and perseverance, enables us to infer something about them. In this particular case, we derive our knowledge of both the phenomenon (Mark returned to usefulness) and Paul's teaching (inferred from the fact that Paul **once** again found Mark useful) from Paul's writing (2 Tim. 4:11). Nevertheless, there is a logical distinction between the phenomenon and the didactic material. This distinction should be carefully kept in mind-especially when we are investigating the nature

of Scripture. For in that case the topic of investigation is also the source of the didactic material.

### The Extent of Inspiration

We must now pose the question of the extent of inspiration, or, to put it somewhat differently, of what is inspired. Is the whole of the Bible to be thus regarded, or only certain portions?

One easy solution would be to cite 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable..." There is a problem, however, in that there is an ambiguity in the first part of this verse. The text reads simply, *πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος καὶ ὀφέλιμος*. It lacks the copula *ἐστί*. Should the verb be inserted between *γραφὴ* and *θεόπνευστος*? In that case the sentence would literally say, "All scripture is God-breathed and profitable." Or should the copula be placed after *θεόπνευστος*? In that event, the sentence would read, "All God-breathed scripture is also profitable." If the former rendering is adopted, the inspiration of all Scripture would be affirmed. If the latter is followed, the sentence would emphasize the profitability of all God-breathed Scripture. From the context, however, one cannot really determine what Paul intended to convey. (What does appear from the context is that Paul had in mind a definite body of writings known to Timothy from his childhood. It is unlikely that Paul was attempting to make a distinction between inspired and uninspired Scripture within this body of writings.)

Can we find additional help on this issue in two other texts previously cited—2 Peter 1:19–21 and John 10:34–35? At first glance this seems not to succeed, since the former refers specifically to prophecy and the latter to the law. It appears from Luke 24:25–27, however, that "Moses and all the prophets" equals "all the scriptures," and from Luke 24:44–45 that "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" equals "the scriptures." In John 10:34, when Jesus refers to the law, he actually quotes from Psalm 82:6. In John 15:25, he refers to a clause found in Psalm 35:19 as "the word that is written in their law." In Matthew 13:35, he refers to "what was spoken by the prophet" and then quotes from Psalm 78:2. Moreover, Paul refers to a number of different types of passages as "law": Isaiah 28:11–12 (1 Cor. 14:21); Psalms and Isaiah (Rom. 3:19); and even Genesis 16:15 and 21:9, which are narrative passages (Gal. 4:21–22). And Peter refers to the "prophetic word" (2 Peter 1:19) and every "prophecy of scripture" (v. 20) in such a way as to lead us to believe that the whole of the collection of writings commonly accepted in that day is in view. It appears that "law" and "prophecy" were often used to designate the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Can this understanding of inspiration be extended to cover the books of the New Testament as well? This problem is not so easily solved. We do have some indications of belief that what these writers were doing was of the same nature as what the writers of the Old Testament had done. One explicit reference of one New Testament author to the writings of another is 2 Peter 3:16. Here Peter refers to the writings of Paul and alludes to the difficulty of understanding some things in them, which, he says, "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*." Thus Peter groups Paul's writings with other books, presumably familiar to the readers, which were regarded as Scripture. Moreover, John identified what he was writing with God's word: "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6). He makes his words the standard of measurement. In addition, the entire Book of Revelation contains indications of John's consciousness of being commanded to write. In Revelation 22:18–19, he speaks of the punishment upon anyone who adds to or subtracts from what has been written in that book of prophecy. The expression used here is similar to the warning which appears three times in Old Testament canonical writings (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6). Paul wrote that the gospel received by the Thessalonians had come by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5), and had been accepted by them as what it really was, the word of God (2:13). While the question of what books should be included in the New Testament canon is another matter, it should be clear that these New Testament writers regarded the Scripture as being extended from the prophetic period to their own time.

Another question which must be addressed is whether this inspiration was a specific action of the Holy Spirit at particular times, or a permanent possession by virtue of who the writers were. To put it differently, was this an intermittent or a continuous activity of the Holy Spirit? As noted earlier, one position attaches inspiration to the prophetic or apostolic office *per se*.<sup>10</sup> According to this view, when Jesus commissioned the apostles to be his representatives, he gave them the authority to define and teach truth. Those who hold this view ordinarily cite Jesus' commissioning of the apostles in Matthew 16:17–20, in which he gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom, noting that what Peter had just said had been revealed to him by the heavenly Father, not by flesh and blood. The commission in Matthew 28:19–20 and the promises of the

10. Paul Schanz, *A Christian Apology* (New York: Pustet, 1891–1896); cf. Honore Coppieters, "Apostles," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1907), vol. 1, p. 628.

Holy Spirit's guiding, teaching, and illuminating ministry (John 14-16) are also regarded as substantiating this view. Inspiration by the Holy Spirit is, according to this position, virtually equivalent to being filled with the Holy Spirit. Whenever a prophet or apostle proclaims a Christian message, he will, by virtue of his office and through the Holy Spirit, be speaking the truth.

But can this view of inspiration be squared with the data of Scripture? It appears, rather, that the power to prophesy was not constant. In Ezekiel 29:1, for instance, there is a very precise dating (in this case down to the exact day) as to when the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel. The same is true of the coming of the word of God to John the Baptist (Luke 3:1-2). There is also precise dating in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:41-42, 59-79). Further, some who were not prophets prophesied. This was true of Balaam (Num. 22:28-30) and of Saul (1 Sam. 19:23-24).

This intermittent character was true of other supernatural gifts. The ability to speak in languages not previously learned came suddenly upon the disciples (Acts 2:4), and there is no indication that they continued to practice this gift. In Acts 19:11-12 we read that God performed extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, but there is no indication that this was a regular occurrence. It is logical to suppose that the inspiration for writing Scripture was intermittent as well.

Finally, we note that there were times when apostles seemed to stray from what presumably was God's will for them, and from the practice of spiritual truth. Peter, for example, compromised by withdrawing from eating with Gentiles when certain Jews came (Gal. 2:11-12). Paul found it necessary to correct Peter publicly (2:14-21). Paul himself was hardly blameless, however. One of the great church fights of all time took place between him and Barnabas (Acts 15:38-41). The contention between them became so severe that they found it necessary to separate from one another. Although we are not able to determine the nature and extent of fault in this situation, it does appear that Paul was at least partially in error. The objection that these men strayed in their actions, not their teaching, does not really carry much cogency, since teaching is done as much by modeling as by proclamation. From the foregoing the conclusion must be drawn that inspiration was not a permanent and continuous matter tied inseparably to the office of prophet and apostle. While it may have been operative at times other than the precise moment of writing Scripture, it certainly did not extend to all of the author's utterances and writings.

### The Intensiveness of Inspiration

We must next ask about the matter of the intensiveness of the inspiration. Was it only a general influence, perhaps involving the suggesting of

concepts, or was it so thoroughgoing that even the choice of words reflects God's intention?

When we examine the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament, an interesting feature appears. We sometimes find indication that they regarded every word, syllable, and punctuation mark as significant. At times their whole argument rests upon a fine point in the text that they are consulting. For example, in John 10:35 Jesus rests his argument upon the use of the plural number in Psalm 82:6: "If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" In Matthew 22:32, his quotation of Exodus 3:6, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," the point depends upon the tense of the verb, which leads him to draw the conclusion, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living." In verse 44, the point of the argument hangs upon a possessive suffix, "The Lord said to my Lord." In this last case Jesus expressly says that when David spoke these words, he was "inspired by the Spirit." Apparently David was led by the Spirit to use the particular forms he did, even to the point of a detail as minute as the possessive in "*my* Lord." (The same quotation occurs in Acts 2:34-35.) And in Galatians 3:16, Paul makes his argument rest upon the singular in Genesis 12:7: "It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ." Since the New Testament writers considered these Old Testament minutiae authoritative (i.e., as what God himself said), they obviously regarded the choice of words and even the form of the words as having been guided by the Holy Spirit.

One other argument regarding the intensiveness of inspiration is the fact that New Testament writers attribute to God statements in the Old Testament which in the original form are not specifically ascribed to him. A notable example is Matthew 19:4-5, where Jesus asks, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said . . .?" He then proceeds to quote from Genesis 2:24. In the original, however, the statement is not attributed to God. It is just a comment on the event of the creation of woman from man. But the words of Genesis are cited by Jesus as being what God said; Jesus even puts these words in the form of a direct quotation. Evidently, in the mind of Jesus anything that the Old Testament said was what God said. Other instances of attributing to God words that were not originally ascribed to him are Acts 4:25, quoting Psalm 2:1-2; Acts 13:34, quoting Psalm 16:10; and Hebrews 1:6-7, quoting Deuteronomy 32:43 (Septuagint; cf. Ps. 97:7) and Psalm 104:4.

In addition to these specific references, we should note that Jesus

often introduced his quotations of the Old Testament with the formula, "It is written." Whatever the Bible said he identified as having the force of God's own speech. It was authoritative. This, of course, does not speak specifically to the question of whether the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit extended to the choice of words, but it does indicate a thorough-going identification of the Old Testament writings with the word of God.

On the basis of this type of didactic material, one would conclude that the inspiration of the Scripture was so intense that it extended even to the choice of particular words. If, however, we are also to take into account the phenomena of Scripture, the characteristics of the book, then we find something a bit different. Dewey Beegle has developed a theory of inspiration based primarily upon the phenomena.<sup>11</sup> He notes, for example, that in the Bible there are some chronological problems which are very difficult to harmonize. The reign of Pekah is a most prominent one. The chronology of Abraham is another. Beegle notes that in Acts 7:4 Stephen refers to Abraham's leaving **Haran** after his father died. We know from Genesis that Terah was 70 at the birth of Abraham (11:26) and died in **Haran** at age 205 (11:32); Abraham, therefore, was 135 at the death of his father. However, Abraham left **Haran** at the age of 75 (Gen. 12:4), which would be some sixty years before the death of his father. On the basis of such apparent discrepancies, Beegle concludes that there certainly is no authoritativeness of specific words. That would involve dictation.

Beegle also observes that quotations from nonbiblical books are to be found in the New Testament. For example, Jude 14 quotes 1 Enoch 1:9 and Jude 9 quotes the Assumption of Moses. These two cases present a problem for the argument that quotation in the New Testament indicates the New Testament writer's belief in the inspiration and consequent authority of the material being quoted. For if authoritativeness is attributed to Old Testament material by virtue of quotation in the New Testament, should it not be attributed to these two apocryphal books as well? Beegle concludes that quotation in the New Testament is not a sufficient proof of inspiration and authoritativeness.

### A Model of Inspiration

If we are to maintain both types of considerations, it will be necessary to find some way of integrating them. In keeping with the methodology stated earlier, we will give primary consideration to the didactic material. This means concluding that inspiration extends even to the choice

11. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 175-97.

of words (i.e., inspiration is verbal). We will define just what that choice of words means, however, by examining the phenomena.

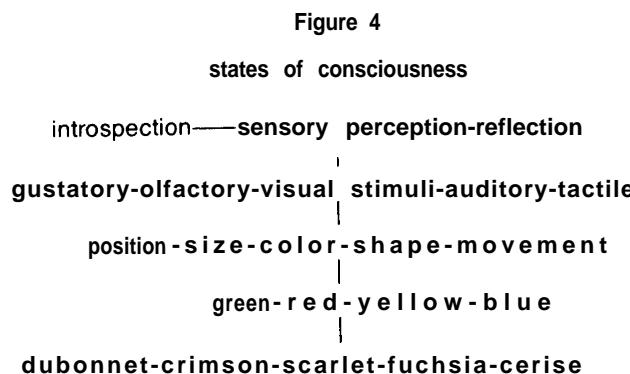
Note that in concluding that inspiration is verbal we have not employed the abstract argument based on the nature of God. That is the contention that since God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and precise, and has inspired the Bible, it must be fully his word, even down to the choice of particular terminology. Rather, our case for verbal inspiration is based upon the didactic material, the view of Scripture held and taught by Jesus and the biblical writers, not upon an abstract inference from the nature of God.

An important point to notice is that the words-versus-thoughts issue is an artificial issue. The two cannot really be separated. A particular thought or concept cannot be represented by every single word which happens to be available in the given language. There is a limited number of words that will function effectively. The more precise the thought becomes, the more limited is the number of words which will serve the purpose. Finally, there is a point where only one word will do, if the match of word to thought is to be precise. Note that we are not here talking about how specific (that is, how detailed) the concept is; rather, we are talking about the degree of clarity or sharpness of the thought. We will refer to the former as the degree of specificity or detail, and to the latter as the degree of precision or the focus. As the degree of precision (or clearness and sharpness in the mind) increases, there is a corresponding decrease in the number of words that will serve to convey the meaning.

It is our suggestion here that what the Spirit may do is to direct the thoughts of the Scripture writer. The direction effected by the Spirit, however, is quite precise. God being omniscient, it is not gratuitous to assume that his thoughts are precise, more so than ours. This being the case, there will be, within the vocabulary of the writer, one word that will most aptly communicate the thought God is conveying (although that word in itself may be inadequate). By creating the thought and stimulating the understanding of the Scripture writer, the Spirit will lead him in effect to use one particular word rather than any other.

While God directs the writer to use particular words (precision) to express the idea, the idea itself may be quite general or quite specific. This is what linguist Kenneth Pike has called the dimension of magnification.<sup>12</sup> One cannot expect that the Bible will always display maximum magnification or a great deal of detail. It will, rather, express just that degree of detail or specificity that God intends, and, on that level of

12. Kenneth L. Pike, "Language and Meaning: Strange Dimensions of Truth," *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1961, p. 28.



**magnification**, just that concept which he intends. This accounts for the fact that sometimes Scripture is not so detailed as we might expect or desire. Indeed, there have been occasions when the Holy Spirit, to serve the purpose of a new situation, moved a Scripture writer to reexpress a concept on a more specific level than its original form.

Figure 4 will help to illustrate what we have in mind. This figure depicts various levels of specificity or detail or magnification. The dimension of specificity involves vertical movement on the chart. Suppose the concept under consideration is the color red. This idea has a particular degree of specificity, no more and no less. It is neither more specific (e.g., scarlet) nor less specific (color). It occurs in a particular location on the chart—both vertically on the generality-specificity axis, and horizontally on its given level of specificity (i.e., red, versus yellow or green). In another instance one may have either more or less detail in a picture (a higher or lower degree of magnification, in Pike's terminology), and a sharper or fuzzier focus. At a less precise focus, of course, the detail will become blurry or even get lost. These two dimensions (detail and focus) should not be confused, however. If the idea is sufficiently precise, then only one word in a given language, or in the vocabulary of a given writer, will adequately communicate and express the meaning. Some languages are richer in distinctions, allowing more precision. Arabic, for example, has many more words for camel than does English. English, on the other hand, has many more words for automobile than does Arabic. In both cases, many of these words are used because of their connotation rather than denotation.

It is our contention here that inspiration involved God's directing the thoughts of the writers, so that they were precisely the thoughts that he wished expressed. At times these thoughts were very specific; at other times they were more general. When they were more general, God wanted that particular degree of specificity recorded, and no more. At

times greater specificity might have been distracting. At other times specificity was important. The concept of propitiation, for example, is a very specific concept.

To determine the degree of specificity, it is helpful to be able to work with the original biblical languages and to do careful exegesis. Knowing the degree of specificity is important because in many cases it bears on the type of authoritativeness which should be ascribed to a particular passage. At times the New Testament writers applied a biblical truth in a new way. They interpreted and elaborated it; that is, they made it more specific. At other times they retained and applied it in exactly the same way. In the former case, the form of the Old Testament teaching was not *normatively* authoritative for the New Testament believer; in the latter case, it was. In each case, however, the account was *historically* authoritative; that is, one could determine from it what was said and done and what was normative in the original situation. Thus, for example, the exact form of the message of Leviticus was significant in informing the New Testament writer what was binding upon the Old Testament people. On the other hand, the exact form of Leviticus may or may not have been normatively binding upon the New Testament believers.

We have concluded that inspiration was verbal, extending even to the choice of words. It was not merely verbal, however, for at times thoughts may be more precise than the words available. Such, for example, was probably the case with John's vision on Patmos, which produced the Book of Revelation.

At this point the objection is generally raised that inspiration extending to the choice of words necessarily becomes dictation. Answering this charge will force us to theorize regarding the process of inspiration. Here we must note that the Scripture writers, at least in every case where we know their identity, were not novices in the faith. They had known God, learned from him, and practiced the spiritual life for some time. God therefore had been at work in their lives for some time, preparing them through a wide variety of family, social, educational, and religious experiences, for the task they were to perform. In fact, Paul suggests that he was chosen even before his birth ("he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace," Gal. 1:15). Through all of life God was at work shaping and developing the individual author. So, for example, the experiences of the fisherman Peter and of the physician Luke were creating the kind of personality and world-view that would later be employed in the writing of the Scripture.

It is sometimes assumed that the vocabulary which is distinctive to a given writer is the human element in the Scripture, a limitation within which God must necessarily work in giving the Bible. From what we have just seen, however, we know that the vocabulary of the Scripture

writers was not exclusively a human factor. Luke's vocabulary resulted from his education and his whole broad sweep of experience; in all of this God had been at work preparing him for his task. The vocabulary Luke had was the vocabulary that God intended him to have and to utilize. Equipped with this pool of God-intended words the author then wrote. Thus, although inspiration in the strict sense applies to the influence of the Holy Spirit at the actual point of writing, it presupposes a long process of God's providential working with the author. Then at the actual point of writing, God directs the thinking of the author. Since God has access to the very thought processes of the human, and, in the case of the believer, indwells the individual in the person of the Holy Spirit, this is no difficult matter, particularly when the individual is praying for enlightenment and displaying receptivity. The process is not greatly unlike mental telepathy, although more internalized and personalized.

But is such thought control possible short of dictation? Remember that the Scripture writer has known God for a long time, has immersed himself in the truth already revealed, and has cultivated the life of devotion. It is possible for someone in this situation, given only a suggestion of a new direction, to "think the thoughts of God." Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist, had a devoted disciple and assistant, Eugen Fink. Fink wrote an interpretation of Husserl's philosophy, upon which the master placed his approval.<sup>13</sup> It is reported that when Husserl read Fink's article he exclaimed, "It is as if I had written it myself!" To give a personal example: a secretary had been with a church for many years. At the beginning of my pastorate there, I dictated letters to her. After a year or so, I could tell her the general tenor of my thinking and she could write my letters, using my style. On one occasion, I brought in a letter which I had coauthored with the finance-committee chairman. She was so familiar with the vocabulary and style of each of us that she (a seminary graduate) successfully did source criticism on it, identifying the M document and the E document. By the end of the third year, I could have simply handed her a letter which I had received and told her to reply, since we had discussed so many issues connected with the church that she actually knew my thinking on most of them. The cases of Eugen Fink and my secretary prove that it is possible-without dictation-to know just what another person wants to say. Note, however, that this assumes a closeness of relationship and a long period of acquaintance. So a Scripture writer, given the circumstances which we have described, could-without dictation-write God's message just as God wanted it recorded.

13. Eugen Fink, "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik," *Kantstudien* 38 (1933): 319-83.

There are, of course, portions of the Bible where it appears that the Lord did in effect say, "Write: '....'" This is particularly true in prophetic and apocalyptic material. The fact that this is sometimes the case should not, however, cause us to doubt that the process described above was the usual and normative pattern. Nor should it cause us to regard the prophetic and apocalyptic material as more inspired than the rest of the Bible (and hence to be interpreted differently). Furthermore, while we have already noted that there is, in direct contrast to passages which show evidence of dictation, some material in Scripture which is not specially revealed (e.g., readily available historical data), such biblical material is not without God's inspiration. There is no special correlation, then, between literary genre and inspiration; that is, one genre is not more inspired than another. While we sometimes discriminate among portions of the Scripture on the basis of their differing potentials for edifying us in various types of situations, that does not mean that they reflect differing degrees or types of inspiration. While the Psalms may be more personally satisfying and inspiring than 1 Chronicles, that does not mean they are more inspired. Inspiration is present irrespective of immediate applicability.

While inspiration conveys a special quality to the writing, that quality is not always easily recognized and assessed. On the one hand, the devotional materials and the Sermon on the Mount have a quality that tends to stand out and can be fairly easily identified. In part, this is due to the subject matter. In other cases, however, such as the historical narratives, the special quality conveyed by inspiration may instead be a matter of the accuracy of the record, and this is not as easily or as directly assessed. Nevertheless, the sensitive reader will probably detect within the whole of the Bible a quality which unmistakably points to inspiration.

The fact that we might be unable to identify the quality of inspiration within a particular passage should not alter our interpretation of that passage. We must not regard it as less authoritative. For all Scripture is verbally inspired and should be interpreted accordingly. Verbal inspiration does not require a literal interpretation of passages which are obviously symbolic in nature, such as "they who wait for the LORD ... shall mount up with wings like eagles" (Isa. 40:31). It does require taking very seriously the task of interpretation, and making an intelligent, sensible effort to discover the precise message God wanted conveyed.

Inspiration is herein conceived of as applying to both the writer and the writing. In the primary sense, it is the writer who is the object of the inspiration. As the writer pens the Scripture, however, the quality of inspiredness is communicated to the writing as well. It is inspired in a

derived sense.<sup>14</sup> This is much like the definition of revelation as both the revealing and the revealed (see pp. 196f.). We have observed that inspiration presupposes an extended period of God's working with the writer. This not only involves the preparation of the writer, but also the preparation of the material for his use. While inspiration in the strict sense probably does not apply to the preservation and transmission of this material, the providence which guides this process should not be overlooked.

In this chapter we have considered the question of method and have chosen to construct our view of inspiration of the Bible by emphasizing the teachings of the Bible regarding its own inspiration, while giving an important but secondary place to the phenomena of Scripture. We have attempted to construct a model that would give due place to both of these considerations.

Certain other issues raised in the early part of this chapter will be dealt with in the chapter on inerrancy. These issues are (1) whether inspiration involves the correction of errors which might have been present in the sources consulted and employed, and (2) whether inspiration involves God's directing the thought and writing of the author on all the subjects with which he deals, or only the more "religious" subjects.

Because the Bible has been inspired, we can be confident of having divine instruction. The fact that we did not live when the revelatory events and teachings first came does not leave us spiritually or theologically deprived. We have a sure guide. And we are motivated to study it intensively, since its message is truly God's word to us.

**14.** It should be observed that 2 Peter 1:20–21 refers to the authors, while 2 Timothy 3:16 refers to what they wrote. Thus the dilemma of whether inspiration pertains to the writer or the writing is shown to be a false issue.

# 10

## The Dependability of God's Word: Inerrancy

Various Conceptions of Inerrancy

The Importance of Inerrancy

Theological Importance

Historical Importance

Epistemological Importance

Inerrancy and Phenomena

Defining Inerrancy

Ancillary Issues

**T**he inerrancy of Scripture has recently been a topic of heated debate among conservative Christians. This is the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings. To those in the broader theological community, this seems an irrelevant issue, a carry-over from an antiquarian view of the Bible. To many evangelicals, however, it is an exceedingly important and even crucial issue. It therefore requires a careful examination. In a real sense, it is the completion of the doctrine of Scripture. For if God has given special revelation of himself and inspired

servants of his to record it, we will want assurance that the Bible is indeed a dependable source of that revelation.

### Various Conceptions of Inerrancy

The term *inerrancy* means different things to different people. As a matter of fact, there is frequent contention over which position properly deserves to be called by that name. It is therefore important to summarize briefly the current positions on the matter of inerrancy.

1. Absolute inerrancy holds that the Bible, which includes rather detailed treatment of matters both scientific and historical, is fully true. The impression is conveyed that the biblical writers intended to give a considerable amount of exact scientific and historical data. Thus, apparent discrepancies can and must be explained. For example, the description of the molten sea in 2 Chronicles 4:2 indicates that its diameter was 10 cubits while the circumference was 30 cubits. However, as we all know, the circumference of a circle is  $\pi$  (3.14159) times the diameter. If, as the biblical text says, the molten sea was circular, there is a discrepancy here, and an explanation must be given.<sup>1</sup>

2. Full inerrancy also holds that the Bible is completely true. While the Bible does not primarily aim to give scientific and historical data, such scientific and historical assertions as it does make are fully true. There is no essential difference between this position and absolute inerrancy in terms of their view of the religious/theological/spiritual message. The understanding of the scientific and historical references is quite different, however. Full inerrancy regards these references as phenomenal; that is, they are reported the way they appear to the human eye. They are not necessarily exact; rather, they are popular descriptions, often involving general references or approximations. Yet they are correct. What they teach is essentially correct in the way they teach it.<sup>2</sup>

3. Limited inerrancy also regards the Bible as inerrant and infallible in its salvific doctrinal references. A sharp distinction is drawn, however, between nonempirical, revealed matters on the one hand, and empirical natural references on the other. The scientific and historical references in the Bible reflect the understanding current at the time the Bible was written. The Bible writers were subject to the limitations of their time. Revelation and inspiration did not raise the writers above ordinary

1. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 165-66.

2. Roger Nicole, "The Nature of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 71-95.

knowledge. God did not reveal science or history to them. Consequently, the Bible may well contain what we would term errors in these areas. This, however, is of no great consequence. The Bible does not purport to teach science and history. For the purposes for which the Bible was given, it is fully truthful and inerrant.<sup>3</sup>

4. Inerrancy of purpose holds that the Bible inerrantly accomplishes its purpose. The purpose of the biblical revelation is to bring people into personal fellowship with Christ, not to communicate truths. It accomplishes this purpose effectively. It is improper, however, to relate inerrancy with factuality. Thus, factual inerrancy is an inappropriate term. Truth is thought of not as a quality of propositions, but as a means to accomplish an end. Implicit in this position is a pragmatic view of truth.<sup>4</sup>

5. All of the above positions desire to retain the term and the idea of inerrancy in one sense or another. Those who advocate the theory of accommodated revelation, however, do not claim or desire to use the term. This position emphasizes the idea that the Bible came through human channels, and thus participates in the shortcomings of human nature. This is true not only of the historical and scientific matters, but also in matters religious and theological. Paul, for instance, in his doctrinal teachings occasionally expressed common rabbinical views. This is not surprising, since Paul was educated as a rabbi. So, even on doctrinal matters, the Bible contains a mixture of revelational and nonrevelational elements. We can find contradictions and revisions within Paul's teachings on such subjects as the resurrection. W. D. Davies, for example, holds that Paul changed his view on the resurrection between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. There is no way to harmonize his teaching on this subject in 1 Corinthians 15 with that in 2 Corinthians 5:5. Nor is there any need to do so. Similarly, Paul Jewett finds a mixture of divinely revealed and human ideas in Paul's writings about the status of women.<sup>5</sup> The basic rabbinic view is clearly present in what he wrote. However, there also are points at which God's revelation of something new in this area shines through. There was a struggle within Paul between his attempt to grasp the word of God and his training as a rabbinic Jew. Some even feel that Jesus was wrong, not merely unaware, regarding the time of his return. He believed and

3. Daniel P. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (1968): 75-83.

4. Jack Rogers, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1977), pp. 41-46. See also James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952 reprint), pp. 217-18.

5. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), p. 311.

6. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 112-14, 119, 134-39, 145-47.

taught that it would take place during the lifetime of his hearers, and of course it did not.

6. Then there is the position of those who hold that revelation is nonpropositional. According to them, the Bible in itself is not revelation. Its function is to point us to the person-to-person encounter which is revelation, rather than to convey propositions. Generally, in epistemology "true" is predicated only of propositions. Persons or experiences are referred to as genuine or "veridical." Thus, the whole question of truth or falsity does not apply. The Bible contains errors, but these are not the word of God; they are merely the words of Isaiah, Matthew, or Paul. The presence of errors in no way militates against the functional usefulness of the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

7. Finally, there is the position that inerrancy is an irrelevant issue. This position has much in common with the preceding one (although it does not necessarily hold that revelation is nonpropositional). For various reasons, the whole issue of inerrancy is regarded as false or distracting. For one thing, "inerrant" is a negative term. It would be far better to use a positive term to describe the Bible. Further, inerrancy is not a biblical concept. In the Bible, erring is a spiritual or moral matter rather than intellectual. Inerrancy distracts us from the proper issues. By focusing our attention upon minutiae of the text and spurring us to expend energy in attempts to resolve minor discrepancies, this concern for inerrancy distracts us from hearing what the Bible is really trying to tell us about our relationship to God. It also inhibits biblical research. If the exegete is bound to the view that the Bible is totally free from error, he is not completely at liberty to investigate the Scriptures. It is an unnecessary and unhelpful *a priori* which becomes a burden to impartial exegesis. It also is artificial and externally imposed. It not only asks questions which the biblical authors did not ask, it demands answers which display an exactness appropriate only in our scientific age. Further, it represents a position which is of rather recent history within the Christian church. The issue of inerrancy is not discussed by earlier theologians. It arose because of the imposition of a particular philosophical viewpoint upon study of the Bible. Finally, this issue is harmful to the church. It creates disunity among those who otherwise have a great deal in common. It makes a major issue out of what should be a minor matter at most.\*

7. Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* (New York: Scribner, 1936), pp. 9-10; *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), pp. 36-37.

8. David Hubbard, "The Irrelevancy of Inerrancy," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers, pp. 151-81.

### The Importance of Inerrancy

Why should the church be concerned about inerrancy at all? Especially in view of the considerations raised by the final position above, would it not be better merely to disregard this issue and "get on with the matters at hand"? In answer we note that there is a very practical concern at the root of much of the discussion about inerrancy. A seminary student who was serving as student pastor of a small rural church summarized well the concern of his congregation when he said, "My people ask me, 'If the Bible says it, can I believe it?'" Concern about the dependability or reliability of the Scriptures is an instance of what Helmut Thielicke has called "the spiritual instinct of the children of God."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, whether the Bible is fully truthful is a matter which is of importance theologically, historically, and epistemologically.

#### *Theological Importance*

As we noted in the chapter on inspiration, Jesus, Paul, and others regarded and employed details of the Scripture as authoritative. This argues for a view of the Bible as completely inspired by God, even to the selection of details within the text. If this is the case, certain implications follow. If God is omniscient, he must know all things. He cannot be ignorant of or in error on any matter. Further, if he is omnipotent, he is able to so affect the biblical authors writing that nothing erroneous enters into the final product. And being a truthful or veracious being, he will certainly desire to utilize these abilities in such a way that man will not be misled by the Scriptures. Thus, our view of inspiration logically entails the inerrancy of the Bible. Inerrancy is a corollary of the doctrine of full inspiration. If, then, it should be shown that the Bible is not fully truthful, our view of inspiration would also be in jeopardy.

#### *Historical Importance*

The church has historically held to the inerrancy of the Bible. While there has not been a fully enunciated theory until modern times, nonetheless there was, down through the years of the history of the church, a general belief in the complete dependability of the Bible. Augustine, for example, wrote:

9. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 25-26.

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Martin Luther said, “The Scriptures have never erred. ... The Scriptures *cannot* err. ... It is certain that Scripture would not contradict itself; it only appears so to the senseless and obdurate hypocrites.”<sup>11</sup>

It should, of course, be noted that certain qualifications of these statements are in order. While Augustine averred the complete truthfulness and reliability of the Bible, he also took a rather allegorical approach to its interpretation; he removed apparent difficulties in the surface meaning of the text by allegorizing. And Luther was not always a model of consistency. In addition, John Calvin, not only in his *Institutes*, a treatise in systematic theology, but also in his commentaries on the Bible, noted a certain amount of freedom by New Testament writers in their quotation of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, it does appear that the church throughout its history has believed in the freedom of the Bible from any untruths. Whether it has meant by this precisely what contemporary inerrantists mean by the term *inerrancy* is not immediately apparent. Whatever the case, we do know that the general idea of inerrancy is not a recent development.

While we are on this subject, we should note briefly the impact which inerrancy has had historically. The best way to proceed is to observe what tend to be the implications for other areas of doctrine when biblical inerrancy is abandoned. There is evidence that where a theologian, a school, or a movement begins by regarding biblical inerrancy as a peripheral or optional matter and abandons this doctrine, it frequently then goes on to abandon or alter other doctrines which the church has ordinarily considered quite major, such as the deity of Christ or the Trinity. Since, as we argued in the opening chapter of this book, history is the laboratory in which theology tests its ideas, we must conclude that the departure from belief in complete trustworthiness of the Bible is a very serious step, not only in terms of what it does to this one doctrine, but even more in terms of what happens to other doctrines as a result.<sup>13</sup>

10. Augustine *Letter 82.3*.

11. Martin Luther, *Werke*, Weimar edition (WA), vol. 34.1, p. 356.

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapter 6, section 3; cf. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University, 1952), pp. 100–05.

13. Richard Lovelace, “Inerrancy: Some Historical Perspectives,” in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, pp. 26–36.

### *Epistemological Importance*

The epistemological question is simply, How do we know? Some assertions in the Bible are at least potentially susceptible to independent verification or falsification. That is to say, the references to historical and scientific matters can, within the limitations of the historical and scientific methods and of the data available, be found to be true or false. Certain other matters, such as doctrinal statements about the nature of God and the atonement, transcend the realm of our sensory experience. We cannot test their truth or validity empirically. Now if the Bible should prove to be in error in those realms where its claims can be checked, on what possible basis would we logically continue to hold to its dependability in areas where we cannot verify what it says?

Let us put this another way. Our basis for holding to the truth of any theological proposition is that the Bible teaches it. If, however, we should conclude that certain propositions (historical or scientific) taught by the Bible are not true, the implications are far-reaching. We cannot then continue to hold to other propositions simply upon the grounds that the Bible teaches them. It is not that these other statements have been proved false, but that we cannot be certain they are true. We either must profess agnosticism regarding them or find some other basis for holding them. Since the principle has been abrogated that whatever the Bible teaches is necessarily true, the mere fact that the Bible teaches these other propositions is insufficient grounds in itself for holding them. One may continue to hold these other propositions, of course, but he does not do so because of the authority of the Bible.

This point is sometimes regarded (and even ridiculed) as a sort of domino theory—“false in one, false in all.”<sup>14</sup> That is a rather superficial analysis, however. For those who make the point are not suggesting that all the other propositions are false; they are simply requesting a basis for holding these other propositions. A more accurate summary of their position might be “false in one, uncertain in all.” To be sure, it could be that all the statements of the Bible which are subject to empirical assessment are true, but that some of the transcendent statements are not. In that case, however, there would be at least a presumption in favor of the truth of the latter. But if some of the former prove false, on what possible basis would we continue to hold to the latter?

It is as if we were to hear a lecture on some rather esoteric subject on which we are quite ignorant. The speaker might make many statements which fall outside of our experience. We have no way of assessing their

14. Dcwey Beagle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 219–22.

truth. What he is saying sounds very profound, but it might simply be just so much high-flown gibberish. But suppose that for a few minutes he develops one area with which we are well acquainted. Here we detect several erroneous statements. What will we then think about the other statements, whose veracity we cannot check? We will doubtless conclude that there may well be inaccuracies there as well. Credibility, once compromised, is not easily regained or preserved in other matters.

One can, of course, continue to hold to the theological statements by an *ad hoc* distinction, maintaining that biblical authority applies only to transcendent or doctrinal truths. In so doing, one will have delivered such propositions from possible refutation. But there **will** be the suspicion that faith has become nothing more than, to paraphrase Mark Twain, "believing what you don't know ain't so." What is the cost of adopting such an expedient? Immunity from disproof may have been secured at the cost of the meaningfulness of the statement that biblical teachings are true. For if nothing is allowed to count against the truth of biblical teachings, does anything count for them either? (A cognitive statement is one which is capable of being true or false, and therefore it must be possible to specify what would count for or against it.) While this may superficially resemble the verifiability principle of logical positivism, there is a significant difference, for in this case the means of verification (and thus the measure of meaning) is not necessarily and exclusively sense data.

If one gives up the statement, "whatever the Bible teaches is true," logically he may take a purely fideist position, namely, "I believe these things not because they are in the Bible, but because I choose to," or "I choose to believe all the statements in the Bible that have not been (or cannot be) disproved." Or he may find an independent way of establishing these tenets. In the past, this has followed several channels. Some liberal theologians proceeded to develop the grounds for their doctrines upon a philosophy of religion. Although Karl Barth and the neoorthodox found verification of doctrines in a direct personal presence of God, Barth entitled the reconstituted form of his magnum opus *Church Dogmatics*, which suggests that he was beginning to rest his views in part upon the authority of the church. Wolfhart Pannenberg has sought to base theology upon history, utilizing sophisticated methods of historiography. To the extent that evangelicals abandon the position that everything taught or affirmed by Scripture is true, other bases for doctrine will be sought. This might well be through the resurgence of a philosophy of religion, or what is more likely given the current "relational" orientation, through basing theology upon behavioral sciences, such as psychology of religion. But whatever the form that such an alternative grounding takes, there will probably be a shrinking of the list of tenets,

for it is difficult to establish the Trinity or the virgin birth of Christ upon either a philosophical argument or the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

### Inerrancy and Phenomena

It is obvious that belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures is not an inductive conclusion arrived at as a result of examining all the passages of the Bible. By its very nature, such a conclusion would be only probable at best. Nor is the doctrine of biblical inerrancy explicitly affirmed or taught in the Bible. Rather, it is a corollary of the doctrine of full inspiration of the Bible. The view of the Bible that was held and taught by the writers of Scripture implies the full truthfulness of the Bible. But this does not spell out for us the nature of biblical inerrancy. Just as the knowledge that God has revealed himself cannot tell us the content of his message, so the Bible's implication that it is free from error does not tell us just what such errorlessness would entail.

We must look now to the actual phenomena of Scripture. And here we find potential difficulties. Some of these are apparent discrepancies between parallel passages in the Gospels, or in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. There seem to be sufficient problems here to force us to think through just how they relate to our doctrine of Scripture. Mark 6:8 reports that Jesus told his disciples to take a staff, while according to Matthew 10:9-10 and Luke 9:3 he prohibited it. In the account of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Luke reports that the crowd cried out, "Glory in the highest," whereas the other Gospels record the words as "Hosanna in the highest." All four Gospels report differently the wording of the inscription above Jesus' cross. According to Matthew, it said, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews"; according to Mark, "The King of the Jews"; according to Luke, "This is the King of the Jews"; according to John, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

There is a problem with the Bible's chronology at several points as well. The reigns of the kings of Israel, for example, are dated in terms of the reigns of the kings of Judah, but here some real discrepancies occur. Stephen's chronology of the Israelites' stay in Egypt (they were enslaved for four hundred years—Acts 7:6) does not coincide with the account in Exodus. There are severe problems with numbers as well. In parallel passages, 2 Samuel 10:18 speaks of 700 chariots where 1 Chronicles 19:18 has 7,000; 2 Samuel 8:4 refers to 1,700 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers where 1 Chronicles 18:4 has 7,000 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers; 2 Samuel 24:9 speaks of 800,000 men of Israel and 500,000 men of Judah, while 1 Chronicles 21:5 states that there were 1,100,000 men of

Israel and 470,000 men of Judah. There are apparent ethical discrepancies as well. According to 2 Samuel 24:1, the Lord was angry against Israel, and he incited David to commit the sin of numbering the people; but according to 1 Chronicles 21:1, Satan rose up against Israel, inciting David to number Israel. And God, who neither tempts nor can be tempted (James 1:13), is said to have sent an evil spirit upon Saul (1 Sam. 18:10); as a result Saul attempted to murder David. These and numerous other difficulties suggest that there is some work to be done in reconciling the actual data of the Bible with the claim that it is fully inerrant. How are these phenomena to be handled? Several strategies have been employed by conservative theologians in the past and are being actively used today.

1. The abstract approach is represented by B. B. Warfield, who held a high view of Scripture. He tended to rest his case primarily upon the doctrinal consideration of its inspiration. While he was aware of the problems (Henry Preserved Smith made him very much aware of them) and offered resolutions for some of them, he tended to feel that they did not all have to be explained. They are merely difficulties. The weight of evidence for the inspiration and consequent inerrancy of the Bible is so great that no amount of data of this type can overthrow it. Despite the fact that Warfield concentrated on the discipline of New Testament exegesis, he did not feel a compulsion to alleviate these difficulties. He could continue to hold to inerrancy in spite of them.<sup>15</sup>

2. The harmonistic approach is represented by Edward J. Young's *Thy Word Is Truth*,<sup>16</sup> as well as Louis Gausser's *Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*. Once again belief in the inerrancy of the Bible is based upon the doctrinal teaching of inspiration. Advocates of this approach assert that the difficulties presented by various phenomena can be resolved, and they make an attempt to do so. Using whatever information is currently available, they harmonize the conflicting passages and suggest solutions to the puzzles.

One example found in Gausser involves the manner of Judas's death. As is well known, there is an apparent discrepancy between Matthew 27:5, according to which Judas committed suicide by hanging himself, and Acts 1:18, which states that "falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out." Gausser offers a story of a man in Lyons who committed suicide. In order to make certain of the results, he seated himself on a ledge outside a fourth-story window and fired a

15. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), pp. 219-20.

16. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

pistol into his mouth. Gausser observes that three accounts might be given of his death, one of which attributes it to the pistol shot, one to the fall, and one to both factors. All these accounts would be correct, he maintains. Similarly, he speculates that Judas hanged himself and fell headlong. Presumably, although Gausser does not say so explicitly, the rope broke and Judas flipped head over heels in the fall. We are lacking this one particular piece of information which would make all the details of the story explicable.<sup>17</sup> There is no contradiction here. Other passages are given similar treatment. Harold Lindsell's explanation of the apparent discrepancy between the diameter and the circumference of the molten sea in 2 Chronicles 4:1-2 is an example of the same species; the circumference is explained as being the measurement of the inner edge of the rim, whereas the diameter is the measurement from outer edge to outer edge.<sup>18</sup> In each case, the author offers conjecture aimed at resolving the difficulty and believes that he has succeeded in the effort.

3. The approach of moderate harmonization follows the style of the harmonistic approach to a certain extent. The problems are taken seriously, and an effort is made to solve them or relieve the difficulties as far as this is reasonably possible with the data currently available. One of the advocates of this position is Everett Harrison. He notes that inerrancy, while not explicitly taught by the Bible, is nonetheless a corollary of full inspiration. It is a conclusion to which devout minds have been driven as a result of the study of Scripture. He attempts to offer resolution of many of the problem passages. In some cases, he does not see a resolution at the moment. He will not attempt to force a premature resolution of the problems, however. Some of the relevant data are not currently available, but may become so in the future as archaeological and philological research advances. Some of the data may be lost. It is possible that if we had all the data, we would be able to resolve all the problems.<sup>19</sup>

4. A fourth position was presented as a possibility by Edward Carnell, although there is no evidence that he actually adopted it himself. This position is relatively simple, and is an extension of a tactic employed in a limited way by many theologians. If we were forced to do so, said Carnell, we could adopt the position that inspiration guarantees only an accurate reproducing of the sources which the Scripture writer employed, but not a correcting of them. Thus, if the source contained an erroneous reference, the Scripture writer recorded that error just as it

17. Louis Gausser, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody, 1949), pp. 214-15.

18. Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible*, pp. 165-66.

19. Everett Harrison, "The Phenomena of Scripture," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Cat-I Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), pp. 237-50.

was in the source.<sup>20</sup> Even Harrison suggested that this position might at times be expedient,\* and James Orr many years earlier proposed that where there were lacunae in the sources, the Holy Spirit did not necessarily fill them in.<sup>22</sup>

Carnell noted that Warfield, in his debate with Smith, had to concede that at certain points biblical statements are not without error; only the recording of them from the original source is inerrant. This is apparently the case, for instance, with the speeches of Eliphaz the Temanite and Job's other friends. There are also some obvious cases of erroneous statements reported in the Bible, such as "There is no God"-this is, of course, the statement of a fool (Pss. 14:1; 53:1). I once had a teaching colleague who asked his students to respond "true" or "false" to the statement, "Everything in the Bible is true." Although he believed strongly in biblical inerrancy, his answer was "false," since the Bible reports many erroneous statements made by uninspired men (in my colleague's view the report of those erroneous statements was of course inerrant). This line of reasoning can be extended to explain many of the apparent problems in the Bible. For example, the chronicler could have been relying upon a fallible and erroneous source in drawing up his list of numbers of chariots and horsemen.

5. Finally, there is the view that the Bible does err. This position is a forthright one, and has been well stated by Dewey Beegle, as well as by others who, unlike Beegle, do not claim to be evangelicals. Beegle basically says that we must acknowledge that the Bible contains real and insoluble problems. We should call them what they are and acknowledge that the Bible contains errors. Instead of trying to explain them away, we should accept the fact that they are there and are genuine, and construct our doctrine of inspiration with this in mind.<sup>23</sup> Our doctrine of inspiration should not be developed in an abstract or a *priori* fashion. When we do that, we simply adopt a view and dictate what it *must* mean. Instead, we should see what the inspiration of the Bible has produced, and then infer from that the nature of inspiration. Whatever inspiration is, it is not verbal. We cannot regard inspiration as extending to the very choice of words in the text.

It is now necessary to take a position from among these possibilities and develop it. In terms of the alternatives just examined regarding the phenomena, the view that comes closest to my own is that of Harrison.

20. Edward Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), pp. 109-11.

21. Harrison, "Phenomena of Scripture," p. 249.

22. Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, pp. 179-81.

23. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 195-97.

The Warfield position, as considered here, places the emphasis properly upon the teaching of Scripture rather than the phenomena. In so doing, however, it fails to give sufficient attention to the phenomena. To the exegete this failure must seem to approach irresponsibility. It is too easy to label as mere difficulties rather than problems passages such as we have noted. The harmonistic school has in many cases done a real favor to the cause of biblical scholarship by finding creative solutions to problems. To insist upon reconciling all of the problems by utilizing the currently available data, however, appears to me to lead to forced handling of the material. Some of the suggestions, such as Gaußen's regarding the death of Judas, seem almost incredible. It is better to acknowledge that we do not yet have all the answers. This humble approach will probably make the Bible more believable than will asking people to accept some of the proffered explanations, and in the process suggesting that the integrity of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy depends upon acceptance of such contrived solutions. Carnell's suggestion has much to commend it, especially since virtually all theologians would concede that they have adopted this expedient, at least to a certain extent.<sup>24</sup> The problems inherent in taking this approach as far as Carnell suggests are considerable, however. In practice, we could be confident that we have the truth only if we are certain that the passage in question does not employ sources. But to make that judgment is very difficult indeed. Consequently, the doctrine of inspiration and authority of the Bible would become merely a formal one whose application is uncertain. Beegle's view seems to move consistently to the conclusion that revelation is not propositional, a position falling outside the orthodox view of revelation. Thus, by process of elimination, I arrive at a view like that of Harrison, but with certain qualifications.<sup>25</sup>

### Defining Inerrancy

We may now state our understanding of inerrancy: The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means

24. Calvin argues that quotation of the Old Testament by a New Testament writer does not guarantee the correctness of the Old Testament text. But in such cases the argument of the New Testament writer does not depend upon an incorrect point in the quotation. Thus, while Luke may quote from an inaccurate Septuagint text, the point he is making is based upon something in the Septuagint text that is absolutely correct—*Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 263-64; cf. *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), vol. 2, p. 364.

25. See Everett Harrison, "Criteria of Biblical Inerrancy," *Christianity Today*, 20 January 1958, pp. 16-17.

of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms. This definition reflects the position of full inerrancy, which, as we pointed out in the opening portion of this chapter, lies between absolute inerrancy and limited inerrancy. It is now necessary to elaborate and expound upon this definition. It is not our intention here to attempt to deal with all of the problems. Rather, we will note some principles and some illustrations which will help us to define inerrancy more specifically and to remove some of the difficulties.

1. Inerrancy pertains to what is affirmed or asserted rather than what is merely reported. This incorporates the valid point of Carnell's suggestion. The Bible reports false statements made by ungodly persons. The presence of these statements in the Scripture does not mean they are true; it only guarantees that they are correctly reported. The same judgment can be made about certain statements of godly men who were not speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Stephen, in his speech in Acts 7, may not have been inspired, although he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus, his chronological statement in verse 6 is not necessarily free from error. It appears that even Paul and Peter may on occasion have made incorrect statements. When, however, something is taken by a biblical writer, from whatever source, and incorporated in his message as an affirmation, not merely a report, then it must be judged as truthful. This does not guarantee the canonicity of the book quoted. Nonbelievers, without special revelation or inspiration, may nonetheless be in possession of the truth. Just because one holds that everything within the Bible is truth, it is not necessary to hold that all truth is within the Bible. Jude's references to two noncanonical books do not necessarily create a problem, for one is not required thereby to believe either that Jude affirmed error, or that Enoch and the Assumption of Moses are divinely inspired books which ought to be included within the canon of the Old Testament.

The question arises, Does inerrancy have any application to moods other than the indicative? The Bible contains questions, wishes, and commands as well as assertions. These, however, are not ordinarily susceptible to being judged either true or false. Thus inerrancy seems not to apply to them. However, within Scripture there are assertions or affirmations (expressed or implied) that someone asked such a question, expressed such a wish, or uttered such a command. While the statement, "Love your enemies!" cannot be said to be either true or false, the assertion, "Jesus said, 'Love your enemies!'" is susceptible to being judged true or false. And as an assertion of Scripture, it is inerrant.

Note here that we are emphasizing the assertions or affirmations, not the intention of the speaker or writer. Much is made in evangelical

circles of the intention of the writer—the message cannot and should not be turned in a direction totally different from that intended by the writer. In particular, evangelicals object to the practice of interpreting a passage, not in terms of what the author meant to express, but rather, of what the reader finds in the passage, or brings to it. This is a most commendable concern.<sup>26</sup> The focus is on what the author intended to affirm.

There are certain problems that attach to the concept of intention, however. One is that it sometimes unduly restricts the meaning of a passage to one central intention. For example, when Jesus said that not one sparrow falls to the ground without the Father's will (Matt. 10:29), his purpose was not to teach that God watches over sparrows. It was to affirm that God watches over his human children (v. 31, "Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows"). Nonetheless, Jesus did affirm that God protects and cares about sparrows; indeed, the truth of the statement about his care for humans depends upon the truth of the statement about sparrows. Thus, the statement about sparrows is an affirmation, and Jesus intended to affirm it, even though his purpose in affirming it was to teach about God's providence in relationship to humans.

Another problem with emphasizing the concept of the author's intention is that it does not take into account the insights that have arisen from twentieth-century psychology's understanding of the unconscious. We now know that much of what we communicate is not conscious. The Freudian slip, body language, and other unconscious communication often reveal more plainly than our intended statements what we really believe. Thus, we must not restrict the revelation and inspiration of God to matters of which the Scripture writer was consciously aware. It seems quite possible that as John wrote of the great vision which he had on Patmos, he communicated more than what he understood.

2. We must judge the truthfulness of Scripture in terms of what the statements meant in the cultural setting in which they were expressed. We should judge the Bible in terms of the forms and standards of its own culture. We should not employ anachronistic standards in seeking to understand what was said. For example, we should not expect that the standards of exactness in quotation to which our age of the printing press and mass distribution is accustomed would have been present in the first century. We ought also to recognize that numbers were often used symbolically in ancient times, much more so than is true in our

<sup>26</sup> E.g., E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1967); cf. Walter Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 117-47.

culture today. The names parents chose for their children also carried a special meaning; this is rarely true today. The word *son* has basically one meaning in our language and culture. In biblical times, however, it was broader in meaning, almost tantamount to "descendant." There is a wide diversity, then, between our culture and that of biblical times. When we speak of inerrancy, we mean that what the Bible affirms is fully true in terms of the culture of its time.

3. The Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written. Here the exactness will vary (the specificity of which we wrote earlier) according to the intended use of the material. Suppose a hypothetical case in which the Bible reported a battle in which 9,476 men were involved. What then would be a correct (or infallible) report? Would 10,000 be accurate? 9,000? 9,500? 9,480? 9,475? Or would only 9,476 be a correct report? The answer is that it depends upon the purpose of the writing. If the report is an official military document which an officer is to submit to his superior, the number must be exact. That is the only way to ascertain whether there were any deserters. If, on the other hand, the account is simply to give some idea of the size of the battle, then a round number like 10,000 is adequate, and in this setting is correct. The same is true regarding the molten sea of 2 Chronicles 4:2. If the aim in giving the dimensions is to provide a plan from which an exact duplicate could be constructed, then it is important to know whether it is to be built with a diameter of 10 cubits or a circumference of 30 cubits. But if the purpose is merely to communicate an idea of the size of the object, then the approximation given by the chronicler is sufficient and may be judged fully true. We often find approximations in the Bible. There is no real conflict between the statement in Numbers 25:9 that 24,000 died by the plague and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 10:8 that 23,000 died. Both are approximations, and for the purpose involved, both are adequate and therefore may be regarded as true.

Giving approximations is a common practice in our own culture. Suppose that my actual gross income last year was \$25,137.69 (a purely hypothetical figure). And suppose you ask me what my gross income for last year was and I reply, "Twenty-five thousand dollars." Have I told the truth, or have I not? That depends upon the situation and setting. If you are a friend and the question is asked in an informal social discussion of the cost of living, I have told the truth. But if you are an Internal Revenue agent conducting an audit, then I have not told the truth. For a statement to be adequate and hence true, greater specificity is required in the latter situation than in the former.

This applies not only to the use of numbers, but also to such matters as the chronological order in historical narratives, which was occasionally

modified in the Gospels. In some cases a change in words was necessary in order to communicate the same meaning to different persons. Thus Luke has "Glory in the highest" where Matthew and Mark have "Hosanna in the highest"; the former would make better sense to Luke's Gentile readership than would the latter. Even expansion and compression, which are used by preachers today without their being charged with unfaithfulness to the text, were practiced by biblical writers.

4. Reports of historical events and scientific matters are in phenomenal rather than technical language. That is, the writer reports how things appear to the eye. This is the ordinary practice in any kind of popular (as opposed to technical) writing. A commonly noted instance of this practice has to do with the matter of the sun rising. When the weatherman on the evening news says that the sun will rise the next morning at 6:37, he has, from a strictly technical standpoint, made an error, since it has been known since the time of Copernicus that the sun does not move—the earth does. Yet there is no problem with this popular expression. Indeed, even in scientific circles, the term *sunrise* has become something of an idiom; though scientists regularly use the term, they do not take it literally. Similarly, biblical reports make no effort to be scientifically exact; they do not attempt to theorize over just what actually occurred when, for example, the walls of Jericho fell, or the Jordan River was stopped, or the axhead floated. The writer simply reported what was seen, how it appeared to the eye. (In a sense, the principle that the Bible uses popular rather than technical language is simply a sub-point of the previous principle, viz., that the Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written.)

5. Difficulties in explaining the biblical text should not be prejudged as indications of error. It has already been suggested that we should not attempt to set forth a definite solution to problems too soon. It is better to wait for the remainder of the data to come in, with the confidence that if we had all the data, the problems could be resolved. In some cases, the data may never come in. Once a tell has been excavated, it has been excavated, whether done carefully by a skilled team of archaeologists, or with a bulldozer, or by a group of thieves looking for valuable artifacts of precious metal. There is encouragement to be found, however, in the fact that the trend is toward the resolution of difficulties as more data come in. Some of the severe problems of a century ago, such as the unknown Sargon mentioned by Isaiah (20:1), have been satisfactorily explained, and without artificial contortions. And even the puzzle of the death of Judas seems now to have a workable and reasonable solution.

The specific word in Acts 1:18 that caused the difficulty regarding the

death of Judas is *προπνήσ*. For a long period of time it was understood to mean only “falling headlong.” Twentieth-century investigations of ancient papyri, however, have revealed that this word has another meaning in Koine Greek. It also means “swelling up.”<sup>27</sup> It is now possible to hypothesize an end of Judas’s life which seems to accommodate all of the data, but without the artificiality found in Gaussen’s handling of the problem. Having hanged himself, Judas was not discovered for some time. In such a situation the visceral organs begin to degenerate first, causing a swelling of the abdomen characteristic of cadavers that have not been properly embalmed (and even of those which have been embalmed, if the process is not repeated after several days). And so, “swelling up [Judas] burst open in the middle and his bowels gushed out.” While there is no way of knowing whether this is what actually took place, it seems to be a workable and adequate resolution of the difficulty.

We must, then, continue to work at the task of resolving whatever tensions there are in our understanding of the Bible. This will involve consulting the very best in linguistic and archaeological materials. Archaeology in particular has confirmed that the substance of the written Scriptures is accurate. Overall, there is less difficulty for the belief in the factual inerrancy of the Bible than there was a hundred years ago. At the same time, we must realize that there will never be complete confirmation of all the propositions or even resolution of all the problem issues. Therefore, we must not attempt to give fanciful explanations which are not warranted by the data. It is better to leave such difficulties unresolved in the confidence, based upon the doctrine of Scripture, that they will be removed to the extent that additional data become available.

Now that we have defined inerrancy specifically, we must note certain items that our definition does not entail. The doctrine of inerrancy does not tell us *a priori* what type of material the Bible will contain. Nor does it tell us how we are to interpret individual passages. (That is the province of hermeneutics.) In particular, inerrancy should not be understood to mean that the maximum amount of specificity will always be present. Rather, our doctrine of inerrancy maintains merely that whatever statements the Bible affirms are fully truthful when they are correctly interpreted in terms of their meaning in their cultural setting and the purpose for which they were written.

### Ancillary Issues

1. Is inerrancy a good term, or should it be avoided? There are certain problems which attach to it. One is that it tends to carry the implication

27. G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937), p. 377.

of extreme specificity, which words like correctness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, dependability, and, to a lesser extent, accuracy do not connote. As long as inerrancy is not understood in the sense of scientific exactness, it can be a useful term. When we are listing the characteristics of Scripture, however, inerrancy should be the last in the series; the earlier ones should be positive. While the Bible does not err, the really important fact about the Bible is that it does teach truth. Furthermore, inerrancy should not be understood as meaning that the Bible tells us everything possible on a given subject. The treatment is not exhaustive, only sufficient to accomplish the intended ends.

Because the term *inerrancy* has become common, it probably is wise to use it. On the other hand, it is not sufficient simply to use the term, since, as we have seen, radically different meanings are attached to it by different persons. The statement of William Hordern is appropriate here as a warning: “To both the fundamentalist and the nonconservative, it often seems that the new conservative is trying to say, ‘The Bible is inerrant, but of course this does not mean that it is without error.’”<sup>28</sup> We must carefully explain what we mean when we use the term so there is no misunderstanding.

2. We must also define what we mean by error. If this is not done, if we do not have some fixed limits which clearly separate truthful statements from false propositions, the meaning of inerrancy will be lost. If there is an “infinite coefficient of elasticity of language,” so that the word *truthful* can simply be stretched a bit more, and a bit more, and a bit more, eventually it comes to include everything, and therefore nothing. If a belief is to have any meaning (in this case, belief in the inerrancy of the Bible), we must be prepared to state what would cause us to give it up. We must be prepared, then, to indicate what would be considered an error. Statements in Scripture which plainly contradict the facts (or are contradicted by them) must be considered errors. If Jesus did not die on the cross, if he did not still the storm on the sea, if the walls of Jericho did not fall, if the people of Israel did not leave their bondage in Egypt and depart for the Promised Land, then the Bible is in error. In all of this we see a modified form of the verifiability principle at work, but without the extreme dimensions which prove to be the undoing of that criterion as it is applied by logical positivism, for in the present case the means of verification are not limited to sense data.

3. The doctrine of inerrancy applies in the strict sense only to the originals, but in a derivative sense to copies and translations, that is, to the extent that they reflect the original. This view is often ridiculed as a

28. William Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 83.

subterfuge, and it is pointed out that no one has seen the inerrant autographs.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as Carl Henry has pointed out, no one has seen the errant originals either.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, the concept that only the originals are inerrant can be used as an evasion. One might suggest that all seeming errors are merely copying errors; they were not present in the originals but subsequently crept in. In actuality, the concept that inerrancy applies only to the originals is seldom put to this use. Textual criticism is a sufficiently developed science that the number of passages in the Bible where the reading is in doubt is relatively small; as a matter of fact, in many of the problem passages there really is no question of the reading. Thus we have a very good idea of the exact wording of the originals. Rather, what is being affirmed by the concept that only the originals are inerrant is that inspiration did not extend to copyists and translators. While divine providence was doubtless operative, there was not the same type of action of the Holy Spirit as was involved in the original writing of the text.

Nonetheless, we must reaffirm that the copies and the translations are also the Word of God, to the degree that they preserve the original message. When we say they are the Word of God, we do not have in mind, of course, the original process of the inspiration of the biblical writer. Rather, they are the Word of God in a derivative sense which attaches to the product. So it was possible for Paul to write to Timothy that all Scripture is inspired, although undoubtedly the Scripture that he was referring to was a copy and probably also a translation (the Septuagint) as well.

In a world in which there are so many erroneous conceptions and so many opinions, the Bible is a sure source of guidance. For when correctly interpreted, it can be fully relied upon in all that it teaches. It is a sure, dependable, and trustworthy authority.

29. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 156-59.

30. Reported in Harrison, "Phenomena of Scripture," p. 239.



## The Power of God's Word: Authority

Definition of Authority

Religious Authority

Establishing the Meaning and Divine Origin of the Bible

The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit

Objective and Subjective Components of Authority

Various Views of Illumination

The View of Augustine

The View of Daniel Fuller

The View of John Calvin

The Bible, Reason, and the Spirit

Tradition and Authority

Historical and Normative Authoritativeness

**B**y the authority of the Bible we mean that the Bible, as the expression of God's will to us, possesses the right supremely to define what we are to believe and how we are to conduct ourselves.

Authority is a subject arousing considerable controversy in our

society today. This is true not only within the sphere of biblical and religious authority, but in broader areas as well. Even in societies which are still formally structured on an authoritarian basis, there is the recognition that the old pyramid model, in which authority generated from the top downward, no longer pertains, at least in its traditional form. People are resistant to dictatorial or arbitrary forms of exercise of authority. External authority is often refused recognition and obedience in favor of accepting one's own judgment as final. There is even a strong antiestablishmentarian mood in the area of religion, where individual judgment is often insisted upon. For example, many Roman Catholics are questioning the traditional view of papal authority as being infallible. Added to this is the plethora of competing claimants to authority.

#### Definition of Authority

By authority we mean the right to command belief and/or action. The term has a wide range of application. We may think of authority as a governmental, jurisdictional matter. Here an example would be a king or emperor who has the right to enforce action. This may take less imperial forms, however. The policeman directing traffic and the property owner demanding that people stay off his land are exercising a power which is rightfully theirs.

What we have described could be termed imperial authority. There is also what we might call "veracious authority."<sup>1</sup> Someone may by virtue of his knowledge be recognized by others as an "authority" on a particular subject. His fund of knowledge in that field exceeds that of most others. As a result, he is capable of prescribing proper belief and/or action. (A document may also, by virtue of the information it contains, be capable of prescribing belief and/or action.) This type of authority is not usually asserted or exerted. It is possessed. It is then recognized and accepted by others. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such a person *is* an authority rather than that he has authority. Veracious authority is a function of the knowledge one possesses and hence is intrinsic, whereas imperial authority is a function of the position one occupies and hence is extrinsic.

We should be careful not to confuse authority with force. While ideally the right to prescribe and the ability to enforce belief and action should coincide, in practice they do not always do so. For example, the rightful heir to a throne or a duly elected official may be deposed in a

coup. An impostor or a usurper may function in the place of another. In the case of veracious authority, there is really no force except an implicit ultimatum: "Follow what I tell you, and you will be led into truth; disregard it, and confusion and error will result." The physician who prescribes a course of action to his patient really has no power to enforce his prescription. He is in effect saying, "If you wish to be healthy, then do this."

In this connection, the distinction between authoritativeness and authoritarianism is also important to maintain. An authoritative person, document, or institution is one that possesses authority and consequently has the right to define belief or prescribe practice. An authoritarian person, on the other hand, is one who attempts to instill his opinions or enforce his commands in an emphatic, dogmatic, or even intolerant fashion. The uninitiated or impressionable are often easily induced to follow an authoritarian person, sometimes more easily than they can be persuaded to follow a more authoritative person.

It is also important to distinguish possession of authority and recognition of it. If they are too closely associated, or the former is measured by the latter, the matter of authority becomes quite subjective. There are persons who do not accept rightful authority, who do not heed traffic laws, or who reject the viewpoint of experts. For whatever reason, they prefer their own opinion. But their failure to recognize authority does not abrogate it.

Authority may be directly exercised by the one possessing it. It may be delegated, however, and frequently is. Often the rightful possessor of authority cannot directly exercise it. Thus it is necessary to delegate that authority to some person or agency which can exercise it. For instance, the citizens of the United States elect officials to represent them, and these officials pass laws and create agencies to administer those laws. The actions of duly authorized employees of such agencies carry the same weight and authority as the citizens themselves possess. A scholar may not be able to present his ideas in a direct fashion to everyone who has an interest in them. He can, however, put his knowledge into a book. The content of the book, since it consists of his actual teachings, will carry the same weight as would his ideas if presented in person.

Lack of effectiveness or of success on a short-term basis should not cause us to doubt the genuineness of an authority. Frequently ideas, particularly if novel, are not readily accepted. Nor do they always prove workable immediately. In the long run, however, true authority will prove itself. Galileo's ideas were initially thought bizarre and even dangerous. Einstein's theory of relativity seemed strange and its workability questionable. Time has proven the worth of both, however. Jesus initially had relatively few converts, was not respected by the leaders

1. Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern Of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 10, 12.

(the authorities) of his day, and was eventually executed. Ultimately, however, every knee will bow and every tongue confess who and what he is (Phil. 2:10–11).

### Religious Authority

When we turn to the specialized issue of religious authority, the crucial question is, Is there some person, institution, or document possessing the right to prescribe belief and action in religious matters? In the ultimate sense, if there is a supreme being higher than man or anything else in the created order, he has the right to determine what we are to believe and how we are to live. From the Christian standpoint, God is the authority in these matters because of who he is. He is the highest being, the one who always has been, who existed before we or any other being came into existence. He is the only being having the power of his own existence within himself. He is not dependent upon anyone or anything else for his existence. Furthermore, he is the authority because of what he has done. He has created us as well as everything else in the entire world and redeemed us. He is also rightfully the authority, the one who has a right to prescribe what we are to believe and how we are to act, because of his continuing activity in the world and in our lives. He maintains his creation in existence. He continues to give us life, cares for us, and provides for our needs.

Another question arises at this point: How does God exercise this authority? Does he exercise it directly or indirectly? Some would maintain that he does so directly. Here we find the neoorthodox. To them, the authority of God is exercised in a direct act of revelation, a self-manifestation which is actually an immediate encounter between God and man. The Bible is not God's Word per se. It is merely an instrument, an object, through which God speaks or meets people. On those occasions, the authority is not the Bible but the self-revealing God. No permanent quality has been attached to the Bible or infused into it. There has been no delegation of the authority.

There are others who understand the authority of God to be exercised in some direct fashion. Among them are various types of "spiritists," both ancient and modern. These are persons who expect some direct word or guidance from God. In their view God speaks to individuals. This may be apart from or very much supplementary to the Bible. Some extreme charismatics believe in a direct special revelation from God. It is not simply charismatics, however, who are found here. One of the questions posed in a 1979 Gallup poll was, "If you, yourself, were testing your own religious beliefs, which ONE of these four religious

authorities would you turn to first?" The options were: what the church says, what respected religious leaders say, what the Holy Spirit says to me personally, and what the Bible says. Of all those polled, 27 percent indicated they would turn first to the Holy Spirit; 40 percent indicated the Bible. Among persons between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age, however, a greater percentage chose the Holy Spirit (36 percent) than chose the Bible (31 percent).<sup>2</sup> While a considerable number of Christians would certainly regard the direct work of the Holy Spirit as a means of guidance, 27 percent of the general public and 36 percent of young adults regard it as the major criterion by which to evaluate religious beliefs.

Still others view divine authority as having been delegated to some person(s) or institution. A prime example here is the Roman Catholic Church. The church is seen as God's representative on earth. When it speaks, it speaks with the same authority as if the Lord himself were speaking. According to this view, the right to control the means of grace and to define truth in doctrinal matters has been delegated to the apostles and their successors. It is from the church, then, that we can learn God's intention for man. While the church does not discover new truth, it does make explicit what is implicit within the revelatory tradition received from the original apostles.<sup>3</sup>

An interesting contemporary view is that religious authority resides in prophets present in the church. Throughout history various movements have had such prophetic leaders. Mohammed believed that he was a special prophet sent from God. Among the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were prophets who declared messages allegedly received from God.<sup>4</sup> There seems to have been a special outbreak of such persons and movements in recent years. Various cults have arisen, led by charismatic leaders claiming to have a special message from God. Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church are a conspicuous example, but many others come to mind as well. Even within mainline evangelicalism, many people regard the word of certain "big name" speakers as almost equal in value with the Bible.

This volume proposes that God himself is the ultimate authority in religious matters. He has the right, both by virtue of who he is and what he does, to establish the standard for belief and practice. With respect to

2. Results of *Christianity Today* -Gallup poll of American religious opinion-data supplied by Walter A. Elwell, author of "Belief and the Bible: A Crisis of Authority?" *Christianity Today*, 21 March 1980, pp. 20-23.

3. S. E. Donlon, "Authority, Ecclesiastical," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 1, p. 1115.

4. Albert Henry Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1897), pp. 62-67.

major issues he does not exercise authority in a direct fashion, however. Rather, he has delegated that authority by creating a book, the Bible. Because it conveys his message, the Bible carries the same weight God himself would command if he were speaking to us personally.

### **Establishing the Meaning and Divine Origin of the Bible**

Revelation is God's making his truth known to man. Inspiration preserves it, making it more widely accessible. Inspiration guarantees that what the Bible says is just what God would say if he were to speak directly. One other element is needed in this chain, however. For the Bible to function as if it is God speaking to us, the Bible reader needs to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, and to be convinced of their divine origin and authorship. There are various ideas as to how this is accomplished.

1. The traditional Roman Catholic position is that it is through the church that we come to understand the Bible and to be convinced of its divine authorship. As we noted earlier, Thomas claimed to be able to establish by rational proofs the divine origin of the Catholic church. Its divine origin established, the church can then certify to us the divinity of the Scriptures. The church, which was present before the Bible, gave us the Bible. It decided what books should be canonized (i.e., included within the Bible). It testifies that these particular books originated from God, and therefore embody his message to us. Further, the church supplies the correct interpretation of the Bible. This is particularly important. Of what value is it for us to have an infallible, inerrant revelation from God, if we do not have an inerrant understanding of that revelation? Since all human understanding is limited and therefore subject to error, something more is needed. The church and ultimately the pope give us the true meaning of the Bible. The infallibility of the pope is the logical complement to the infallibility of the Bible.

2. Another group emphasizes that human reason is the means of establishing the Bible's meaning and divine origin. In an extreme form, this view is represented by the rationalists. Assurance that the Bible is divinely inspired comes from examining the evidences. The Bible is alleged to possess certain characteristics which will convince anyone who examines it of its divine inspiration. One of the major evidences is fulfilled prophecy-rather unlikely occurrences predicted in the distant past eventually came to pass. These events, says the argument, could not have been predicted on the basis of unaided human insight or foresight. Consequently, God must have revealed them and directed the writing of this book. Other evidences include the supernatural character of Jesus

and miracles.<sup>5</sup> Interpretation is also a function of human reason. The Bible's meaning is determined by examining grammars, lexicons, historical background, and so on. Scholarly critical study is the means of ascertaining the meaning of the Bible.

3. The third position is the one we will adopt. This view contends that there is an internal working of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the understanding of the hearer or reader of the Bible, bringing about comprehension of its meaning, and creating a certainty of its truth and divine origin.

### **The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit**

There are a number of reasons why the illumination or witness of the Holy Spirit is needed if man is to understand the meaning of the Bible and be certain of its truth. (Neither the church nor human reason will do.) First there is the ontological difference between God and man. God is transcendent; he goes beyond our categories of understanding. He can never be fully grasped within our finite concepts or by our human vocabulary. He can be understood, but not comprehensively. Correlated with God's transcendence is man's finiteness. He is a limited being in terms of both his point of origin in time and the extent to which he can grasp information. Consequently, he cannot formulate concepts which are commensurate with the nature of God. These limitations are inherent in man's being man. They are not a result of the fall or of individual human sin, but of the Creator-creature relationship. No moral connotation or stigma is attached to them.

Beyond these limitations, however, are limitations which do result from the sinfulness of man and of the human race. The latter are not inherent in human nature but rather result from the detrimental effects of sin upon man's noetic powers. The Bible witnesses in numerous and emphatic ways to this encumbrance of human understanding, particularly with regard to spiritual matters.

The final reason the special working of the Holy Spirit is needed is that man requires certainty with respect to divine matters. Because we are concerned here with matters of (spiritual and eternal) life and death, it is necessary to have more than mere probability. Our need for certainty is in direct proportion to the importance of what is at stake: in matters of eternal consequence, we need a certainty that human reasoning cannot provide. If one is deciding what automobile to purchase, or

**5.** William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity and the Horae Paulinae* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1850).

what kind of paint to apply to his home, listing the advantages of each of the options will usually suffice. (The option with the most advantages frequently proves to be the best.) If, however, the question is whom or what to believe with respect to one's eternal destiny, the need to be certain is far greater.

To understand what the Holy Spirit does, we now need to examine more closely what the Bible has to say about the human condition, particularly man's lack of ability to recognize and understand the truth without the aid of the Spirit. In Matthew 13:13–15 and Mark 8:18 Jesus speaks of those who hear but never understand and see but never perceive. Their condition is depicted in vivid images throughout the New Testament. Their hearts have grown dull, their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed (Matt. 13:15). They know God but do not honor him as God, and so they have become futile in their thinking and their senseless minds are darkened (Rom. 1:21). Romans 11:8 attributes their condition to God, who "gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear." Consequently, "their eyes are darkened" (v. 10). In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul attributes their condition to the god of this world, who "has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." All of these references, as well as numerous other allusions, argue for the need of some special work of the Spirit to enhance man's perception and understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul tells us that the natural man (the man who neither perceives nor understands) has not received the gifts of the Spirit of God. In the original we find the word δέχομαι, which signifies not merely to "receive" something, but rather to "accept" something, to welcome it, whether a gift or an idea.<sup>6</sup> Natural man does not accept the gifts of the Spirit because he finds the wisdom of God foolish. He is unable to understand (*γνῶναι*) it because it must be spiritually (*πνευματικῶς*) discerned or investigated (*ἀνακρίνεται*). The problem, then, is not merely that natural man is unwilling to accept the gifts and wisdom of God, but that, without the help of the Holy Spirit, natural man is unable to understand them.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 2:14 there is corroborating evidence that man cannot understand without the Spirit's aid. In verse 11 we read that only the Spirit of God comprehends the things of God. Paul also indicates in 1:20–21 that the world cannot know God through its wisdom, for God has made foolish the wisdom of this world. Indeed, the wisdom of the world is folly to God (3:19). The gifts of the Spirit are

6. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), p. 176.

imparted in words taught (*διδάσκω*) not by human wisdom but by the Spirit (2:13). From all of these considerations, it appears that Paul is not saying that unspiritual persons understand but do not accept. Rather, they do not accept, at least in part, because they do not understand.

But this condition is overcome when the Holy Spirit begins to work within man. Paul speaks of having the eyes of the heart enlightened (*πεφωτισμένους*), a perfect passive participle, suggesting that something has been done and remains in effect (Eph. 1:18). In 2 Corinthians 3, he speaks of the removal of the veil placed upon the mind (v. 16) so that one may behold the glory of the Lord (v. 18). While the original reference was to the Israelites (v. 13), Paul has now broadened it to refer to all men (v. 16), for in the remainder of the chapter and the first six verses of the next chapter the orientation is quite universal. The New Testament refers to this enlightenment of man in various other ways: circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29), being filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9), the gift of understanding to know Jesus Christ (1 John 5:20), hearing the voice of the Son of God (John 10:3). What previously had seemed to be foolish (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14) and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) now appears to the believer as the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), as secret and hidden wisdom of God (1:24; 2:7), and as the mind of Christ (2:16).

What we have been describing here is a one-time work of the Spirit—regeneration. It introduces a categorical difference between the believer and the unbeliever. There is also, however, a continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, a work particularly described and elaborated by Jesus in his message to his followers in John 14–16. Here Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13). In some references, Jesus says that he himself will send the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26; 16:7). In the earlier part of the message he spoke of the Father's sending the Spirit in Jesus' name (14:16, 26). In the final statement, he simply speaks of the Holy Spirit's coming (16:13). It therefore appears that the Spirit was sent by both the Father and the Son, and that it was necessary for Jesus first to go away to the Father (note the redundant and hence emphatic use of *ἐγώ* in 16:7 and 14:12—"I go to the Father"). The Holy Spirit was to take Jesus' place and to perform his own peculiar functions as well.

What are these functions which the Holy Spirit performs?

1. The Holy Spirit will teach the believers all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had taught them (14:26).

7. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 5th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), pp. 676–77.

2. The Holy Spirit will witness to Jesus. The disciples will also be witnesses to Jesus, because they have been with him from the beginning (15:26–27).
3. The Holy Spirit will convict (*ἐλέγχω*) the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16%). This particular word implies rebuking in such a way as to bring about conviction, as contrasted with *ἐπιτιμάω*, which may suggest simply an undeserved (Matt. 16:22) or ineffectual (Luke 23:40) rebuke.<sup>8</sup>
4. The Holy Spirit will guide believers into all the truth. He will not speak on his own authority, but will speak whatever he hears (John 16:13). In the process, he will also glorify Jesus (16:14).

Note in particular the designation of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (14:17). Johns account of what Jesus said does not refer to the Holy Spirit as the true Spirit (*ἀληθές* or *ἀληθινόν*), but the Spirit of truth (*τῆς ἀληθείας*). This may represent nothing more than the literal translation of an Aramaic expression into Greek, but more likely signifies that the very nature of the Spirit is truth. He is the one who communicates truth. The world is not able to receive (*λαμβάνω*, simple reception, as opposed to *δέχομαι*, acceptance) him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. Believers, on the other hand, know him (*γνώσκω*), because he abides with them and will be in them. (There is some dispute as to whether the tense of the final verb of verse 17 is to be understood as future or present. *ἔσται* ["will be"] seems to have somewhat better textual basis than does *ἔστιν* ["is"]. It appears likely that *ἔσται* was altered to *ἔστιν* in an attempt to harmonize this verb form with the present tense of *μένω*.)

Let us summarize the role of the Spirit as depicted in John 14–16. He guides into truth, calling to remembrance the words of Jesus, not speaking on his own, but speaking what he hears, bringing about conviction, witnessing to Christ. Thus his ministry is definitely involved with divine truth. But just what is meant by that? It seems to be not so much a new ministry, or the addition of new truth not previously made known, but rather an action of the Holy Spirit in relationship to truth already revealed. Thus the Holy Spirit's ministry involves elucidating the truth, bringing belief and persuasion and conviction, but not new revelation.

But is this passage to be understood of the whole church throughout all periods of its life, or do these teachings about the work of the Holy Spirit apply only to the disciples of Jesus' day? If the latter view is adopted, the Spirit's guidance of the disciples into truth has reference only to their role in the production of the Bible, and not to any

8. Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 13–15.

continuing ministry. Obviously the message was originally given to the group which physically surrounded Jesus. There are certain references which clearly localize it (e.g., 14:8–11). There is, however, for the most part, an absence of elements which would demand a restrictive interpretation. Indeed, several teachings here (e.g., 14:1–7; 15:1–17) are also communicated elsewhere in the Bible. Obviously they were not restricted to merely the first hearers, for they involve promises claimed and commands accepted by the whole church throughout all time. It is logical to conclude that the teachings regarding the Spirit's ministry are for us as well.

As a matter of fact, what is taught in John 14–16 regarding the Spirit's guidance of believers into truth is also found elsewhere in the Bible. In particular, Paul mentions that the message of the gospel originally came to the Thessalonians by way of the Holy Spirit. Paul says that it did not merely come in word only; it also came "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). When the Thessalonians received (*παραλαβόντες*) the word, they accepted it (*ἔδέξασθε*) not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God (2:13). The difference between mere indifferent reception of the message and an active effectual acceptance is understood as a work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Paul prays that the Ephesians (3:14–19) may be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man, and may have the strength to comprehend (*καταλαβέσθαι*) and to know (*γνῶναι*) the love of Christ which exceeds (*ὑπερβάλλονταν*) knowledge (*γνώσεως*). The implication is that the Holy Spirit will communicate to the Ephesians a knowledge of the love of Christ that exceeds ordinary knowledge.

### Objective and Subjective Components of Authority

There is, then, what Bernard Ramm has called a *pattern* of authority. The objective word, the written Scripture, together with the subjective word, the inner illumination and conviction of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the authority for the Christian.

Scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century virtually maintained that the authority is the Bible alone. In some cases this also has been the position of American fundamentalism of the twentieth century. Those who hold this position see an objective quality in the Bible that automatically brings one into contact with God; a virtually sacramental view of the Bible can result. The Bible as a revelation and an inspired preservation of that revelation is also regarded as having an intrinsic efficacy. A mere presentation of the Bible or exposure to the Bible is per se of value, for the words of the Bible have a power in themselves. Reading the Bible

daily is thought to confer a value, in and of itself. The old adage, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," has a theological parallel: "a chapter a day keeps the devil away." A potential danger here is that the Bible may become almost a fetish.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there are some groups which regard the Holy Spirit as the chief authority for the Christian. Certain charismatic groups, for example, believe that special prophecy is occurring today. New messages from God are being given by the Holy Spirit. In most cases, these messages are regarded as explaining the true meaning of certain biblical passages. Thus, the contention is that while the Bible is authoritative, in practice its meaning would often not be found without special action by the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Actually, it is the combination of these two factors that constitutes authority. Both are needed. The written word, correctly interpreted, is the objective basis of authority. The inward illuminating and persuading work of the Holy Spirit is the subjective dimension. This dual dimension prevents sterile, cold, dry truth on one hand, and overexcitability and ill-advised fervor on the other. Together, the two yield a maturity that is necessary in the Christian life—a cool head and warm heart (not a cold heart and hot head). As one pastor put it in a rather crude fashion: "If you have the Bible without the Spirit, you will dry up. If you have the Spirit without the Bible, you will blow up. But if you have both the Bible and the Spirit together, you will grow up."

How does this view of the Bible compare with neoorthodoxy's view of the Bible? On the surface, at least to those of a scholastic orthodox position, the two appear very similar. The experience that the neoorthodox term revelation is in effect what we mean by illumination. At the moment in which one becomes convinced of the truth, illumination is taking place. To be sure, illumination will not always occur in a dramatic fashion. Sometimes conviction rises more gradually and calmly. Apart from the drama which may attach to the situation, however, there are other significant differences between the neoorthodox view of revelation and our view of illumination.

First, the content of the Bible is, from our orthodox perspective, objectively the Word of God. What these writings say is actually what

**9.** A. C. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 146.

**10.** In one church, a decision was to be made on two proposed plans for a new sanctuary. One member insisted that the Lord had told him that the church should adopt the plan calling for the larger sanctuary. His basis was that the ratio between the number of seats in the larger plan and the number in the smaller plan was five to three, exactly the ratio between the number of times that Elisha told Joash he should have struck the ground and the number of times he actually struck it (2 Kings 13:18-19). The church eventually divided over disagreement on this and similar issues.

God says to us, whether or not anyone reads, understands, or accepts them. The neoorthodox, on the other hand, do not see revelation as primarily communication of information, but rather the presence of God himself. Consequently, the Bible is not the Word of God in some objective fashion. Rather, it becomes the Word of God. When the revelation encounter ceases, the Bible is once again simply the words of the men who wrote it. In the orthodox view here presented, however, the Bible is God's message; what it says is what he says to us, irrespective of whether anyone is reading it, hearing it, understanding it, or responding to it. Its status as revelation is not dependent upon anyone's response to it. It is what it is.

This means, further, that the Bible has a definite and objective meaning which is (or at least should be) the same for everyone. In the neoorthodox view, since there are no revealed truths, only truths of revelation, how one person interprets an encounter with God may be different from another persons understanding. Indeed, even the interpretations given to events by the authors of Scripture were not divinely inspired. What they wrote was merely their own attempt to give some accounting of what they had experienced. Therefore, it is not possible to settle differences of understanding by quoting the words of the Bible. At best, the words of Scripture can simply point to the actual event of revelation. In the view presented here, however, since the words of Scripture are objectively God's revelation, one person can point to the content of the Bible in seeking to demonstrate to another what is the correct understanding. The essential meaning of a passage will be the same for everyone, although the application might be different for one person than for another.

Further, since the Bible does have an objective meaning which we come to understand through the process of illumination, illumination must have some permanent effect. Once the meaning is learned, then (barring forgetfulness) we have that meaning more or less permanently. This is not to say that there cannot be a deepened illumination giving us a more profound understanding of a particular passage, but rather that there need not be a renewing of the illumination, since the meaning (as well as the revelation) is of such a nature that it persists and can be retained.

### Various Views of Illumination

#### *The View of Augustine*

In the history of the church there have been differing views of illumination. For Augustine, illumination was part of the general process of

gaining knowledge. Augustine was a Platonist, or at least a neo-Platonist. Plato had taught that reality consists in the Forms or Ideas. All existent empirical particulars take their reality from them. Thus, all white things are white because they participate in the Form or Idea of whiteness. This Form of whiteness is not itself white, but is the formula for whiteness as it were. Similarly, all occurrences of salt are salt only because they participate in the Idea of saltiness or are instances of NaCl, the formula for salt. The only reason we are able to know anything is that we recognize Ideas or Forms (some would say universals) in the particulars. Without knowledge of the Ideas we would be unable to abstract from what is experienced and formulate any understanding. In Plato's view, the soul knows the Forms because it was in contact with them before entering this world of sense experience and particulars. Augustine, since he did not accept the preexistence of the soul, took a different approach. God impresses the Forms upon the mind of the individual, thus making it possible to recognize these qualities in particulars, and giving the mind criteria for abstracting and for evaluating. Whereas Plato believed that we recognize the Forms because of a one-time experience in the past, Augustine believed that God is constantly impressing these concepts upon the mind.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine notes that, contrary to popular opinion, there are three, not two, components in the process of gaining knowledge. There must, of course, be the knower and the object known. In addition, there must be the medium of knowledge. If we are to hear, there must be a medium (e.g., air) to conduct the sound waves. Sound cannot be transmitted in a vacuum. In the same fashion, we cannot see without the medium of light. In total darkness there is no sight, even though a person capable of seeing and an object capable of being seen may be present. And so it is with respect to all knowledge: in addition to the knower and the object of knowledge there must be some means of access to the Ideas or Forms, or there will be no knowledge. This holds true for sense perception, reflection, and every other kind of knowing. Thus, God is the third party in the process of gaining knowledge, for he constantly illuminates the mind by impressing the Forms or Ideas upon it. Knowledge of Scripture is of this same fashion. Illumination as to the meaning and truth of the Bible is simply a special instance of God's activity in the general process of man's acquisition of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

While Augustine has given account of the process by which we gain knowledge, he has not differentiated here between the Christian and the non-Christian. Two brief observations will point up the problems in this

11. Augustine *The City of God* 9. 16.

12. Augustine *Soliloquies* 1. 12; *De libero arbitrio* 2. 12. 34.

approach: (1) Augustine's epistemology is not consistent with his anthropology, according to which man is radically sinful; and (2) he fails to take into account the biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit performs a special work in relationship to believers.

#### *The View of Daniel Fuller*

Daniel Fuller has propounded a novel view of what precisely is involved in the Holy Spirit's work of illumination. This view appears to be based exclusively on 1 Corinthians 2:13–14, and in particular the clause, "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God." Fuller maintains that what is involved here is not understanding of the biblical text, but acceptance of its teachings. He regards δέχομαι as the crucial word, for it denotes not merely reception of God's teachings, but willing, positive acceptance. Thus, the problem of unspiritual man is not that he does not understand what the Bible says, but that he is unwilling to follow its teachings. Illumination, then, is the process by which the Holy Spirit turns man's will around to accept God's teachings.

Proceeding on his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:14 as signifying that the unbeliever's basic problem is his unwillingness to accept God's teaching, Fuller draws the unwarranted conclusion that sin has seriously affected man's will, but not his reason. This means, says Fuller, that an objective, descriptive biblical theologian will be better able to get at the meaning of a text than will a theologian who regards the Bible as in some way authoritative. The former will not be as affected by subjective factors, since he is concerned only to ascertain what Jesus or Paul taught. He is not in any sense obligated to follow or obey those teachings. The believer, on the other hand, may find a collision between the teaching of the Bible and his own presuppositions. He will be tempted, unknowingly perhaps, to read back into the text a meaning which he expects to find there. His very commitment to Scripture makes misunderstanding it more likely.<sup>13</sup>

There are severe difficulties with Fuller's view that illumination is the Holy Spirit's working with man's will (and only his will). Apart from the fact that Fuller bases his view on but a single portion of Scripture, he has assumed that only man's will, not his reason, is affected by sin. Because the unbeliever's understanding is not corrupted by sin, and because he, unlike the believer, has no personal stake in what Scripture says, he can be dispassionate and get at the real meaning of the biblical

13. Daniel Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 189–98.

text. But is this really so? How many unbelievers are really this dispassionate or uninvolving? One who examines the teachings of Jesus must have some interest in them. May not that interest in itself incline one to find a meaning there which he finds more acceptable than the actual meaning? On the other hand, the very commitment of the believer gives him a more serious interest in and concern for the Bible. This commitment may involve a willingness to follow the Scripture wherever it leads. The seriousness of the Christians belief that the Bible is God's Word should make him all the more diligent in seeking faithfully to determine its true meaning. If one has accepted Christ as Lord, will he not be desirous of ascertaining precisely what the Lord has declared? Finally, the biblical texts (cited on pp. 248-49) which indicate that the unbeliever does not accept, at least in part, because he does not understand, and that the Holy Spirit opens up both heart and mind, seem difficult to square with Fuller's view that sin has not seriously affected man's reason, only his will.

#### *The View of John Calvin*

John Calvin's view of illumination is more adequate than that of either Augustine or Fuller. Calvin, of course, believed in and taught total depravity. This means that the whole of human nature, including reason, has been adversely affected by the fall. Man in the natural state is unable to recognize and respond to divine truth. When regeneration takes place, however, the "spectacles of faith" vastly improve one's spiritual eyesight. Even after regeneration, however, there is need for continuing progressive growth, which we usually call sanctification. In addition, the Holy Spirit works internally in the life of the believer, witnessing to the truth and countering the effects of sin so the inherent meaning of the Bible can be seen. This view of illumination seems most in harmony with the biblical teachings, and therefore is advocated here.<sup>14</sup>

#### **The Bible, Reason, and the Spirit**

At this point arises a question concerning the relationship between biblical authority and reason. Is there not the possibility of some conflict here? Ostensibly the authority is the Bible, but various means of interpretation are brought to bear upon the Bible to elicit its meaning. If reason is the means of interpretation, is not reason, rather than the

14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapters 7 and 9.

Bible, the real authority, since it in effect comes to the Bible from a position of superiority?

Here a distinction must be drawn between legislative authority and judicial authority. In the federal government, the houses of Congress produce legislation, but the judiciary (ultimately the Supreme Court) decides what the legislation means. They are separate branches of government, each with its own appropriate authority.

This seems to be a good way to think of the relationship between Scripture and reason. Scripture is our supreme legislative authority. It gives us the content of our belief and of our code of behavior and practice. Reason does not tell us the content of our belief. It does not discover truth. Even what we learn from the general revelation is still a matter of revelation rather than a logical deduction through natural theology. Of course, content obtained from the general revelation is necessarily quite broad in scope and merely supplementary to the special revelation.

When we come to determine what the message means, however, and, at a later stage, assess whether it is true, we must utilize the power of reasoning. We must employ the best methods of interpretation or hermeneutics. And then we must decide whether the Christian belief system is true by rationally examining and evaluating the evidences. This we term apologetics. While there is a dimension of the self-explanatory within Scripture, Scripture alone will not give us the meaning of Scripture. There is therefore no inconsistency in regarding Scripture as our supreme authority in the sense that it tells us what to do and believe, and employing various hermeneutical and exegetical methods to determine its meaning.

We have noted that illumination by the Holy Spirit helps the Scripture reader or hearer understand the Bible and creates the conviction that it is true and is the Word of God. This, however, should not be regarded as a substitute for the use of hermeneutical methods. These methods play a complementary, not competitive role. A view of authority emphasizing the subjective component relies almost exclusively upon the inner witness of the Spirit. A view emphasizing the objective component regards the Bible alone as the authority; it relies on methods of interpretation to the neglect of the inner witness of the Spirit. The Spirit of God, however, frequently works through means rather than directly. He creates certainty of the divine nature of Scripture by providing evidences which reason can evaluate. He also gives understanding of the text through the exegetes work of interpretation. Even Calvin, with his strong emphasis upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, called attention to the *indicia* of the credibility of Scripture,<sup>15</sup> and in his commentaries used

15. Ibid., book 1, chapter 8.

the best of classical scholarship to get at the meaning of the Bible. Thus, the exegete and the apologist will use the very best methods and data, but will do so with a reiterated prayer for the Holy Spirit to work through these means.

### Tradition and Authority

**N**ow that we have examined the relationship between the Bible and reason, we must ask how tradition relates to the matter of authority. Does it function as a legislative authority, supplying content to the Christian faith? There are some who believe that revelation continued in the history of the church, so that the opinions of the church fathers carry a considerable authoritative weight. Others view the role of tradition as less formal, but give a considerable respect or even veneration to the Fathers, if for no other reason than that they stood closer to the original revelation, and hence were better able to understand and explain it than are we who live so many centuries removed from the events. Some groups, particularly the free churches, ostensibly repudiate any use of tradition, eschewing it in favor of a total reliance upon Scripture.

It should be noted that even those who disavow tradition are frequently affected by tradition, albeit in a somewhat different form. The president of a Baptist seminary once said with tongue in cheek: "We Baptists do not follow tradition. But we are bound by our historic Baptist position!" Tradition need not necessarily be old, although it must at least be old enough to be retained and transmitted. A tradition may be of recent origin. Indeed, at some point all traditions were of recent origin. Some of the popular speakers and leaders in Christian circles create their own tradition. As a matter of fact, certain key expressions of theirs may be virtually canonized among their followers.

There is a positive value to tradition: it can assist us to understand the Scripture and its application. The Fathers do have something to say, but their writings must be viewed as commentaries upon the text, not as biblical text itself. We should consult them as we do other commentaries. Thus, they function as judicial authorities. Their authority comes from their utilization and elucidation of Scripture. They must never be allowed to displace Scripture. Whenever a tradition, whether it is a teaching of ancient origin or of a recent popular leader, comes into conflict with the meaning of the Bible, the tradition must give way to the Scripture.

### Historical and Normative Authoritativeness

One other distinction needs to be drawn and elaborated. It concerns the way in which the Bible is authoritative for us. The Bible is certainly

authoritative in telling us what God's will was for certain individuals and groups within the biblical period. The question being considered here is, Is what was binding upon those people also binding upon us?

It is necessary to distinguish between two types of authority: historical and normative. The Bible informs us as to what God commanded of the people in the biblical situation and what he expects of us. Insofar as the Bible teaches us what occurred and what the people were commanded in biblical times, it is historically authoritative. But is it also normatively authoritative? Are we bound to carry out the same actions as were expected of those people? Here one must be careful not to identify too quickly God's will for those people with his will for us. It will be necessary to determine what is the permanent essence of the message, and what is the temporary form of its expression. The reader will recall that some guidelines were given in our chapter on contemporizing the faith (pp. 120-24). It is quite possible for something to be historically authoritative without being normatively authoritative.

---

---

## 1 PART THREE

### What God Is Like

- 12. The Greatness of God
  - 13. The Goodness of God
  - 14. God's Nearness and Distance: Immanence and Transcendence
  - 15. God's Three-in-Oneness: The Trinity
- 

## The Greatness of God

The Nature of Attributes  
Classifications of Attributes  
Attributes of Greatness  
Spirituality  
Personality  
Life  
Infinity  
Constancy

**T**he doctrine of God is the central point for much of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived. It lends a particular coloration to one's style of ministry and philosophy of life.

Problems or difficulties on two levels make it evident that there is a need for a correct understanding of God. First is the popular or practical level. In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips has pointed out some common distorted understandings of God.<sup>1</sup> Some people think of God as a kind of celestial policeman who looks for opportunities to

1. J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

pounce upon erring and straying persons. A popular country song enunciates this view: "God's gonna get you for that; God's gonna get you for that. Ain't no use to run and hide, 'cuz he knows where you're at!" Insurance companies, with their references to "acts of God"-always catastrophic occurrences-seem to have a powerful, malevolent being in mind. The opposite view, that God is grandfatherly, is also prevalent. Here God is conceived of as an indulgent, kindly old gentleman who would never want to detract from humans' enjoyment of life. These and many other false conceptions of God need to be corrected, if our spiritual lives are to have any real meaning and depth.

Problems on a more sophisticated level also point out the need for a correct view of God. The biblical understanding of God has often been problematic. In the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity created special tension and debate. While that particular topic has not totally ceased to present difficulty, other issues have become prominent in our day. One of these concerns God's relationship to the creation. Is he so separate and removed from the creation (transcendent) that he does not work through it and hence nothing can be known of him from it? Or is he to be found within human society and the processes of nature? Specific questions which have arisen in connection with this issue are: Does God work through the process of evolution? and Must God's transcendence be thought of primarily in spatial categories? Another major issue pertains to the nature of God. Is he fixed and unchanging in essence? Or does he grow and develop like the rest of the universe, as process theology contends? And then there are the matters raised by the theology of hope, which has suggested that God is to be thought of primarily in relationship to the future rather than the past. These and other issues call for clear thinking and careful enunciation of the understanding of God.

Many errors have been made in attempts to understand God, some of them opposite in nature. One is an excessive analysis, in which God is submitted to a virtual autopsy. The attributes of God are laid out and classified in a fashion similar to the approach taken in an anatomy textbook.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to make the study of God an excessively speculative matter; and in that case the speculative conclusion itself, instead of a closer relationship with him, becomes the end. This should not be so. Rather, the study of God's nature should be seen as a means to a more accurate understanding of him and hence a closer personal relationship with him. Then there need not be an eschewing of inquiry into, and reflection upon, what God is like. And then there will be no temptation

2. E.g., Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint).

to slip into the opposite error: so generalizing the conception of God that our response becomes merely a warm feeling toward what Phillips called the "oblong blur" (God unfocused),<sup>3</sup> or what some have called "belief in the great whatever." Inquiry into the nature of God, then, should be neither a speculative pressing beyond what God has revealed, nor a mystical leap toward a hazy, undefined something.

### The Nature of Attributes

When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature. We are not referring here to the acts which he performs, such as creating, guiding, and preserving, nor to the corresponding roles he plays-Creator, Guide, Preserver.

The attributes are qualities of the entire Godhead. They should not be confused with *properties*, which, technically speaking, are the distinctive characteristics of the various persons of the Trinity. Properties are functions (general), activities (more specific), or acts (most specific) of the individual members of the Godhead.

The attributes are permanent qualities. They cannot be gained or lost. They are intrinsic. Thus, holiness is not an attribute (a permanent, inseparable characteristic) of Adam, but it is of God. God's attributes are essential and inherent dimensions of his very nature.

While our understanding of God is undoubtedly filtered through our own mental framework, his attributes are not our conceptions projected upon him. They are objective characteristics of his nature. In every biblical case where God's attributes are described, it is evident they are part of his very nature. While the author often expresses his reaction or response to these attributes, the attributes and the response are quite clearly distinguished from one another.

The attributes are inseparable from the being or essence of God. Some earlier theologies thought of the attributes as somehow adhering to or being at least in some way distinguishable from the underlying substance or being or essence.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, this idea was based upon the Aristotelian conception of substance and attribute. Some other theologies have gone to the opposite extreme, virtually denying that God has an essence. Here the attributes are pictured as a sort of collection of qualities. They are thought of as fragmentary parts or segments of God.<sup>5</sup>

3. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, pp. 63-66.

4. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, p. 158.

5. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*

It is better to conceive of the attributes of God as his nature, not as a collection of fragmentary parts nor as something in addition to his essence. Thus, God is his love, holiness, and power. These are but different ways of viewing the unified being, God. God is richly complex, and these conceptions are merely attempts to grasp different objective aspects or facets of his being.

When we speak of the incomprehensibility of God, then, we do not mean that there is an unknown being or essence beyond or behind his attributes. Rather, we mean that we do not know his qualities or his nature completely and exhaustively. We know God only as he has revealed himself. While his self-revelation is doubtless consistent with his full nature and accurate, it is not an exhaustive revelation. Further, we do not totally understand or know comprehensively that which he has revealed to us of himself. Thus, there is, and always will be, an element of mystery regarding God.

### Classifications of Attributes

1. In attempts to better understand God, various systems of classifying his attributes have been devised. One system found especially in the writings of Reformed theologians speaks of communicable and incommunicable attributes.<sup>6</sup> The communicable attributes are those qualities of God for which at least a partial counterpart can be found in his human creations. Here there are love, which, while infinite in God, is found at least in partial form in man, and even omnipotence, for man has at least a degree of power. The incommunicable attributes, on the other hand, are those unique qualities for which no counterpart can be found in humans. One example of this is omnipresence. God is everywhere simultaneously. Even with jet and rocket travel, man is incapable of being everywhere simultaneously.

2. A second pair of categories is the immanent or intransitive and the emanant or transitive qualities. The former are those which remain within God's own nature. His spirituality is an example. Emanant or transitive attributes are those which go out from and operate outside the nature of God, affecting the creation. God's mercy is a transitive attribute. It makes no sense to think or speak of God's mercy apart from the created beings to whom he shows mercy.<sup>7</sup>

3. Closely related to the immediately preceding classification and sometimes combined with it is the distinction between absolute and

6. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 55.

7. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 247-49.

relative qualities. The absolute attributes of God are those which he has in himself. He has always possessed these qualities independently of the objects of his creation. The relative attributes, on the other hand, are those which are manifested through his relationship to other subjects and inanimate objects. Infinity is an absolute attribute; eternity and omnipresence are relative attributes representing the relationship of his unlimited nature to the finite objects of the creation. A problem attaching to this classification concerns the status of these relative attributes prior to God's act of creating. Did God not have these until he created, so that the divine nature at that time underwent some sort of change? Or are the relative attributes only the *application* of the absolute attributes to settings in which created objects are present?<sup>8</sup>

4. Our final classification is that of natural and moral attributes. The moral attributes are those which in the human context would relate to the concept of rightness (as opposed to wrongness). Holiness, love, mercy, and faithfulness are examples. Natural attributes are the non-moral superlatives of God, such as his knowledge and power.<sup>9</sup> Some object to this classification on the basis that the moral attributes are just as "natural" as the natural attributes, in that they are an integral part of the nature of God.<sup>10</sup>

With some modifications, it is the last system of classification that will be employed in this study. Instead of natural and moral, however, we will use the terms attributes of *greatness* and attributes of *goodness*. We turn first to the qualities of greatness, which include spirituality, personality, life, infinity, and constancy.

### Attributes of Greatness

#### Spirituality

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

One consequence of God's spirituality is that he does not have the limitations involved with a physical body. For one thing, he is not limited

8. Ibid.

9. Edgar Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1927), p. 222.

10. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 55.

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

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

In biblical times, the doctrine of God's spirituality was a counter to the practice of idolatry and of nature worship. God, being spirit, could not be represented by any physical object or likeness. That he is not restricted by geographical location also countered the idea that God could be contained and controlled. In our day, the Mormons maintain that not only God the Son, but also the Father has a physical body, although the Holy Spirit does not. Indeed, Mormonism contends that an immaterial body cannot exist.<sup>11</sup> This is clearly contradicted by the Bible's teaching on the spirituality of God.

#### *Personality*

While it might seem to some that spirituality implies personality, this does not necessarily follow. Georg Hegel, whose philosophy influenced much of nineteenth-century theology, believed in the Absolute, a great spirit or mind which encompasses all things within itself. In Hegel's metaphysics, reality as a whole is one great thinking mind, and all of what most people consider to be finite objects and persons are simply thoughts in the mind of the Absolute. There really is no personal self-consciousness about this being, however, no personality to which one can relate.<sup>12</sup> Nor is there any personal deity in a number of Eastern

11. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, 36th ed. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), p. 48.

12. Georg Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Humanities, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 90–105.

religions. In Hinduism, reality is *Brahma*, the whole, of which we are individual parts or *Atman*. One does not relate to reality by turning outward, as to an individual person. One rather withdraws, inward, through a process of contemplation. The aim of this process is to lose one's own individual identity and self-consciousness, to be in effect absorbed into the whole. *Nirvana* is the stage at which all individual striving ceases, and one becomes simply at rest.<sup>13</sup>

The biblical view is quite different. Here God is personal. He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings.

That God has personality is indicated in several ways in Scripture. One is the fact that God has a name. He has a name which he assigns to himself and by which he reveals himself. When Moses wonders how he should respond when the Israelites will ask the name of the God who has sent him, God identifies himself as "I am" or "I will be" (Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord-Exod. 3:14). By this he demonstrates that he is not an abstract, unknowable being, or a nameless force. Nor is this name used merely to refer to God or to describe him. It is also used to address him. Genesis 4:26 indicates that men began to call upon the name of the Lord, and Genesis 12:8 refers to Abraham's building an altar and calling upon his name. Psalm 20 speaks of boasting in the name of the Lord (v. 7) and calling upon him (v. 9). The name is to be spoken and treated respectfully, according to Exodus 20:7. The great respect accorded to the name is indicative of the personality of God. If a place or object were involved, such respect would not be necessary. With persons, however, it is otherwise. Hebrew names were not mere labels to distinguish one person from another. In our impersonal society, this may seem to be the case. Names are seldom chosen for their meaning; rather, parents choose a name because they happen to like it, or it is currently popular. The Hebrew approach was quite different, however. A name was chosen very carefully, and with attention to its significance. Whereas in our society a number might serve as effectively as a name and perhaps even better, the Hebrews considered the name an embodiment of the person bearing it.<sup>14</sup>

The particular names that God assumes are indicative of the personal aspect of his nature. They refer primarily to his relationship with persons rather than with nature. God is not depicted as working principally

13. G. T. Manley, "Hinduism," in *The World's Religions*, ed. J. N. D. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 107.

14. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 40–45.

with nature. This appears to be the case, to be sure, in certain passages such as the Psalms. There is not, however, the kind of emphasis on nature such as is found in many surrounding religions. The emphasis, rather, is on his concern with directing and shaping the lives of his worshipers, both individually and socially.

A further indication of the personal nature of God is the activity in which he engages. He is depicted in the Bible as knowing and communicating with human persons. In the earliest picture of his relationship with man (Gen. 3), God comes to and talks with Adam and Eve; the impression is given that this had been a regular practice. Although this representation of God is undoubtedly anthropomorphic, it nonetheless teaches that he is a person who relates to persons as such. He is depicted as having all of the capacities associated with personality: he knows, he feels, he wills, he acts.

There are a number of resulting implications. Because God is a person (indeed, he is pictured as our Father), the relationship we have with him has a dimension of warmth and understanding. God is not a bureau or a department; he is not a machine or a computer that automatically supplies the needs of people. He is a knowing, loving, good Father. He can be approached. He can be spoken to, and he in turn speaks.

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

God is to be treated as a being, not an object or force. He is not something to be used or manipulated. While our thinking and practice may at times betray such a view, it is not consistent with the biblical picture. The idea that God is simply something to be used or something that solves our problems and meets our needs is not religion. Such attempts to harness him belong, rather, to the realm of magic or technology.

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

supremely but exclusively. God as a person is to be loved for what he is, not for what he can do for us.

### *Life*

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

This characteristic of God is also prominent in the contrast frequently drawn between him and other gods. He is depicted as the living God, as contrasted with inanimate objects of metal or stone. Jeremiah 10:10 refers to him as the true God, the living God, who controls nature. "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth," on the other hand, "shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens" (v. 11). John 5:26 speaks of God as having life in himself, and 1 Thessalonians 1:9 draws a contrast between the idols from which the Thessalonians had turned and the "living and true God."

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

Moreover, the continuation of God's existence does not depend upon anything outside of himself. All other creatures, insofar as they are alive, need something to sustain that life. Nourishment, warmth, protection, all are necessary. In Matthew 6:25–33, Jesus notes that the birds and the flowers depend upon the Father's provision. With God, however, there is no indication of such a need. On the contrary, Paul denies that God needs anything or is served by human hands (Acts 17:25). He is, regardless of whether anything else is. Just as he existed before anything else came into being, so he also can continue to exist independent of everything else.

While God is independent in the sense of not needing anything else for his existence, this is not to say that he is aloof, indifferent, or unconcerned. God relates to us, but it is by his choice that he thus relates, not because he is compelled by some need. That he does so relate to us is therefore so much the more a cause for glorifying him. He has acted and continues to act out of *agape*, unselfish love, rather than out of need.

Sometimes the life of God is described as self-caused. It is preferable to refer to him as the uncaused one. His very nature is to exist. It is not necessary for him to will his own existence. For God not to exist would be logically contradictory. We are not here reintroducing the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God. Rather, we are saying merely that if God is as he is described in Scripture, he must exist.

A proper understanding of this aspect of God's nature should free us from the idea that God needs us. God has chosen to use us to accomplish his purposes, and in that sense he now needs us. He could, however, if he so chose, have bypassed us. He could simply have been-without us; and he can, if he chooses, accomplish his purposes without us. It is to our gain that he permits us to know and serve him, and it is our loss if we reject that opportunity. Sometimes we hear expressions of what might be referred to as the "poor God" syndrome: if God does not alter his ways and treat us differently, he will lose us, to his great deprivation. But God does not need us. He is not fortunate to have us; it is we who are the fortunate and favored ones.

We live in a world of contingency. So much of what we know and believe is conditioned by the word *if*. We will live another ten years, if our health does not fail. We will retire in comfort, if our investments and pension program do not fail. We will be safe, if the defenses of our government do not fail. We will enjoy the fellowship of our friends, if something does not happen to them. We will get to our next appointment, if our automobile does not break down. But with God it is different. There is no "if" attached here. There is no need to say, "God will be, if. . ." God is and will be, period! There is one sure thing, and that is that there is a God and there always will be.

#### *Infinity*

God is infinite. This means not only that God is unlimited, but that he is unlimitable. In this respect, God is unlike anything we experience. Even those things that common sense once told us are infinite or boundless are now seen to have limits. Energy at an earlier time seemed inexhaustible. We have in recent years become aware that the types of

energy with which we are particularly familiar have rather sharp limitations, and we are approaching those limits considerably more rapidly than we imagined. So also the ocean once seemed to be an endless source of food, and a dumping place so vast that it could not be contaminated. Yet we are becoming aware that its resources and its ability to absorb pollution are both finite. The infinity of God, however, speaks of a limitless being.

The infinity of God may be thought of from several angles. We think first in terms of space. Here we have what has traditionally been referred to as immensity and omnipresence. God is not subject to limitations of space. By this we do not mean merely the limitation of being in a particular place—if an object is in one place it cannot be in another. Rather, it is improper to think of God as present in space at all. All finite objects have a location. They are somewhere. This necessarily prevents their being somewhere else. The greatness of finite objects is measured by how much space they occupy. With God, however, the question of whereness or location is not applicable. God is the one who brought space (and time) into being. He was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. There can be no plotting of his location on a set of coordinates. This seems to be a function of his immateriality or spirituality. There is no physical body to be located at a particular place. Consider here Paul's statement that God does not dwell in man-made shrines, because he is the Lord of heaven and earth; he made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24–25).

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

Here as in so many other respects there is a sharp contrast between God and the false gods. It is clearly seen in the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. One of the taunts which Elijah hurled at his opponents when Baal failed to answer was that perhaps he was on a journey. If Baal was off somewhere else, he could not also be there to send down fire. Jehovah, however, does not have this problem. He can be in countless places and involved with many different situations simultaneously.

For many of us, certain places have sacred connotations. We may have received special blessing from God when we were in a particular geographical location. If, upon moving to another location, things do not go as well, we may be tempted to think that God is not there. Or a particular house of worship or a special place within a building may have taken on extra significance because of God's past working. We may find it difficult to adjust to a change, but the problem is psychological, not theological. God is not localized. He has not been left behind. He is available to us wherever we may be. We are not restricted to worshiping him in a sanctuary. It is good to assemble with other believers in a regular place of worship, but God is not prevented from meeting with us because we have been unable to come to this special place. Nor does God have any difficulty dealing with needs and problems which arise in widely differing locations at the same time. He does not, however, move from one place to another as a sort of divine superman who flies at infinite speed. Rather, he simply has access to the whole of the creation al all times.

God is also infinite in relation to time. Time does not apply to him. He was before time began. The question, How old is God? is simply inappropriate. He is no older now than a year ago, for infinity plus one is no more than infinity. He simply is not restricted by the dimension of time.

God is the one who always is. He was, he is, he will be. Psalm 90:1-2 says, "LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." Jude 25 says, "To the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever." A similar thought is found in Ephesians 3:21. The use of expressions such as "the first and the last" and the "Alpha and Omega" serve to convey the same idea (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

God is timeless. He does not grow or develop. There are no variations in his nature at different points within his existence. The interests, knowledge, activities, and even personalities of humans change from childhood to youth to adulthood to old age. With God there is no such change, however. He has always been what he is. (In the last part of this chapter we will discuss his changelessness and constancy.)

The fact that God is not bound by time does not mean that he is not conscious of the succession of points of time. He knows what is now occurring in human experience. He is aware that events occur in a particular order. Yet he is equally aware of all points of that order simultaneously. This transcendence over time has been likened to a person who sits on a steeple while he watches a parade. He sees all parts of the parade at the different points on the route rather than only what is going past him at the moment. He is aware of what is passing each point of the route. So God also is aware of what is happening, has happened, and will happen at each point in time. Yet at any given point within time he is also conscious of the distinction between what is now occurring, what has been, and what will be.<sup>15</sup>

There is a successive order to the acts of God and there is a logical order to his decisions, yet there is no temporal order to his willing. His deliberation and willing take no time. He has from all eternity determined what he is now doing. Thus his actions are not in any sense reactions to developments. He does not get taken by surprise or have to formulate contingency plans. The theology of hope has stressed the transcendence of God over time by thinking of him primarily as the God of the future. While there has been a tendency in traditional theology to think of God in terms of past events, the theology of hope emphasizes what he will be and do.<sup>16</sup>

The infinity of God may also be considered with respect to objects of knowledge. His understanding is immeasurable (Ps. 147:5). The writer of Proverbs says that the eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good (Prov. 15:3). Jesus said that not a sparrow can fall to the ground without the Father's will (Matt. 10:29), and that even the hairs of the disciples' heads are all numbered (v. 30). Hebrews 4:13 says that "before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do." We are all completely transparent before God. He sees and knows us totally. He knows every truth, even those not yet discovered by man, for it was he who built them into the creation. And he therefore knows every genuine possibility, even when they seem limitless in number.

A further factor, in the light of this knowledge, is the wisdom of God. By this is meant that God acts in the light of all of the facts and in light of correct values. Knowing all things, God knows what is good. In Romans 11:33 Paul eloquently assesses God's knowledge and wisdom: "0 the

15. See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1962), especially his criticism of Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

16. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" The psalmist describes God's works as having all been made in wisdom (Ps. 104:24).

When we humans act, we sometimes act unwisely simply because we do not have all the facts. Later developments may prove our actions to have been unwise. Had we known certain relevant facts, we would undoubtedly have acted differently. We may choose to drive on a road which appears to be in excellent condition, unaware that it deteriorates further ahead. Sometimes our perspective is distorted or limited. Optical illusions are an example, as is a photograph taken of someone whose feet were nearer the camera than was the rest of his body. The photograph makes the person appear to have gigantic feet. In addition, lack of experience may cause erroneous actions or decisions. A child, for example, if given the choice of a nickel or dime, will often take the nickel, simply because it is larger.

God, however, has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to revise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have. One can therefore pray confidently, knowing that God will not grant something that is not good. Even though we are not wise enough to see all of the facts, or the results to which our ideas or planned actions may lead, we can trust God to know what is best.

Finally, God's infinity may also be considered in relationship to what is traditionally referred to as the omnipotence of God. By this we mean that God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power. This is taught in Scripture in several ways. There is evidence of God's unlimited power in one of his names, *אֱלֹהֶיךָ Shaddai* ('el Shaddai). When God appeared to Abraham to reaffirm his covenant, he identified himself by saying, "I am God Almighty" (Gen. 17:1). We also see God's omnipotence in his overcoming apparently insurmountable problems. In Genesis 18:10–14, for example, we read of God's promise that Sarah would have a son, even though she was past the age of childbirth. This promise had been given twenty-five years earlier, and it had not yet been fulfilled. When Sarah heard the promise again, she laughed. The Lord responded, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Similarly, the promise in Jeremiah 32:15 that fields will once again be bought and sold in Judah seems incredible in view of the impending fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Jeremiah's faith, however, is strong: "Ah Lord God! . . . Nothing is too hard for thee" (v. 17). And after speaking of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus responds to his

disciples' question as to who can then be saved: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

This power of God is manifested in several different ways. References to the power of God over nature are common, especially in the Psalms, often with an accompanying statement about God's having created the whole universe. In biblical times this power over nature was frequently demonstrated in miracles—from the birth of Isaac, the plagues in Egypt, and the floating axhead in the time of Elisha (2 Kings 6:5–7), to the nature miracles of Jesus, such as stilling the storm (Mark 4:35–41) and walking on the water (Matt. 14:22–33). God's power is also evident in his control of the course of history. Paul spoke of God's "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation" for all peoples (Acts 17:26). Perhaps most amazing in many ways is God's power in human life and personality. The real measure of divine power is not the ability of God to create or to lift a large rock. In many ways, changing human personality is more difficult. Whereas giant machinery can accomplish extraordinary types of physical work, it is not so easy to alter human nature. Yet, with respect to salvation Jesus said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). We never need despair out of a belief that it is impossible to change human nature, whether our own or that of others, because God can work effectively in even this area.

What all of this means is that God's will is never frustrated. What he chooses to do, he accomplishes, for he has the ability to do it. Psalm 115:3 says to the unbelievers, "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases." Three elements must be present if we are to accomplish an ethical action. There must be the knowledge of what is to be done, the will to do it, and the ability to do what we have purposed. We may fail at any of these points. We may not know what is the right thing to do, or may know it but not choose to do it, or may know and choose it, but be unable to do it. However, three factors of God's nature always come together to produce correct action: he is wise, so that he knows what to do; he is good, and thus he chooses to do the right; he is powerful, and therefore is capable of doing what he wills to do.

There are, however, certain qualifications of this all-powerful character of God. He cannot arbitrarily do anything whatsoever that we may conceive of. He can do only those things which are proper objects of his power. Thus, he cannot do the logically absurd or contradictory. He cannot make square circles or triangles with four corners. He cannot undo what happened in the past, although he may wipe out its effects or even the memory of it. He cannot act contrary to his nature—he cannot be cruel or unconcerned. He cannot fail to do what he has promised. In reference to God's having made a promise and having confirmed it with

an oath, the writer to the Hebrews says: "So that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we ... might have strong encouragement" (Heb. 6:18). All of these "inabilities," however, are not weaknesses, but strengths. The inability to do evil or to lie or to fail is a mark of positive strength rather than of failure.

Another aspect of the power of God is that he is free. While God is bound to keep his promises, he was not initially under any compulsion to make those promises. Nothing in Scripture suggests that God's will is determined or bound by any external factors. On the contrary, it is common to attribute his decisions and actions to the "good pleasure of his will" (*εὐδοκία*). Paul in particular attributes them to God's will (Eph. 1:5, 9; Phil. 2:13). God's decisions and actions are not determined by consideration of any factors outside himself. They are simply a matter of his own free choice.

### Constancy

In several places in Scripture, God is described as unchanging. In Psalm 102, the psalmist contrasts God's nature with the heavens and the earth: "They will perish, but thou dost endure; ... they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have no end" (vv. 26-27). Psalm 33:11 stresses the permanence of God's thoughts: "The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations." And God himself says that although his people have turned aside from his statutes, "I the LORD do not change" (Mal. 3:6). James says that with God "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).

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

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

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

some interpretations of the doctrine of divine constancy, expressed as immutability, have actually drawn heavily upon the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive. But the biblical view is not that God is static but stable. He is active and dynamic, but in a way which is stable and consistent with his nature. What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfil his commitments. The believer can rely upon that (Lam. 3:22-23; 1 John 1:9).

In our day, the idea of an unchanging God has been challenged by the movement known as process theology. Its fundamental thesis is that reality is processive. This is not to say that everything is in process. There are unchanging principles of process and unchanging abstract forms, but to be real is to be in process.<sup>17</sup>

Further, reality is organic or interrelated. Rather than thinking of concrete events and entities in terms of what they are in and of themselves, we must think of them in relationship to all that precedes. Whereas independence has often been thought of as desirable, process theology stresses interdependence. It is not merely that interdependence is given primacy or priority as an ideal; it is an ontological characteristic. It is an inescapable fact of reality.<sup>18</sup>

Interdependence applies to God as well. God must not be seen as a being of impulsive, detached immutability. Rather, he is related to the

<sup>17</sup>. John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid., p. 21.

world and involved with it. The primary quality or attribute of God is love; it is the fullest expression of his relatedness to the world. According to the process theologians, God has traditionally been regarded as impassive: he does not really feel passion; he loves without passion.<sup>19</sup> But God must rather be viewed as having a genuinely sympathetic response to those he loves.

Here we are getting into what is sometimes called dipolar theism.<sup>20</sup> The two poles or aspects of God are, according to Charles Hartshorne, his unchanging abstract essence and his concrete actuality, or, in Alfred North Whitehead's terms, his primordial nature and his consequent nature. In his concrete actuality (consequent nature) God is responsive to and receptive of the processes of the world.<sup>21</sup> This places limitations upon the absoluteness of God. Divine omniscience means that at every moment of the divine life God knows all that is knowable at that given moment. However, in every moment of God's life there are new unforeseen happenings in the world which have become knowable only at that moment. God's knowledge processes with every new decision and action in the world. As a result, other traditional conceptions about God must also be modified. Divine sovereignty, for instance, is no longer to be regarded as absolute. Man is now to be viewed as taking a part in determining the future.\*\*

How shall we respond to this challenge? We may note that there is a large element of validity in process theology's criticism of some classical orthodoxy. To be sure, God has often been pictured as static, isolated from involvement with the world. That, we would maintain, is not the biblical view.

But in seeking to correct this error, the process theologians have overreacted. Dependence on the processes of the world compromises quite seriously the absolute or unqualified dimensions of God. While the Bible does picture God as involved with the world, it also pictures him as antedating the creation and having an independent status. Genuine transcendence, as taught in the Bible, excludes the type of limitations that process theology imposes. Further evaluation of the view that God is dependent on the processes of the world would entail an analysis of the process philosophy upon which it rests, and would go beyond the

19. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

20. Ibid., p. 47.

21. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 524, 530.

22. Daniel Day Williams, "How Does God Act? An Essay in Whitehead's Metaphysics," in *Process and Divinity: The Hartshorne Festschrift*, ed. William L. Reese and Eugene Freeman (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1964), p. 177.

scope of our interest here. Suffice it to say that, whatever the merits of this view may be, it cannot be considered, the biblical view.

There are additional problems. The process theologians have recognized that there must be aspects of reality that do not change. If that were not the case, their view would be contradictory and hence false, for the very theory of process would be displaced eventually. It would become relativized. But this matter of unchanging principles is never fully developed. What is their status? How do they relate to God? If there are principles of reality that do not change, may not something of the nature of God be similarly timeless and absolute?

Although process theology purports to view God as a personal being, unlike the impersonal unmoved mover of Greek metaphysics, it is questionable whether this is really the case. God seems to be little more than an aspect of reality. In what sense he is a personal, acting being is not made clear. Thus, while there is a valid point in process theology's objection to the adoption of some Greek metaphysical models by some elements within classical orthodoxy, the legitimate insight contained in that objection can be better presented by a faithful rendition of the biblical picture of God. This will avoid the accompanying drawbacks of process theology.

God is a great God. The realization of this fact stirred biblical writers such as the psalmists. And this realization stirs the believer today, causing him to join with the songwriter in proclaiming:

0 Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

# 13

## The Goodness of God

### Moral Qualities

Moral Purity  
Holiness  
Righteousness  
Justice  
integrity  
Genuineness  
Veracity  
Faithfulness  
Love  
Benevolence  
Grace  
Mercy  
Persistence

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

The Best Mode of Investigating God's Attributes

### Moral Qualities

If the qualities of greatness we described in the preceding chapter were God's only attributes, he might conceivably be an immoral or amoral being, exercising his power and knowledge in a capricious or

even cruel fashion. But what we are dealing with is a good God, one who can be trusted and loved. He has attributes of goodness as well as greatness. In this chapter we will consider his moral qualities, that is, the characteristics of God as a moral being. For convenient study, we will classify his basic moral attributes as purity, integrity, and love.

### **Moral Purity**

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

#### **1. Holiness**

There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. The first is his uniqueness. (This aspect of God's holiness could be considered another attribute of greatness, in this case with respect to moral matters.) He is totally separate from all of creation. This is what Louis Berkhof called the "majesty-holiness" of God.<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of God is affirmed in Exodus 15:11: "Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Similar expressions of the loftiness, the exaltedness, the splendor of God, are found in 1 Samuel 2:2 and Isaiah 57:15. Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The foundations of the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke. The seraphim cried out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:1-4). The Hebrew word for "holy" (*קדש—qadosh*) means "marked off" or "withdrawn from common, ordinary use." The verb from which it is derived suggests "to cut off" or "to separate." Whereas in the religions of the peoples around Israel the adjective *holy* was freely applied to objects, actions, and personnel involved in the worship, in Israel's covenant worship it was very freely used of the Deity himself.

The sacredness of God is often conveyed to objects and places associated with him. For example, in the incident of the burning bush Moses was told to take off his shoes since the ground on which he stood was holy (Exod. 3). In like manner, when God came down upon Mount Sinai, it was separated from the Israelite encampment. No one but Moses was to go up into the mountain or even touch the border of it (Exod. 19). Similar restrictions applied to the tabernacle and later the temple. The Most Holy Place was veiled off from the Holy Place (Exod. 26:33; 1 Kings 6:16). Access was barred to all but the high priest, and he entered only once a year. Proper reaction to God's holiness, his separateness, is one of

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 73.

awe, reverence, and silence. "Let them praise thy great and terrible name! Holy is he!" (Ps. 99:3).

The other aspect of God's holiness is his absolute purity or goodness. This means that he is untouched and unstained by the evil in the world. He does not in any sense participate in it. Note the way in which Habakkuk 1:13 addresses God: "Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong." James 1:13 says that God cannot be tempted with evil. In this respect God is totally unlike the gods of other religions. Those gods frequently engaged in the same type of sinful acts as did their followers. Jehovah, however, is free from such acts. Job 34:12 says, "Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice."

God's perfection is the standard for our moral character and the motivation for religious practice. The whole moral code follows from his holiness. The people of Israel were told, "For I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls upon the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45). The same thought is expressed in Leviticus 19:2 and Matthew 5:48. Because of the flawlessness of God, a similar quality is expected of those objects or persons set apart unto him. Priests are to be without any physical blemish. The same is true of sacrificial animals. Worshipers are not to bring defective animals, but rather perfect ones without any blemish (Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3).

We have here a very basic and important dimension of God's nature. God's holiness is emphasized throughout the whole Bible, but especially in the Old Testament depictions. Its importance is seen in both the number of times it is referred to and the emphasis with which it is taught. Some have suggested that it is the most important single attribute of God.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this is a legitimate or desirable deduction, holiness is at least a very important attribute of God. And it has far-reaching implications.

It is a point of repeated emphasis in the Bible that the believer is to be like God. Thus, because God is holy, they who are his followers are also to be holy. We have already noted the references in Leviticus 11:44-45 and Matthew 5:48. God not only is personally free from any moral wickedness or evil. He is unable to tolerate the presence of evil. He is, as it were, allergic to sin and evil. Those who are his must therefore seek the same holiness that is so basic to his own nature. Isaiah, upon seeing God, became very much aware of his own impurity. He despaired, "Woe

2. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 297.

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

Paul stresses the point that those whom God has called to be his people are therefore to separate themselves from unclean things and be perfectly holy (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). The same idea is found in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 and 4:7. In an evident reference to the Old Testament requirement of spotlessness and freedom from any blemish, Paul notes that the church is also to be completely holy: "that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). In addition to the realization that we must be holy, worship and reverence are also natural consequences of seeing God in his spotlessness and holiness. Psalm 99:9 says, "Extol the **LORD** our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the **LORD** our God is holy!" A very similar thought is found in Revelation 15:4: "Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy."

## 2. Righteousness

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

The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law which he himself has established. He conducts himself in conformity with what he expects of others. He is the expression in action of what he requires. Thus, God in his actions is described as doing right. For example, Abraham says to Jehovah, "Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). The Lord himself says, "I am the **LORD** who

practice[s] kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight" (Jer. 9:24). Because God is righteous, measuring up to the standard of his law, we can trust him. He is honest in his dealings. We need not be afraid to enter into a relationship with him.

A question which has been a topic of debate down through the history of Christian thought is, What makes certain actions right and others wrong? In medieval times one school of thought, the realists, maintained that God chooses the right because it is right.<sup>3</sup> What he calls good could not have been designated otherwise, for there is an intrinsic good in kindness and an inherent evil in cruelty. Another school of thought, the nominalists, asserted that it is God's choice which makes an action right. God does not choose an action because of some intrinsic value in it.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is his sovereign choice of that action which makes it right. He could have chosen otherwise; if he had done so, the good would be quite different from what it is. Actually, the biblical position falls between realism and nominalism. The right is not something arbitrary, so that cruelty and murder would have been good if God had so declared. In making decisions, God does follow an objective standard of right and wrong, a standard which is part of the very structure of reality. But that standard to which God adheres is not external to God—it is his own nature. He decides in accordance with reality, and that reality is himself.

In our saying, however, that God's law, his requirements of us, and his moral judgments are in accordance with his nature, and that his actions conform with his own standards, a further question appears to arise: Is God selfish? We have been taught that a grievous form of sin is selfishness-seeking one's own welfare and comfort to the disregard and even the detriment of others. Some would even go so far as to claim that selfishness is the root principle, the very basis, of sin.<sup>5</sup> Yet here God seems to be in violation of his own command against selfishness. For the highest goal of God is apparently his own glory. Is this not an instance of the very self-centeredness which God forbids and even condemns in others?

We need to look more closely at the sin of self-centeredness as we find it in human beings. The essence of the sin does not lie in preferring ourselves to others, but in preferring some finite thing to God, placing something of limited value in the place of the supreme value, the Lord. Thus, to be concerned for some other person rather than God is wrong, even though it might seem to be quite a selfless act on our own part. The first great commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, mind,

3. E.g., Anselm *Cur Deus homo* 1. 12.

4. William of Ockham, *Reportatio*, book 3, questions 13C, 12CCC.

5. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 567–73.

soul, and strength (Luke 10:27). The second command is to love our neighbor as ourselves. To put the second commandment in the place of the first is wrong and sinful.

Thus, for God to make his own glory the supreme objective is not in conflict with his command against self-centeredness. Indeed, making his glory the supreme objective actually fulfills the command. So then, God has not said in essence, "Do as I say, not as I do." As the highest value in the universe, the source from which all else derives, God must choose his own glory ahead of all else. As the only infinite being, this is what he must do. To put something else in the primary place would in effect be a case of idolatry.

### **3. Justice**

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

The Scripture makes clear that sin has definite consequences. These consequences must eventually come to pass, whether sooner or later. In Genesis 2:17 we read God's warning to Adam and Eve: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Similar warnings recur throughout the Scripture, including Paul's statement that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Deuteronomy 7:10, Psalm 58:11, and Romans 12:19 all indicate that God will punish sin, for sin intrinsically deserves to be punished. It is a disruption of the very structure of the divine spiritual economy, and this disruption or imbalance must necessarily be set right. Not only evil, but good as well will ultimately receive its rewards. Deuteronomy 7:9 expresses this very clearly: "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations."

The justice of God means that he is fair in the administration of his law. He does not show favoritism or partiality. Who a person is is not significant. What he has done or not done is the only consideration in the assigning of consequences or rewards. Evidence of God's fairness is that he condemned those judges in biblical times who, while charged to serve as his representatives, accepted bribes to alter their judgments (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:3; Amos 5:12). The reason for their condemnation was that

God himself, being just, expected the same sort of behavior from those who were to administer his law.

At times, however, the rule of God does not appear to be just. Those who lead sinful lives are not always punished, and the righteous frequently seem to go unrewarded. Psalm 73 reflects upon the apparent prosperity of the wicked. They are healthy and apparently free from the troubles that other men experience. This observation is frequently ours as well. In the past we often heard the slogan "crime does not pay." But crime frequently does pay, and sometimes quite handsomely! Leaders in organized crime often accumulate huge amounts of earthly wealth, and may be healthy as well, while some very virtuous believers may experience poverty, ill health, or the tragic death of loved ones. And this apparent inequity may go on for years. How can a just God allow this?

This problem is part of the larger problem of evil, which will receive extensive treatment in chapter 19. At this point, however, it will be helpful for us to note what the psalmist discovered. When he went into the sanctuary of God, he perceived the end of the wicked. He saw that they would ultimately be destroyed (Ps. 73:17-20, 27). He himself, on the other hand, would be guided by God's counsel, and would eventually be received to glory (v. 24). The justice of God must not be evaluated on a short-term basis. Within this life it will often be incomplete or imperfect. Earthly life is not all there is, however. There is a life beyond, and in the scope of all eternity, God's justice will be complete.<sup>6</sup>

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

### **Integrity**

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

#### **1. Genuineness**

The basic dimension of the divine integrity is God's genuineness. He is a real God. Many of the considerations adduced in connection with the attribute of life apply here as well. In contrast to the many false or

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 144-54.

spurious gods that Israel encountered, their Lord is the true God. His genuineness, his reality, is designated by the Greek adjective ἀληθινός, which corresponds to the Hebrew word אֶתְمָה ('emeth).

In Jeremiah 10, the prophet describes with considerable satire the objects which some men worship. They construct idols with their own hands, and then proceed to worship them, although these products of their own making are unable to speak or walk (v. 5). Of the Lord, however, it is said, "But the **LORD** is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King" (v. 10). In John 17:3, Jesus addresses the Father as the only true (ἀληθινός) God. There are similar references in 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 John 5:20; and Revelation 3:7 and 6:10.

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

## 2. Veracity

Veracity is the second dimension of God's truthfulness. God represents things as they really are. Whether he is speaking of himself or part of his creation, what God says is the way things really are. Samuel said to Saul, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent" (1 Sam. 15:29). Paul speaks of the God "who never lies" (Titus 1:2). And in Hebrews 6:18 we read that when God added his oath to his promise, there were "two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false." Jesus spoke of the word of God as being the truth (John 17:17, 19). We should note that these passages are affirming more than that God does not and will not lie. God *cannot lie*. Lying is contrary to his very nature.

Does veracity mean that what God says can always be trusted? Or does it mean simply that he does not knowingly tell an untruth? Is it possible that he might unknowingly tell an untruth, and thus what he says might be in error? Could error result from his not knowing the truth, or from knowing it incompletely? The answer to these questions is the omniscience of God. It combines with the veracity of God to guarantee to us the truth of everything he tells us.

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

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

## 3. Faithfulness

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

The faithfulness of God is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the pages of Scripture. God proved himself to be a God who always fulfills what he has said he will do. His promise to Abraham of a son came when Abraham and Sarah were seventy-five and sixty-five years of age respectively. Sarah was already past the age of childbearing and had proved to be barren. The promise was repeated over a period of twenty-five years; but without sign of the expected heir, even Abraham despaired of the promise's being fulfilled and took steps on his own to provide a son for himself (Ishmael). Yet God proved faithful—the son whom God had promised was born (Isaac). Years later, God commanded Abraham to put this son to death. Again God proved faithful by providing a substitute sacrifice. Likewise, that the people of Israel would one day possess the Promised Land seemed unlikely in view of their bondage in Egypt. The future blessings promised to the nation appeared in doubt when they were in captivity. And the first promise (Gen. 3:15) of a Redeemer seemed a long time in coming to fulfillment. Yet in all of these situations, the Lord proved that he is faithful. He does not make promises lightly. The promises he does make, he keeps.

As is the case with his other moral attributes, the Lord expects believers to emulate his truthfulness. God's people are not to give their word

thoughtlessly. And when they do give their word, they are to remain faithful to it (Eccles. 5:4–5). They must keep not only the promises made to God (Pss. 61:5, 8; 66:13) but those made to their fellow man as well (Josh. 9:16–21).

### *Love*

When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. There is some scriptural basis for this. For example, in 1 John 4:8 and 16 we read: "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. . . . So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." Second Corinthians 13:11 speaks of "the God of love and peace." In general, God's love may be thought of as his eternal giving or sharing of himself. As such, love has always been present among the members of the Trinity. Jesus said, "But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). Matthew 3:17 reports that a voice from heaven said of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The triunity of God means that there has been an eternal exercise of God's love, even before there were any created beings. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are: (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.

#### *1. Benevolence*

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

God's love is an unselfish interest in us for our sake. It is **agape**, not *eros*. In John 15 Jesus draws a contrast between a master-servant (or employer-employee) relationship and a friend-to-friend relationship. It is the latter type of relationship which is to characterize the believer and the Savior. It is clear that Jesus regards love as the basis of this relationship, for in describing it he uses the word *love* in either noun or verb form nine times in the span of nine verses (vv. 9–17). His vital interest in

the believers is evident in verse 11: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." He goes on to state, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). Yet Jesus did not lay down his life only for his friends, those who loved him and appreciated what he was doing for them. He also laid down his life for his enemies, those who despised and rejected him. Here it becomes especially clear that our relationship with God is on a friend-to-friend rather than employee-to-employer basis. He died for his enemies, although he would get nothing from them in return. An employer may be interested in the welfare of an employee for what the employee can do for him. The health of the employee is important, for a healthy employee can produce more on his job for the employer than can an unhealthy one. Jesus, however, is a friend. He is concerned with our good for our own sake, not for what he can get out of us. God does not need us. He is all-powerful, all-sufficient. He can accomplish what he wishes without us, although he has chosen to work through us. Thus, his love for us and for his other creatures is completely disinterested.

This self-giving, unselfish quality of the divine love is seen in what God has done. God's love in sending his Son to die for us was not motivated by our prior love for him. The apostle John says, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The whole of Romans 5:6–10 elaborates upon the same theme. Note especially verse 8 ("But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us") and verse 10 ("while we were enemies we were reconciled to God"). Since God is love, the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is also a description of him. Love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. It bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

This divine love not only took the initiative in creating the basis of salvation by sending Jesus Christ, but it also continuously seeks us out. The three parables of Jesus in Luke 15 emphasize this strongly. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep which are safe in the fold and goes to seek the missing one, even though nothing in the description indicates that there is anything especially attractive or desirable about it. Yet the shepherd goes looking for that one. The woman who had lost one coin searched diligently for it. And although the father of the prodigal son did not go into the far country to look for him, he kept constant watch for the son's return. He took initiative in welcoming him back as his son, giving him the best of care and even ordering a celebration.

When we think of God's love, there arises a dilemma which is related to the problem posed earlier regarding the seeming self-centeredness of God. Does he love us for his own sake, thus apparently jeopardizing the unselfish, giving character of his love; or does he love us for our own

sake, thus apparently jeopardizing his status as the highest value? The former would seem to compromise the love of God, the latter his glory. There is, however, a third possibility. God loves us on the basis of that likeness of himself which he has placed within us, or in which he has created us (Gen. 1:27). He therefore in effect loves that which participates in the greatness and goodness of himself; he loves himself in us. This, however, is not something intrinsic within us by our own doing. The image of God is present in us because of the unselfish, giving nature of God. God loves us for what he can give to us, or what he can make of us. This is manifested both in the fact and the nature of the original creative act, and in his continued relationship with us. His love is a disposition of affection toward us, a feeling of unselfish concern, and a resolve to act toward us in such a way as to promote our welfare.

God's benevolence, the actual caring and providing for those he loves, is seen in numerous ways. God even cares for and provides for the subhuman creation. The psalmist wrote, "Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16). Jesus taught that the Father feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:26, 28). Not a sparrow can fall to the earth without the Father's will (Matt. 10:29). The principle that God is benevolent in his provision and protection is extended in the latter two passages to his human children as well (Matt. 6:25, 30–33; 10:30–31). While we may tend to take these promises somewhat exclusively to ourselves as believers, the Bible indicates that God is benevolent to the whole human race. In the sense of benevolence, God's love is extended to all mankind. He "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Paul told the Lystrans that God "did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). So we see that God inherently not only feels in a particular positive way toward the objects of his love, but he acts for their welfare. Love is an active matter.

## 2. Grace

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

The graciousness of God is, of course, prominent in the New Testament. Some have suggested that the Old Testament picture of God is quite different, however. Probably the most extreme instance of such teaching is Marcion, who contended that we are dealing with two different Gods in the two Testaments: the Old Testament God of creation and strict justice, and the New Testament God (Christ) of love.<sup>7</sup> Yet numerous passages in the Old Testament speak of the graciousness of God. In Exodus 34:6, for example, God says of himself: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And in the New Testament Paul attributes our salvation to the grace of God: "He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us" (Eph. 1:5–8). Note the idea of abundance in both of these passages. God is not a stingy god who gives just barely what he must, and conserves the rest. There is a generosity to this grace of God. He gives abundantly.

There are passages in the New Testament which are even more explicit in relating salvation to the extravagant gift of God's grace. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 2:7–9: "that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast." In Titus, Paul again emphasizes this gracious work of God: "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men" (Titus 2:11). Then, after describing the depths of the sinfulness of mankind (3:3), he says, "but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit ... so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life" (3:4–7). Salvation is indeed the gift of God. Sometimes the justice of God is impugned on the grounds that some receive this grace of God and others do not. That any are saved at all is, however, the amazing thing. If God gave to all what they deserve, none would be saved. Everyone would be lost and condemned.

## 3. Mercy

God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates man as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy sees him as miserable and needy. Words like *חסד* (*chesed*), *רחם* (*racham*), and *ἔλεος* give expression

7. See Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*

to this dimension of God's love. The psalmist said, "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Similar ideas are found in Deuteronomy 5:10; Psalm 57:10; and Psalm 86:5. The attribute of mercy is seen in the pitying concern of Jehovah for the people of Israel who were in bondage to the Egyptians. He heard their cry and knew their sufferings (Exod. 3:7). It is also seen in the compassion which Jesus felt when people suffering from physical ailments came to him (Mark 1:41). Their spiritual condition also moved him (Matt. 9:36). Sometimes both kinds of needs are involved. Thus, in describing the same incident, Matthew speaks of Jesus' having compassion and healing the sick (Matt. 14:14), while Mark speaks of his having compassion and teaching many things (Mark 6:34). Matthew elsewhere combines the two ideas. When Jesus saw the crowds were helpless like sheep without a shepherd, he had compassion on them. So he went about "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 9:35-36).

#### 4. Persistence

A final dimension of the love of God is persistence. The Hebrew here is אֶרְקָם ('erek 'appayim-Exod. 34:6), and the Greek is μακροθυμία (slowness to anger). We read of God's persistence in Psalm 86:15; Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; and 2 Peter 3:15. In all of these verses God is pictured as withholding judgment and continuing to offer salvation and grace over long periods of time.

God's long-suffering was particularly apparent with Israel; this was, of course, an outflow of his faithfulness to them. The people of Israel repeatedly rebelled against Jehovah, desiring to return to Egypt, rejecting Moses' leadership, setting up idols for worship, falling into the practices of the people about them, and intermarrying with them. There must have been times when the Lord was inclined to abandon his people. Even the Hittites or the Moabites might have seemed a better risk about then. A large-scale destruction of Israel on the fashion of the flood would have been most appropriate, yet the Lord did not cut them off.

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

On one occasion Peter came to Jesus (on behalf of the disciples, no doubt) and asked how often he should forgive a brother who sinned against him: as many as seven times? Jesus' reply to Peter, which has

been interpreted as either "77 times" or "490 times," indicates the persistent, relentless nature of the love that is to be characteristic of a follower of the Lord. Jesus himself demonstrated such persistent love with Peter. When warned by Jesus that he would deny his Lord, Peter vigorously protested. Even if everyone else denied Jesus, Peter would never do so. Jesus warned him that he would deny not once but three times, a prophecy which soon came to pass. Peter went out and wept bitterly after denying that he even knew Jesus. But Jesus forgave Peter this time, just as he had with so many other shortcomings. As a matter of fact, the angel at the tomb instructed the three women to go tell the disciples *and Peter* that Jesus was going to Galilee where they would see him (Mark 16:7). God's faithfulness and forbearance were also manifested in his not casting off other believers who had sinned and failed him: Moses, David, Solomon, and many more.

As with the other attributes of God, so love is also to characterize the believer. Jesus made this clear. He said that by keeping his commandment his disciples would abide in his love. And that commandment is: "that you love one another, as I *have loved you*" (John 15:12). Further, when he sent out his disciples, he instructed them, "You received without pay, give without pay" (Matt. 10:8). He taught them to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). And he told them with disapproval the parable of the servant who was forgiven a large amount of money, but then refused to forgive a fellow servant a small amount of money (Matt. 18:23-35). John insisted that the absence of practical acts of concern is an indication that one's supposed Christian experience is not genuine and that God's love does not abide in him (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-18).

#### God's Love and Justice-A Point of Tension?

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

The one point of potential tension usually singled out is the relationship between the love of God and his justice. On one hand, God's justice seems so severe, requiring the death of those who sin. This is a fierce, harsh God. On the other hand, God is merciful, gracious, forgiving, long-suffering. Are not these two sets of traits in conflict with one another? Is there, then, internal tension in God's nature?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>. Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 227f.

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

What we are saying is that love is not fully understood unless we see it as including justice. If love does not include justice, it is mere sentimentality. The approach which would define love as merely granting what someone else desires is not biblical. It runs into two difficulties: (1) Giving someone what would make him comfortable for the moment may be nothing more than indulging his whim—such action may not necessarily be right. (2) This is usually an emotional reaction to an individual or situation that is immediately at hand. But love is much wider in scope—it necessarily entails justice, a sense of right and wrong, and all mankind. As Joseph Fletcher has correctly shown, justice is simply love distributed.<sup>9</sup> It is love to all of one's neighbors, those immediately at hand, and those removed in space and time. Justice means that love must always be shown, whether or not a situation of immediate need presents itself in pressing and vivid fashion. Love in the biblical sense, then, is not merely to indulge someone near at hand. Rather, it inherently involves justice as well. This means there will be a concern for the ultimate welfare of all mankind, a passion to do what is right, and enforcement of appropriate consequences for wrong action.

Actually, love and justice have worked together in God's dealing with man. God's justice requires that there be payment of the penalty for sin. God's love, however, desires man to be restored to fellowship with him. The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the justice and the love of God have been maintained. And there really is no tension between the two. There is tension only if one's view of love requires that God forgive sin without any payment being made. But that is to think of God as different from what he really is. Moreover, the offer of Christ as atonement shows a greater love on God's part than would simply indulgently releasing people from the consequences of sin. To fulfill his just administration of the law, God's love was so great that he gave his Son for us. Love and justice are not two separate attributes competing with one another. God is both righteous and loving, and has himself given what he demands.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 86-102.

<sup>10</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, pp. 377-78.

### The Best Mode of Investigating God's Attributes

In discussing the attributes of God, we have sought to avoid the speculative mode which sometimes characterized scholasticism in the past. The attributes of God were analyzed in very abstract ways. But the Bible does not speak of God as some sort of infinite computer. Rather, the images used are very concrete and warm. God is pictured as a father, a shepherd, a friend. It is particularly enlightening to examine the way God is pictured in the Psalms. There he is presented as an integral part of the believer's experience. In the Psalms we discover the various attributes of God as they manifest themselves in the actual circumstances of the believer's life.

The best mode of investigating the attributes of God, then, is to examine the scriptural statements carefully and make reasonable inferences from them. The Scholastics in developing their natural theology, on the other hand, used three speculative methods to deduce the attributes of God.<sup>11</sup> The first method (causality) involved investigating the nature of the world, and imputing to God such qualities as would be necessary to bring about the effects observed. The second method (negation) was a matter of removing from the idea of God all the imperfections found in man and ascribing in their place the opposite perfection to God. The third method (eminence) was to take the positive qualities found in man and apply their superlative form to God, on the assumption that God is the source of those positive qualities and, being infinite, must possess in unlimited fashion what is found only partially in man. But these approaches involve assumptions which may lead to the abstract or isolated treatment of individual attributes which was warned against earlier, and hence to conflicting conceptions.

The biblical treatment of the attributes of God is not a speculative but rather a practical matter. There is a vital connection between what God is and what he does, between his attributes and his acts. The attributes of God are frequently revealed in his actions, so that what he does is a clue to what he is. Further, the attributes revealed in the Bible are an indication of how he will act. God's actions are not spontaneous, erratic, or arbitrary. They are outflows of his nature. Thus there are a constancy and a dependability about them. We can correctly relate to God by governing our actions in accordance with what the Scriptures say God is like. Moreover, knowledge of God's nature becomes a means to realistic self-knowledge. One's holiness is fully and correctly assessed only when measured by the standard of perfect holiness, that of God. We have already noted this in connection with Peter's encounter with Jesus

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 52.

in Luke 5. Finally, the qualities of God, insofar as they are also qualities of man (i.e., not omnipresence, etc.), are the motivation and stimulus to man to live in an appropriate way. They are the model of godliness for the Christian.

If we have fully understood who and what God is, we will see him as the supreme being. We will make him the Lord, the one who is to be pleased, and whose will is to be done. This reminder is needed in our day, for we have a tendency to slip from a theocentric to an anthropocentric ordering of our religious lives. This leads to what might be called “inverted theology.” Instead of regarding God as our Lord, whose glory is the supreme value and whose will is to be done, we regard him as our servant. He is expected to meet all of our perceived needs and to answer to our standards of what is right and wrong. We need to learn from Samuel, whose response when the Lord called him was, “Speak, Lord, your servant hears.” He did not see this as an opportunity to pour out his concerns to the Lord, saying, “Listen, Lord, your servant speaks.” When we adopt the latter stance, we in effect make ourselves God. We presume to know what is right and what is best. In so doing, we take upon ourselves a great responsibility: to guide our own lives. But it is God who knows what is best in the long run. He is the almighty and loving Lord. He has created us, not we him, and we exist for his glory, not he for ours. We will stand before him in the last judgment, not he before us. If we have truly understood God’s nature, then with Jesus our first concern in prayer will not be for the granting of our desires. It will rather be, “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

# 14

## God’s Nearness and Distance: Immanence and Transcendence

### Immanence

- The Biblical Basis
- Modern Versions of Immanentism
- Classical Liberalism
- Paul Tillich
- The Death of God Theology
- Implications of Immanence

### Transcendence

- The Biblical Basis
- Models of Transcendence
  - The Traditional Model
  - Karl Barth’s Model
  - Søren Kierkegaard’s Nonspatial Model
  - The Historical Model of the Theology of Hope
- Implications of Transcendence

**O**ne additional general consideration regarding the nature of God is the pair of concepts traditionally designated transcendence and immanence. These refer to God’s relationship to the created world. We do not have in mind here God’s specific actions with respect to the universe, but rather his status in relationship to it, that is, the degree to

which he is present and active within the universe (immanence) as opposed to being absent and removed from it (transcendence).

These two biblical ideas must be kept in balance. This can best be achieved by treating them together. In this respect they are like the love and the justice of God, in that a correct understanding of each requires its being seen in the light of the other. Where either is overemphasized at the expense of the other, the orthodox theistic conception is lost. Where immanence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of a personal God. Where transcendence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of an active God.

The position we take with respect to immanence and transcendence has definite practical implications. The lifestyle of the Christian will (or should) be affected by what one believes on these matters. And the way in which one's ministry is conducted will also be affected by what he conceives of as the nature of God's involvement with the created order.

Immanence and transcendence should not be regarded as attributes of God. Rather, these concepts cut across the various attributes of God's greatness and goodness. Some of the attributes are, to be sure, inherently more expressive of God's transcendence and others more expressive of his immanence; but, in general, transcendence and immanence should be regarded as indications of how God, in all of his attributes, relates to his world.

## Immanence

### *The Biblical Basis*

We begin with the immanence of God. By this we mean God's presence and activity within nature, human nature, and history. There are a large number of pertinent biblical references of various types. Jeremiah 23:24 emphasizes God's presence throughout the whole of the universe. "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD." Paul told the philosophers on Mars' Hill: "Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (Acts 17:27-28).

There are also passages which note that God's spirit originates and/or sustains all things; everything is dependent upon him. The Book of Job includes several references to the indwelling and sustaining spirit or breath of God: "as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils" (27:3); "the spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (33:4); "if he [the Almighty] should take back his

spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust" (34:14-15). Psalm 104:29-30 similarly emphasizes nature's dependence upon God: "When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground." The creation accounts in Genesis, of course, give special emphasis to the involvement of God in the creative act. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God is pictured as moving or brooding upon the face of the waters. In 2:7, we read that God breathed into man, and man became a living being. Isaiah 63:11, Micah 3:8, and Haggai 2:5 note that God's Spirit dwells within or among his people. There are also references suggesting that whatever happens within nature is God's doing and is under his control. The sending of sunshine and rain, the feeding and protecting of the birds of the air, and the clothing of the flowers are all credited to the Father (Matt. 5:45; 6:25-30; 10:29-30).

What is emphasized in these passages is that God is active within the regular patterns of nature. He is the God of nature, of natural law. Even what are ordinarily considered natural events should be seen as God's doing, for nature and God are not as separate as we usually think. God is present everywhere, not just in the spectacular or unusual occurrences. He is at work within human individuals and thus within human institutions and movements. Disjunctions are not to be sharply drawn between either God and man or God and the world.

The more the concept of the immanence of God is developed and emphasized, the more the view moves towards pantheism, as contrasted with theism. That is to say, as the transcendence of God, his status independent of the creation, is deemphasized, he becomes less personal, less someone with whom we may have a personal relationship. Although immanence in an extreme form closely resembles pantheism, there is still a difference between the two views. In the view that God is immanent, nature has no independent status. As it has recently been put, nature is not transcendent to God.' Thus, nature minus God equals nothing. God, however, does have status independent of nature. So, God minus nature does equal something. In pantheism, nature minus God equals nothing, but God minus nature also equals nothing. He has no independent status. Creation in the traditional sense has no place in the pantheistic scheme, since, according to pantheism, God could not have existed before the creation of the natural order.

1. Colin Gunton, "Transcendence, Metaphor, and the Knowability of God," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 31 (1980): 509.

*Modern Versions of Immanentism**Classical Liberalism*

The twentieth century has seen several movements which place heavy emphasis upon divine immanence. Classical liberalism, to varying degrees, has seen God as immanent within the world. To a large extent, the difference between fundamentalism and liberalism is a difference in world-view. The conservative operates with a definite supernaturalism-God resides outside the world and intervenes periodically within the natural processes through miracles. The conservative sees reality as occupying more than one level. The liberal, on the other hand, tends to have a single-story view of reality. There is no supernatural realm outside of the natural realm. God is within nature rather than beyond or outside it.<sup>2</sup>

Although liberalism is not naturalism, it has similar tendencies. There is a tendency, for example, to view God as working exclusively through natural processes rather than through radical discontinuities with nature (miracles).<sup>3</sup> The liberal is happy to accept evolution as an example of God at work. In evolution God is seen as accomplishing his ends through the use of natural means. According to liberalism, nothing is secular, for God is at work everywhere and through everything that occurs. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for instance, saw miracles everywhere. "Miracle," he said, "is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant."<sup>4</sup>

Whereas the conservative sees God's work particularly in special, extraordinary acts, the liberal sees God at work everywhere. The virgin birth is important to conservatives as an evidence of God's special work. The liberal, on the other hand, retorts, "The virgin birth a miracle? Every birth is a miracle." Conservatives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century vigorously resisted the Darwinian theory of evolution, for it seemed to render theistic creation superfluous.<sup>5</sup> To the liberal, however, this was not the case. Evolution does not preclude divine activity; it presupposes it. The conservative held that the universe must have a single cause: either God caused it (more or less directly) or natural forces of evolution caused it. To the liberal, however, the statements "God created the universe" and "the universe came

2. Borden I? Bowne, *The Immanence of God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), p. 17.

3. Ibid., p. 18.

4. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 88.

5. James Orr, *God's Image in Man and Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 201-02.

to pass through evolution" were not in any sense incompatible.<sup>6</sup> The underlying assumption was that nature and God are not as discrete as has sometimes been thought.

This concept, applied in varying degrees, has had an interesting impact upon several areas of doctrine. The definition of revelation, for instance, has become more generalized. In an extreme form, that of Schleiermacher, revelation is any instance of conscious insight.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Bible is a book recording God's revelations to man. As such, however, it is not unique; that is, it is not qualitatively different from other pieces of religious literature, or even literature that does not claim to be religious. Isaiah, the Sermon on the Mount, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Carlyle, Goethe, all are vehicles of divine revelation. Any truth, no matter where you find it, is divine truth.<sup>8</sup> This position virtually obliterates the traditional distinction between special revelation and general revelation. Others have maintained that there is a distinction between the Bible and other literature, but have emphasized that it is a quantitative rather than qualitative difference. God works through many channels of truth, but to a greater degree, perhaps a much greater degree, through the writers of Scripture.

The gap between God and man has also been reduced by liberalism. The traditional orthodox view is that God created man in his own image, yet man was totally distinct from God. Man then fell and became sinful. Liberalism, on the other hand, pictures human nature as in itself containing God. There is a spark of the divine within man. Liberals do not believe that man's original nature has been corrupted; rather, they view human nature as being intrinsically good and having the potential of developing further. What is needed is not some radical transformation by grace from without. Rather, the potential divinity of man must be developed or the divine presence within amplified. Nurturing of the strengths, ideals, and aspirations of man is what is called for, not a supernaturalistic alteration. Man does not need a conversion, a radical change of direction. Rather, he needs inspiration, a vision of what he can become. His old nature is not some radically corrupted humanity. It is simply his affinity with the animal kingdom and his self-orientation—these need to be transcended>

Consequently, divine action is seen as taking place to a large extent through movements within society. Political activity, for example, and

6. Bowne, *Immanence*, p. 23.

7. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 89.

8. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 559.

9. John Fiske, *Through Nature to God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), p. 54. Cf. Randall, *Modern Mind*, pp. 555-56.

social-action groups are means by which God's purpose is accomplished. The whole world can be Christianized through transformation of the structures of society. God may be as active within a particular political party as he is within a Christian denomination.<sup>10</sup> Even aggressive policies leading to war have been seen as means by which God accomplishes his purposes. A person who invests his major effort in a socially conscious service-club may be as religious as one who labors extensively within the church.

Liberalism also modified the traditional view of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Orthodoxy or conservative Christianity had insisted that Jesus was qualitatively different from all other human beings. He was possessed of two natures, the divine and the human. With the movement toward synthesizing divine and human into one, this distinctiveness of Jesus became relativized. Jesus was different from other human beings in degree only, not in kind. He was the man with the greatest God-consciousness,<sup>11</sup> or the man who most fully discovered God, or the person in whom God most fully dwelt.<sup>12</sup> A prominent advocate of this view was W. Robertson Smith, a Scottish theologian who was tried for heresy. One charge of which he was accused was denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Deeply hurt, he exclaimed: "How can they accuse me of that? I've never denied the divinity of any man, let alone Jesus!" To give a more personal example: when, in a series of ecumenical radio dialogues in which I participated, someone emphasized that Jesus was unique, a process theologian exclaimed: "Jesus unique? Every human being who has ever lived is unique!" Varying degrees of this view can be found. In all cases the underlying assumption is that if God is immanent within humanity, he is immanent within all persons in the same sense. While there may be a quantitative difference in the extent to which God is present in various individuals, there is no qualitative difference in the manner of his presence, not even in Christ.

#### **Paul Tillich**

Another version of immanentism is that of Paul Tillich, who saw himself as in many ways standing on the boundary between different groups and movements. In particular, he viewed himself as occupying a middle position between liberalism and neoorthodoxy. In many ways, his most distinctive idea was his doctrine of God. God for Tillich was not a being, one being among many. In conventional theism, God is the

10. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1919).

11. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 377ff.

12. Donald Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1948), pp. 114-18.

supreme being, the greatest being, the unlimited being, but still a being, over against all other beings, which are finite. He stands outside of them and they outside of him. For Tillich, however, God is not a being; he is being itself, or the ground of being. He is that internal power or force which causes everything to exist. Thus, whereas all finite beings exist, God does not exist. While this may sound like a derogatory statement about God, it is not so. Some have thought that Tillich was an atheist because he said God does not exist. There is even a story that when Tillich was teaching at Harvard Divinity School, the wife of a faculty member in another part of the university demanded that Tillich be dismissed. For an atheist to teach in the divinity school seemed to her to be a contradiction in terms. But Tillich's statement that God does not exist was not derogatory; it was a compliment. When he said that God does not exist, Tillich meant that God does not merely exist-God is! Finite beings exist; God is, and is the basis of the existence of everything that exists.<sup>13</sup>

God is present within everything that is, but he is not to be equated with everything that is. Thus, Tillich's view is not pantheism. It is more accurately panentheism. It is not accurate to say that for Tillich God and everything that exists are identical; rather, for Tillich God is in everything. If one kicks a tree or a stone, he cannot correctly say, "I just kicked God." But he could say, "I kicked something in which God is." The relationship of God to all the finite objects within the world is something like the relationship of sap to a tree. It is not the tree, but is the vital force within the tree, the basis of its life. So God is the principle of being of everything that exists.

But although God is the basis of the existence of every object, he cannot be known by superficial knowledge of any object or set of objects. He is the depth within everything that is. He is the deep internal force causing it to be rather than not be. Thus there is a type of transcendence here, quite unconventional in its nature. God is not outside objects. He is deep down within them. When one experiences something in depth, he is experiencing God's transcendence. When someone has a very deep relationship with another person, he is experiencing the transcendent God. In such a situation one is aware that the ground of his own being is the same as the ground of the other person's being. One can have a similar experience with beings which are other than human: animals, plants, inanimate nature. In getting beyond a surface acquaintance with these objects, one is relating to God.<sup>14</sup>

13. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 235ff.

14. Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 82.

The question is sometimes raised whether Tillich's system gives one a personal god. Tillich himself would reply that if the question is, "Is God a person?" the answer must be no. God is not a person, any more than he is a being. But he is the ground of personality. He is the basis or cause of human personality. He is what makes us personal. And in that sense he is personal. Wherever one experiences or encounters personality, one is encountering God, for he is the cause of all personality.<sup>15</sup> But he is not an entity with which one can have a personal relationship. One cannot know God as God. One can know him only in conjunction with knowing some other being. God cannot be known on a person-to-person basis.

One of the problems encountered upon close examination of Tillich's view is the apparent lack of anything resembling traditional worship or prayer. Tillich acknowledged near the end of his life that he no longer prayed. He merely meditated. There is not the kind of person-to-person communion which lies at the heart of Christianity and which Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as practicing and advocating. As one reads Tillich's writings, the feeling grows that it is not Christian piety or the Christian God that is being discussed. Indeed, in many ways a book like Tillich's ***Courage to Be*** appears to have more in common with Hinduism than it does with historic Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Further, it is questionable whether Tillich's view necessarily follows from his method. He works with what is termed the method of correlation. After analyzing the cultural situation, one formulates a philosophical question to which theology then gives an answer. In other words, the answers offered by theology are correlated with the questions being asked by the culture. A basic question which is raised in virtually every cultural situation is the question of being, namely, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" As his answer, Tillich offers the ground of being. There is something because there is within everything the power of being which causes it to be what it is. But need the answer come in this particular form? The orthodox answer is God. God is the power of being, but he is also a being, although the supreme and unlimited being, to be sure. To the question of why there is something, God is at least as effective an answer as is Tillich's ground of being. In the traditional conception, God is the Creator, independent of and separate from all things; he brings all things into existence. This view allows for a genuine creation, since God's being is not dependent on anything else. He is-in and of himself. Tillich's view, on the other hand, restricts God's being to

15. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 245.

16. Ibid., p. 127. Cf. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1952), pp. 84ff., and Rollo May's description of meditation in *Paulus: Reminiscences of a Friendship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 94-96.

the existence of all other beings. He could not be before or without the existence of something else.

### ***The Death of God Theology***

A third force in the twentieth century which has emphasized the immanence of God is the Death of God theology. While there are many nuances to the expression "the death of God," what is usually meant is that God at one time existed transcendently as what Thomas Altizer calls the primordial being. Over a long period of time, however, God gave up this separate or transcendent status and became immanent within nature and the human race.<sup>17</sup> Through a series of steps God came to identify with man. This process was completed in the person of Jesus. With his coming to earth, God irrevocably became part of the world. The death of God was, then, something of a suicide of the primordial God, that is, a voluntary giving up of his primordial status. He no longer has any existence apart from human beings. With the coming of Jesus, a process of diffusion of the divine nature began, so that it is now found throughout humanity. We therefore see Jesus now in every person within the human race. As Jesus himself said, he is to be found within our fellow man. Deeds of mercy and love done to others are done to him (Matt. 25:31-40). As William Hamilton put it, "Jesus is in the world as masked." We find him hidden behind the face of every other human being.<sup>18</sup>

With the diffusion of the divine nature, the boundary line between the sacred and the secular has for all practical purposes broken down. Traditionally, God was to be found within distinctively religious practices, such as worship, prayer, and meditation. God is no longer found within these activities. Such practices are now quite meaningless. If the sense of God is to be recaptured, it is as likely to be recaptured through participation in the civil-rights movement as through worship in a cathedral, perhaps even more so.<sup>19</sup>

As was true in the **cases** of liberalism and Tillich, the Death of God theology tends to lose the personal dimensions of religious experience. Hamilton, in an address on the unfinished agenda for the Death of God theology, noted that the status of worship and prayer is problematical.<sup>20</sup>

17. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 77-84.

18. William Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 49.

19. Ibid., p. 48.

20. William Hamilton, "The Unfinished Agenda of the Death of God Theology" (Speech delivered at Bethany Theological Seminary, Oak Brook, Illinois, March 1966).

This movement, then, is little more than a humanism set within the context of religious symbols and architecture. The dimension of a personal and transcendent God has been so lost that there is little basis for terming an experience religious other than its having a mystical character. Further, the Christian ethic which is practiced here has little ideological basis. The doctrinal tenets which once served as the foundation of ethical practice are gone; only the superstructure of ethics remains, perhaps as an emotional carry-over from an earlier time.

We should note at this point that the Bible does affirm the immanence of God, but within definite limits. When these limits are exceeded, certain problems appear. For one thing, it becomes difficult to distinguish the work of God from anything else, including demonic activity within the world and human society. This was observed by Karl Barth at two different times. The first was in connection with World War I, when certain German Christians identified the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm as the working of God to accomplish his purposes. The second came in the 1930s when some Christians regarded the policies of Adolf Hitler and Nazism as God's activity in the world.<sup>21</sup> In each case, the assumption that whatever occurs is God's will led sincere believers to endorse and support what was actually evil and anti-Christian. This is one of the dangers of overstating God's immanence. If God is totally immanent within the creation and history, there is no basis for making ethical evaluations. There is no outside objective standard by which to make such judgments. When we overemphasize immanence at the expense of transcendence, God becomes virtually a label for man's highest values, ideals, and aspirations. Edward Scribner Ames says that God is like Alma Mater or Uncle Sam.<sup>22</sup> Surely this is not what has traditionally been called Christianity.

Moreover, as we noted earlier, the personal dimension of God becomes lost. It is not possible to have communion, a reciprocal relation, with a totally immanent god. Religious activity becomes merely a version of various types of social activity. Although Jesus did say, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40), he did not say that this is the *only* means by which love can be shown to him. The second great command is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"; but that does not substitute for or exhaustively fulfil the first command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, *The Church and the Political Problem of Our Day* (New York: Scribner, 1939).

<sup>22</sup> Edward Scribner Ames, *Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), p. 133.

#### *Implications of Immanence*

Divine immanence of the limited degree taught in Scripture carries several implications:

1. God is not limited to working directly to accomplish his purposes. While it is very obviously a work of God when his people pray and a miraculous healing occurs, it is also God's work when through the application of medical knowledge and skill a physician is successful in bringing a patient back to health. Medicine is part of God's general revelation, and the work of the doctor is a channel of God's activity. It is a dramatic answer to prayer when a Christian in financial need receives an anonymous gift of money in the mail, but it is just as much God's doing when he receives an opportunity to work for the money he needs.

2. God may use persons and organizations that are not avowedly Christian. In biblical times, God did not limit himself to working through the covenant nation of Israel or through the church. He even used Assyria, a pagan nation, to bring chastening upon Israel. He is able to use secular or nominally Christian organizations. Even non-Christians do some genuinely good and commendable things. This is not to say that these deeds are in any sense meritorious works which qualify for salvation the people who do them. But such deeds may be contributory to God's purposes in the world, even if those who do them do not recognize them as such. Thus, when no compromise of biblical truth is involved, the Christian and the church may at times cooperate with non-Christian organizations to accomplish part of God's plan.

3. We should have an appreciation for all that God has created. Nature is not something that is there as a brute fact, something that may be plundered for our purposes. It is God's, and he is present and active within it. While it has been given to man to be used to satisfy his legitimate needs, he ought not to exploit it for his own pleasure or out of greed. God is present in nature, watching over the birds and the flowers; ruthless and selfish treatment of them is painful to him. The doctrine of divine immanence therefore has ecological application. It also has implications regarding our attitudes to fellow men. God is genuinely present within everyone (although not in the special sense in which he indwells Christians). Therefore, people are not to be despised or treated disrespectfully. A way to show our love for God is to treat lovingly the various members of the creation within whom he dwells and works. Jesus' teaching in the great eschatological discourse of Matthew 25 is of particular application here.

4. We can learn something about God from his creation. All that is has been brought into being by God and, further, is actively indwelt by him. We may therefore detect clues about what God is like by observing the

behavior of the created universe. For example, a definite pattern of logic seems to apply within the creation. There is an orderliness, a regularity, about it. Moreover, it has been found that we can come to understand nature better through rational methods of inquiry. While there will be differences to be sure, there is a compelling basis here for assuming that God also is orderly and that we may come to understand him better through a judicious use of logic. Those who believe that God is sporadic, arbitrary, or whimsical by nature and that his actions are characterized by paradox and even contradiction either have not taken a close look at the behavior of the world or have assumed that God is in no sense operating there.

5. God's immanence means that there are points at which the gospel can make contact with the unbeliever. If God is to some extent present and active within the whole of the created world, he is present and active within humans who have not made a personal commitment of their lives to him. Thus, there are points at which they will be sensitive to the truth of the gospel message, places where they are in touch with God's working. Evangelism aims to find those points and direct the message to them.

### **Transcendence**

The other aspect of the relationship of God to the world is his transcendence. By this we mean that God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity. God is not simply attached to, or involved in, his creation. He is also superior to it in several significant ways.

#### *The Biblical Basis*

A number of Scripture passages affirm the concept of divine transcendence. It is a particular theme of the Book of Isaiah. In 55:8-9 we read that God's thoughts transcend man's: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." In 6:1-5 the Lord is depicted as "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The seraphim call out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts," an indication of his transcendence, and add, "The whole earth is full of his glory," a reference to his immanence. Isaiah responds with an expression of his own uncleanness. Thus, God's transcendence over us must be seen not only in terms of his greatness, his power and knowledge, but also in terms of his goodness, his holiness and purity. Isaiah 57:15 also expresses both the transcendence

and immanence of God: "For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'"

We read of God's transcendence in other books of the Bible as well. Psalm 113:5-6 says, "Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?" He is described as "enthroned in the heavens" in Psalm 123:1. In John 8:23, Jesus draws a contrast between himself and his hearers: "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world."

#### *Models of Transcendence*

The motif of God's transcendence—the idea that God is a being independent of and superior to the rest of the universe—is found, then, throughout the Bible. We must now ask what model, what form of expression, can best represent and communicate this truth.

#### *The Traditional Model*

It is obvious from the texts we have already cited that the biblical conception depends heavily upon spatial imagery. God is thought of as "higher," "above," "high and lifted up." This is not surprising, for in a world where human flight had not yet been achieved, and would not be for a long time, it was natural to express superiority in terms of elevation.

Today, however, it is difficult if not impossible for sophisticated persons to conceive of God's transcendence in this fashion. There are two reasons for this difficulty, one deriving from general culture, and the other theological in character. On one hand, simple references to "up" and "down" are inadequate today. In biblical times and for centuries thereafter it was assumed that all heavenly bodies are located in an upward direction from the surface of the earth. But the knowledge that the earth is not a flat surface and is actually part of a heliocentric system which is in turn part of a much larger universe has made this assumption untenable. Further, what an American terms "up" is "down" to an Australian, and vice versa. It will not do, then, to try to explain transcendence in terms of a vertical dimension. Speaking of God as "out there" rather than "up there" deals with this problem, but still does not come to grips with the theological problem.<sup>23</sup>

The theological problem pertains to God's nature. As we observed earlier (p. 273), the question of whereness does not apply to God. He is not a physical being; hence he does not have spatial dimensions of location

<sup>23</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), pp. 29-44.

and extension. It does not make sense to talk about God as if his location could be plotted on astronomical coordinates, or he could be reached by traveling long enough and far enough in a rocket ship. He is a spirit, not an object.

#### *Karl Barth's Model*

In the twentieth century, a new major emphasis on God's transcendence appeared in the thought and writing of Karl Barth, particularly in his early work, and most notably in his *Römerbrief*. In that work he emphasized the Unknown God.<sup>24</sup> God is the altogether other, immensely above the rest of the deities of the world of Paul's day and all the deities which modern thought creates.

God is not an aspect of man or the best of human nature. He is separated from man by an *infinite* qualitative distinction.<sup>25</sup> There is within man no spark of affinity with the divine, no ability to produce divine revelation, no remainder in him of a likeness to God. Moreover, God is not involved in nature or conditioned by it. He is free from all such limitations.<sup>26</sup> Nor is he really known by us. He is the hidden one; he cannot be discovered by man's effort, verified by man's intellectual proofs, or understood in terms of man's concepts. Barth's vigorous attack upon all forms of natural theology was an expression of his belief in divine transcendence. Revelation comes only on God's own initiative; and when it does come, it is not mediated through general culture. It comes, in Barth's language, vertically from above. Man is never able in any way to make God his possession.<sup>27</sup>

In the judgment of many theologians, including even the later Barth himself, Barth's early view of transcendence was extreme. Taken in its most literal form, it seemed to virtually cut off any real possibility of communication between God and man. There was too severe a distinction between God and man, too sharp a rejection of culture. But this was a much needed correction to the anthropocentric thrust of much nineteenth-century immanentism. The question for us here is whether we can express the transcendence of God in a less extreme way that makes sense in twentieth-century terms. We need not necessarily attempt to make the doctrine acceptable to twentieth-century secularists, but we must at least provide contemporary Christians with a mode of

24. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief: Abdruck der neuen Bearbeitung* (Zurich: E.V.Z. Verlag, 1967), pp. llf.

25. Ibid., p. 315.

26. Ibid., p. 11.

27. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 188-90.

thought which will make it clear that God is spiritually and metaphysically other than man and nature.

#### *Søren Kierkegaard's Nonspatial Model*

Ssren Kierkegaard's conception of divine transcendence was in many ways influential on Karl Barth. While there are a few extreme elements in Kierkegaard's thought, he offers some genuinely creative ways of expressing the idea of transcendence. Two of them are what Martin Heinecken has expounded under the labels of qualitative distinction and dimensional beyondness.

By qualitative distinction is meant that the difference between God and man is not merely one of degree. God is not merely like man but more so. They are of fundamentally different kinds. Thus God cannot be known by taking the highest and the best elements within man and amplifying them. Being qualitatively distinct, God cannot be extrapolated from the ideas that man has nor from the qualities of man's personality or character.<sup>28</sup>

Underlying this position is the belief that qualities cannot be reduced to quantities. No accumulation of additional quantity can give a new quality. There is a difference here which cannot be bridged simply by increments. Thus, if one took cotton and refined it further and further, it would never become silk. Silk simply is something different. Instances where simple addition seems to result in new qualities are actually illusions. As an example of an intellectual illusion, take the case of the nis balls. Imagine one nis ball, a small, hard, white spherical object not greatly unlike a golf ball, but without the little dimples characteristic of a golf ball. If we add another, we have two nis balls, then three, four, and so on until we come to nine nis balls. If we then add one more nis ball, something amazing occurs: a new quality appears, for we now have tennis balls. But this is only an audio illusion, a trick upon the ears. We do not have a new kind of ball, fuzzy and larger; we merely have one more of the same type of ball we had before. Nothing has changed qualitatively. And so it is with attempts to reach God intellectually (proofs for the existence of God) or morally (salvation by works). We may on occasion think we have succeeded, but our success is apparent rather than real. We cannot reach God by adding more information or more works, for God is God, not simply a superlative form of man.

If, like Barth, we were to regard Kierkegaard's concept of the qualitative distinction between God and man as infinite in scope, religion and theology would be impossible. For if the difference between God and

28. Martin Heinecken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1956), pp. 81-83.

man is infinite, if God is infinitely different in nature from man, then not even God could bridge the gap and reach man.<sup>29</sup> But one need not make the distinction infinite in order to preserve the idea that the difference between God and man is one of kind and not merely of degree.

The other fruitful aspect of Kierkegaard's model of transcendence is dimensional beyondness.<sup>30</sup> It is not merely the case that when measured in terms of the dimensions of man, God is infinite; he is also in a different dimension altogether. It is somewhat like the difference between a two-dimensional figure (a horizontal plane) and a three-dimensional figure. In the latter instance, the added dimension (the vertical) not only intersects the horizontal plane, but is transcendent to it.

The concept of dimensional beyondness should be broadened, however. God is dimensionally beyond us not in the sense of another spatial measurement, but of qualitative difference. This is the broad sense of dimension. Consider, as an example, that sound is a different dimension than sight. The question, "What color is middle C?" is an unanswerable question (although one "correct" answer would of course be that it is white, at least on the piano). Color and sound are two different dimensions; a totally different sense is involved.

The concept of dimensional beyondness enables us to think of transcendence and immanence together. God is in the same place we are, yet he is not accessible to us in a simple way, for he is in a different dimension. He is on a different level or in a different realm of reality. The many sounds within a given room can serve here as an example. Most of them are inaudible to the normal sense of hearing. If, however, we introduce a radio receiver and tune it across the frequencies of the dial, we will discover a vast variety of sounds. All of those radio waves were immanent within the room, but in frequencies unheard by the unaided human ear. In like manner, God is near to us; his presence and influence are everywhere. Yet because he is in a spiritual realm of reality, we cannot get from ourselves to him by mere geographical locomotion. It requires a change of state to make that transition, a change which usually involves death. Thus, God can be near, so very near, and yet be afar off as well, as several Scripture references indicate (e.g., Jer. 23:23; Eph. 4:6).

#### ***The Historical Model of the Theology of Hope***

A recent theological development that also adds to our understanding of transcendence is the theology of hope. Instead of thinking of God's

29. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1941), p. 369.

30. Heinecken, *Moment Before God*, pp. 90-93.

relationship to the world in cosmological terms, the theology of hope uses instead a historical model. God's transcendence is eschatological, not spatial.<sup>31</sup> He does not simply live in the past and work from past events. Nor is he simply immanent within the present occurrences. Rather, he appears on the frontier of life with its openness to the future. While some aspects of this theology suggest that God is not yet as complete as the Bible describes him, nonetheless here is a God who is transcendent in the sense of living and functioning where we have not yet been. The move from man to God is not a change of place (from here to there), but of state (from now to then, from present to future). While this theology is correct in emphasizing God's historical transcendence, his cosmological or metaphysical transcendence should not be ignored.

#### *Implications of Transcendence*

The doctrine of transcendence has several implications which will affect our other beliefs and our practices.

1. There is something higher than man. Man is not the highest good in the universe, or the highest measure of truth and value. Good, truth, and value are not determined by the shifting flux of this world and human opinion. There is something which gives value to man from above. The value of man is not that he is the highest product of the evolutionary process thus far, but that the supreme eternal being has made man in his own image. It is not man's estimation of himself, but the judgment of the holy God that gives man value.

2. God can never be completely captured in human concepts. This means that all of our doctrinal ideas, helpful and basically correct though they may be, cannot fully exhaust God's nature. He is not limited to our understanding of him. Nor can our forms of worship or styles of church architecture give full expression to what God is. There is no way in which we humans can adequately represent or approach God.

3. Our salvation is not our achievement. Fellowship with God is not attained by our making our way up to God. That is impossible. We are not able to raise ourselves to God's level by fulfilling his standards for us. Even if we were able to do so, it still would not be our accomplishment. The very fact that we know what he expects of us is a matter of his self-revelation, not our discovery. Even apart from the additional problem of sin, then, fellowship with God would be strictly a matter of his gift to us.

4. There will always be a difference between God and man. The gap

31. Frederick Herzog, "Towards the Waiting God," in *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, ed. Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 59-61.

between us is not merely a moral and spiritual disparity which originated with the fall. It is metaphysical, stemming from creation. Even when redeemed and glorified, we will still be renewed human beings. We will never become God. He will always be God and we will always be humans, so that there will always be a transcendence. Salvation consists in God's restoring us to what he intended us to be, not elevating us to what he is.

5. Reverence is appropriate in our relationship with God. Some worship, rightfully stressing the joy and confidence that the believer has in relationship to a loving heavenly Father, goes beyond that point to an excessive familiarity treating him as an equal, or worse yet, as a servant. If we have grasped the fact of the divine transcendence, however, this will not happen. While there are room and need for enthusiasm of expression, and perhaps even an exuberance, that should never lead to a loss of respect. There will always be a sense of awe and wonder, of what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>32</sup> Although there are love and trust and openness between us and God, we are not equals. He is the almighty, sovereign Lord. We are his servants and followers. This means that we will submit our wills to God; we will not try to make his will conform to ours. Our prayers will also be influenced accordingly. Rather than making demands in our prayers, we will pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

6. We will look for genuinely transcendent working by God. Thus we will not expect that only those things which can be accomplished by natural means will come to pass. While we will use every available technique of modern learning to accomplish God's ends, we will never cease to be dependent upon his working. We will not neglect prayer for his guidance or for his special intervention. Thus, for example, Christian counseling will not differ from other types of counseling (naturalistic or humanistic) only in that it is preceded by brief prayer. There will be the anticipation that God will, in response to faith and prayer, work in ways that could not be predicted or produced solely on the basis of natural factors.

As with the matter of God's immanence, so also with transcendence we must guard against the dangers of excessive emphasis. We will not look for God merely in the religious or devotional; we will also look for him in the "secular" aspects of life. We will not look for miracles exclusively, but we will not disregard them either. Some attributes, such as holiness, eternity, omnipotence, are expressive of the transcendent character of God. Others, such as omnipresence, are expressive of the

immanent. But if all aspects of God's nature are given the emphasis and attention that the Bible assigns to them, a fully rounded understanding of God will be the result. While God is never fully within our grasp since he goes far beyond our ideas and forms, yet he is always available to us when we turn to him.

<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University, 1958), pp. 12-40.

# 15

## God's Three-in-Oneness: The Trinity

### The Biblical Teaching

- The Oneness of God
- The Deity of Three
- Three-in-Oneness

### Historical Constructions

- The "Economic" View of the Trinity
- Dynamic Monarchianism
- Modalistic Monarchianism
- The Orthodox Formulation

### Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity

- The Search for Analogies

**I**n the doctrine of the Trinity, we encounter one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity. Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God. In so doing, it presents what seems on the surface to be a self-contradictory doctrine. Furthermore, this doctrine is not overtly or explicitly stated in Scripture. Nevertheless, devout minds have been led to it as they sought to do justice to the witness of Scripture.

The doctrine of the Trinity is crucial for Christianity. It is concerned with who God is, what he is like, how he works, and how he is to be approached. Moreover, the question of the deity of Jesus Christ, which has historically been a point of great tension, is very much wrapped up with one's understanding of the Trinity. The position we take on the Trinity will have profound bearing on our Christology.

The position we take on the Trinity will also answer several questions of a practical nature. Whom are we to worship—Father only, Son, Holy Spirit, or the Triune God? To whom are we to pray? Is the work of each to be considered in isolation from the work of the others, or may we think of the atoning death of Jesus as somehow the work of the Father as well? Should the Son be thought of as the Father's equal in essence, or should he be relegated to a somewhat lesser status?

In formulating our position on the Trinity, our theological method will be put to the test. Since the Trinity is not explicitly taught in Scripture, we will have to put together complementary themes, draw inferences from biblical teachings, and decide on a particular type of conceptual vehicle to express our understanding. In addition, because the formulation of the doctrine has had a long and complex history, we will have to evaluate past constructions against the background of their period and culture, and to enunciate the doctrine in a way that will be similarly appropriate for our age. Thus, formulating a position on the Trinity is a genuine exercise in *systematic* theology, calling forth all the skills which were discussed in the opening chapters.

We will begin our study of the Trinity by examining the biblical basis of the doctrine. This is fundamental to all else that we do here. It will be important to note the type of witness in the Scripture which led the church to formulate and propound this strange doctrine. Then we will examine various historical statements of the doctrine, noting particular emphases, strengths, and weaknesses. Finally, we will formulate our own statement for today, attempting to illustrate and clarify its tenets in such a way as to make it meaningful for our time.

### **The Biblical Teaching**

We begin with the biblical data bearing upon the doctrine of the Trinity. There are three separate but interrelated types of evidence: evidence for the unity of God—that God is one; evidence that there are three persons who are God; and finally, indications or at least intimations of the three-in-oneness.

### **The Oneness of God**

The religion of the ancient Hebrews was a rigorously monotheistic faith, as indeed the Jewish religion is to this day. The unity of God was revealed to Israel at several different times and in various ways. The Ten Commandments, for example, begin with the statement, “I am the **LORD** your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me [or besides me]” (Exod. 20:2–3). The Hebrew translated here as “before me” or “besides me” is **לֹא־פָנֵא** (*'al panai*), which means literally “to my face.” God had demonstrated his unique reality by what he had done, and thus was entitled to Israel's exclusive worship, devotion, and obedience. There were no others who had so proven their claim to deity.

The prohibition of idolatry, the second commandment (v. 4), also rests upon the uniqueness of Jehovah. He will not tolerate any worship of manmade objects, for he alone is God. He is the only member of a unique class. The rejection of polytheism runs throughout the Old Testament. God repeatedly demonstrates his superiority to other claimants to deity. It could, of course, be maintained that this does not conclusively prove that the Old Testament requires monotheism. It might simply be the case that it is the other gods (i.e., the gods of other nations) who are rejected by the Old Testament, but that there is more than one true God of the Israelites. In answer we need point out only that it is clearly assumed throughout the Old Testament that there is but one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not many (e.g., Exod. 3:13–15).

A clearer indication of the oneness of God is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, the great truths of which the people of Israel were commanded to absorb themselves and to inculcate into their children. They were to meditate upon these teachings (“these words … shall be upon your heart,” v. 6). They were to talk about them—at home and on the road, when lying down and when arising (v. 7). They were to use visual aids to call attention to them—wearing them on their hands and foreheads, and writing them on the doorframes of their houses and on their gates. And what are these great truths that were to be emphasized so? One is an indicative, a declarative statement; the other an imperative or command. “Hear, O Israel: the **LORD** our God is one **LORD**” (v. 4). While there are various legitimate translations of the Hebrew here, all alike emphasize the unique, unmatched deity of Jehovah. The second great truth God wanted Israel to learn and teach is a command based on his uniqueness: “Love the **LORD** your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (v. 5). Because he is one, there was to be no division of Israel's commitment. After the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4–5), the commands of Exodus 20 are virtually repeated. In positive terms God's

people are told: "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name" (Deut. 6:13). In negative terms they are told: "You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the peoples who are round about you" (v. 14). God is clearly one God, precluding the possibility that any of the gods of the surrounding peoples could be real and thereby worthy of service and devotion (cf. Exod. 15:11; Zech. 14:9).

The teaching regarding the oneness of God is not restricted to the Old Testament. James 2:19 commands belief in one God, while noting its insufficiency for justification. Paul also underscores the uniqueness of God. The apostle writes as he discusses the eating of meat which had been offered to idols: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is... but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:4, 6, NIV). Here Paul, like the Mosaic law, excludes idolatry on the grounds that there is only one God. Similarly, Paul writes to Timothy: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5–6). While on the surface these verses seem to distinguish Jesus from the only God, the Father, the primary thrust of the former reference is that God alone is truly God (idols are nothing); and the primary thrust of the latter is that there is but one God, and that there is only one mediator between God and men.

#### *The Deity of Three*

All this evidence, if taken by itself, would no doubt lead us to a basically monotheistic belief. What, then, moved the church beyond this evidence? It was the additional biblical witness to the effect that three persons are God. The deity of the first, the Father, is scarcely in dispute. In addition to the references in Paul's writings just cited (1 Cor. 8:4, 6; 1 Tim. 2:5–6), we may note the cases where Jesus refers to the Father as God. In Matthew 6:26, he indicates that "your heavenly Father feeds [the birds of the air]." In a parallel statement which follows shortly thereafter, he indicates that "God ... clothes the grass of the field" (v. 30). And in verses 31–32 he states that we need not ask about what we shall eat or drink or wear because "your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." It is apparent that, for Jesus, "God" and "your heavenly Father" are interchangeable expressions. And in numerous other references to God, Jesus obviously has the Father in mind (e.g., Matt. 19:23–26; 27:46; Mark 12:17, 24–27).

Somewhat more problematic is the status of Jesus as deity, yet Scripture also identifies him as God. (Since the topic of Jesus' divinity will be

developed in the section on Christology [Chap. 32], we will not go into great detail here.) A key reference to the deity of Christ Jesus is found in Philippians 2. In verses 5–11 Paul has taken what was in all likelihood a hymn of the early church and used it as the basis of an appeal to his readers to practice humility. He notes that "though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v. 6). The word here translated "form" is *μορφή*. This term in classical Greek as well as in biblical Greek means "the set of characteristics which constitutes a thing what it is." It denotes the genuine nature of a thing. The word *μορφή* contrasts with *σχῆμα*, which is also generally translated "form," but in the sense of shape or superficial appearance rather than substance.

For Paul, an orthodox Jew trained in the rabbinic teaching of strict Judaism, verse 6 is indeed an astonishing statement. Reflecting the faith of the early church, it suggests a deep commitment to the full deity of Christ. This commitment is indicated not only by the use of *μορφή*, but by the expression "equality [*ἴσα*] with God." It is generally held that the thrust of verse 6 is that Jesus possessed equality with God, but did not attempt to hold on to it. Some have argued, however, that Jesus did not possess equality with God; the thrust of this verse is, then, that Jesus neither coveted nor aspired to equality with God. Thus, *ἀπταγμόν* ("a thing to be grasped") should not be interpreted as "a thing to cling to," but "a thing to seize." But this argument is obviously wrong, for verse 7 indicates, to the contrary, that he "emptied himself" (*ἐκαντὸνέκενωσεν*). While Paul does not specify of what Jesus emptied himself, it is apparent that this was an active step of self-abnegation, not a passive declining to take action. Hence equality with God is something which he antecedently possessed. And one who is equal with God must be God.<sup>1</sup>

Another significant passage is Hebrews 1. The author, whose identity is unknown to us, is writing to a group of Hebrew Christians. He (or she) makes several statements which strongly imply the full deity of the Son. In the opening verses, as the writer (who will hereafter be referred to with the masculine personal pronoun) argues that the Son is superior to

1. There are divergent interpretations of this passage, e.g., Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil 2, 5–11*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1961); Ralph Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967). But I would call the reader's attention to Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner, 1965), p. 235, n. 9; Leon Morris, *The Lord from Heaven: A Study of the New Testament Teaching on the Deity and Humanity of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); Paul D. Feinberg, "The Kenosis and Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Analysis of Philippians 2:6–11," *Trinity Journal*, n.s. 1 (1980): 21–46. Morris, for example, comments: "It cannot be maintained that Paul was thinking of a Jesus who was no more than human. Phil. ii. 5ff. is a passage which demands for its understanding that Jesus was divine in the fullest sense" (p. 74).

the angels, he notes that God has spoken through the Son, appointed him heir of all things, and made the universe through him (v. 2). He then describes the Son as the “radiance [*ἀπαύγασμα*] of God’s glory” (NIV) and the “exact representation of his being” (*χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως*). While it could perhaps be maintained that this affirms only that God revealed himself through the Son, rather than that the Son *is* God, the context suggests otherwise. In addition to identifying himself as the Father of the one whom he here calls Son (v. 5), God is quoted in verse 8 (from Ps. 45:6) as addressing the Son as “God” and in verse 10 as “Lord” (from Ps. 102:25). The writer concludes by noting that God said to the Son, “Sit at my right hand” (from Ps. 110:1). It is significant that the Scripture writer addresses Hebrew Christians, who certainly would be steeped in monotheism, in ways which undeniably affirm the deity of Jesus and his equality with the Father.

A final consideration is Jesus’ own self-consciousness. We should note that Jesus never directly asserted his deity. He never said simply, “I am God.” Yet several threads of evidence suggest that this is indeed how he understood himself. He claimed to possess what properly belongs only to God. He spoke of the angels of God (Luke 12:8–9; 15:10) as his angels (Matt. 13:41). He regarded the kingdom of God (Matt. 12:28; 19:14, 24; 21:3 1, 43) and the elect of God (Mark 13:20) as his own. Further, he claimed to forgive sins (Mark 2:8–10). The Jews recognized that only God can forgive sins, and they consequently accused Jesus of blasphemy (*βλασφημία*). He also claimed the power to judge the world (Matt. 25:31) and to reign over it (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62).

Further, we may note how Jesus responded both to those who accused him of claiming deity and to those who sincerely attributed divinity to him. At his trial, the accusation brought against him was that he claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:7; Matt. 26:63–65). If Jesus did not regard himself as God, here was a splendid opportunity for him to correct a mistaken impression. Yet this he did not do. In fact, at his trial before Caiaphas he came as close as he ever did to affirming his own deity. For he responded to the charge, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” by stating, “You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Either he desired to be put to death on a false charge, or he did understand himself to be the Son of God. Moreover, when Thomas addressed Jesus as “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28), Jesus did not disavow the appellation.

There also are biblical references which identify the Holy Spirit as God. Here we may note that there are passages where references to the Holy Spirit occur interchangeably with references to God. One example of this is Acts 5:3–4. Ananias and Sapphira held back a portion of the

proceeds from the sale of their property, misrepresenting what they laid at the apostles’ feet as the entirety. Here, lying to the Holy Spirit (v. 3) is equated with lying to God (v. 4). The Holy Spirit is also described as having the qualities and performing the works of God. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts men of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11). He regenerates or gives new life (John 3:8). In 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, we read that it is the Spirit who conveys gifts to the church, and who exercises sovereignty over who receives those gifts. In addition, he receives the honor and glory reserved for God.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, Paul reminds believers that they are God’s temple and his Spirit dwells within them. In chapter 6, he says that their bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit within them (vv. 19–20). “God” and “Holy Spirit” seem to be interchangeable expressions. Also there are several places where the Holy Spirit is put on an equal footing with God. One is the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19; a second is the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14; finally, there is 1 Peter 1:2, where Peter addresses his readers as “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.”

### *Three-in-Oneness*

On the surface, these two lines of evidence—God’s oneness and threeness—seem contradictory. In the earliest years of its existence the church did not have much opportunity to study the relationship between these two sets of data. The process of organizing itself and propagating the faith and even the struggle for survival in a hostile world precluded much serious doctrinal reflection. As the church became more secure, however, it began attempting to fit together these two types of material. It concluded that God must be understood as three-in-one, or in other words, triune. At this point we must pose the question whether this doctrine is explicitly taught in the Bible, is suggested by the Scripture, or is merely an inference drawn from other teachings of the Bible.

One text which has traditionally been appealed to as documenting the Trinity is 1 John 5:7, that is, as it is found in earlier versions such as the King James: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” Here is, apparently, a clear and succinct statement of the three-in-oneness. Unfortunately, however, the textual basis is so weak that some recent translations (e.g., NIV) include this statement only in an italicized footnote, and others omit it altogether (e.g., RSV). If there is a biblical basis for the Trinity, it must be sought elsewhere.

The plural form of the noun for the God of Israel, אלהים ('elohim), is sometimes regarded as an intimation of a trinitarian view. This is a generic name used to refer to other gods as well. When used with reference to Israel's God, it is generally, but not always, found in the plural. Some would argue that here is a hint of the plural nature of God. The plural form is commonly interpreted, however, as an indication of majesty or intensity rather than of multiplicity within God's nature. Theodorus Vriezen thinks that the plural form is intended to elevate the referent to the status of a general representative of the class and accordingly rejects the idea that the doctrine of the Trinity is implied in Genesis 1:26.<sup>2</sup> Walter Eichrodt believes that in using the plural of majesty ('elohim) the writer of Genesis intended to preserve his cosmogony from any trace of polytheistic thought and at the same time to represent the Creator God as the absolute ruler and the only being whose will carries any weight.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation of 'elohim as a plural of majesty is by no means unanimously held by recent Old Testament scholarship, however. In 1953, G. A. F. Knight argued against it in a monograph entitled *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity*. He maintained that to make 'elohim a plural of majesty is to read into ancient Hebrew a modern way of thinking, since the kings of Israel and Judah are all addressed in the singular in our biblical records.<sup>4</sup> While rejecting the plural of majesty, Knight pointed out that there is, nonetheless, a peculiarity in Hebrew which will help us understand the term in question. The words for water and heaven (among others) are both plural. Grammarians have termed this phenomenon the quantitative plural. Water may be thought of in terms of individual raindrops or of a mass of water such as is found in the ocean. Knight asserted that this quantitative diversity in unity is a fitting way of understanding the plural 'elohim. He also believed that this explains why the singular noun אֱלֹהִי ('adonai) is written as a plural.<sup>5</sup>

There are other plural forms as well. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image." Here the plural appears both in the verb "let us make" and in the possessive suffix "our." In Genesis 11:7 there is also a plural verb form: "Let us go down, and there confuse their language." When Isaiah was called, he heard the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8). The objection has been raised that

2. Theodorus Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1958), p. 179.

3. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 187.

4. G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), p. 20.

5. Ibid.

these are plurals of majesty. What is significant,<sup>+</sup> however, from the standpoint of logical analysis, is the shift from singular to plural in the first and third of these examples. Genesis 1:26 actually says, "Then God said [singular], 'Let us make [plural] man in our [plural] image.'" The Scripture writer does not use a plural (of majesty) verb with 'elohim, but God is quoted as using a plural verb with reference to himself. Similarly, Isaiah 6:8 reads: "Whom shall I send [singular], and who will go for us [plural]?"

The teaching regarding the image of God in man has also been viewed as an intimation of the Trinity. Genesis 1:27 reads:

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

Some would argue that what we have here is a parallelism not merely in the first two, but in all three lines. Thus, "male and female he created them" is equivalent to "So God created man in his own image" and to "in the image of God he created him." On this basis, the image of God in man (generic) is to be found in the fact that man has been created male and female (i.e., plural).<sup>6</sup> This means that the image of God must consist in a unity in plurality, a characteristic of both the ectype and the archetype. According to Genesis 2:24, man and woman are to become one (אחד—'echad); a union of two separate entities is entailed. It is significant that the same word is used of God in the *Shema*: "The LORD our God is one [אחד] LORD" (Deut. 6:4). It seems that something is being affirmed here about the nature of God—he is an organism, that is, a unity of distinct parts.

In several places in Scripture the three persons are linked together in unity and apparent equality. One of these is the baptismal formula as prescribed in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20): baptizing in (or into) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Note that "name" is singular, although there are three persons included. Note also that there is no suggestion of inferiority or subordination. This formula became part of a very early tradition in the church—it is found in the *Didache* (7. 1–4) and in Justin's *Apology* (1.61).

Yet another direct linking of the three names is the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14—"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Here again is a linkage of the three names in unity and apparent equality.

6. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 33–40, 43–48; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), vol. 3, part 1, pp. 183–201.

In both the Gospels and the Epistles there are linkages of the three persons which are not quite as direct and explicit. The angel tells Mary that her child will be called holy, the Son of God, because the Holy Spirit will come upon her (Luke 1:35). At the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16–17), all three persons of the Trinity are present. The Son is baptized, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and the Father speaks words of commendation of the Son. Jesus relates his doing of miracles to the power of the Spirit of God, and indicates that this is evidence that the kingdom of God has come (Matt. 12:28). The threefold pattern can also be seen in Jesus' statement that he will send the promise of the Father upon the disciples (Luke 24:49). Peter's message at Pentecost also links all three: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. ... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33, 38).

In 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 Paul speaks of the conferring of special endowments upon believers within the body of Christ: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one." In a soteriological context he says: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4:6). Paul speaks of his own ministry in terms of "the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:16). And Paul relates the several steps in the process of salvation to the various persons of the Trinity: "But it is God who established us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 1:21–22). Similarly, Paul addresses the Thessalonians as "brethren beloved by the Lord," and indicates that he always gives thanks for them because "God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13–14). We might also mention here the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14–19.

It is obvious that Paul saw a very close relationship among the three persons. And so did the writers of other epistles. Peter begins his first letter by addressing his readers as the exiles of the dispersion "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1 Peter 1:1–2). Jude urges his readers: "Build yourselves up on your most holy faith;

pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (vv. 20–21).

A more subtle indication of Paul's trinitarian view is the way in which he organizes some of his books. Thus the form as well as the content of his writings communicates his belief in the Trinity. Arthur Wainwright has developed this at some length.<sup>7</sup> He outlines Romans in part as follows:

- The judgment of God upon all (1:18–3:20)
- Justification through faith in Christ (3:21–8:1)
- Life in the Spirit (8:2–30)

Part of Galatians follows a similar pattern:

- Justification through faith in Christ (3:1–29)
- Adoption into sonship through the redemption wrought by Christ and the sending of the Spirit (4:1–7)
- The bondage of the law and the freedom given by Christ (4:8–5:15)
- Life in the Spirit (5: 16–6: 10)

The same is true of 1 Corinthians. It is apparent that the Trinity was a very significant part of Paul's conception of the gospel and the Christian life.

It is in the Fourth Gospel that the strongest evidence of a coequal Trinity is to be found. The threefold formula appears again and again: 1:33–34; 14:16, 26; 16:13–15; 20:21–22 (cf. 1 John 4:2, 13–14). The inter-dynamics among the three persons comes through repeatedly, as George Hendry has observed.<sup>8</sup> The Son is sent by the Father (14:24) and comes forth from him (16:28). The Spirit is given by the Father (14:16), sent from the Father (14:26), and proceeds from the Father (15:26). Yet the Son is closely involved in the coming of the Spirit: he prays for his coming (14:16); the Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name (14:26); the Son will send the Spirit from the Father (15:26); the Son must go away so that he can send the Spirit (16:7). The Spirit's ministry is understood as a continuation and elaboration of that of the Son. He will bring to remembrance what the Son has said (14:26); he will bear witness to the

7. Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 257ff.

8. George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 31.

Son (1526); he will declare what he hears from the Son, thus glorifying the Son (16:13–14).

The prologue of the Gospel also contains material rich in significance for the doctrine of the Trinity. John says in the first verse of the book: “The Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*όλόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος*). Here is an indication of the divinity of the Word; note how the difference in word order between the first and second clauses serves to accentuate “God” (or “divine”). Here also we find the idea that while the Son is distinct from the Father, yet there is fellowship between them, for the preposition *πρὸς* does not connote merely physical proximity to the Father, but an intimacy of fellowship as well.

There are other ways in which this Gospel stresses the closeness and unity between the Father and the Son. Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (10:30), and “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). He prays that his disciples may be one as he and the Father are one (17:21).

Our conclusion from the data we have just examined: Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not expressly asserted, the Scripture, particularly the New Testament, contains so many suggestions of the deity and unity of the three persons that we can understand why the church formulated the doctrine, and conclude that they were right in so doing.

### Historical Constructions

As we have observed earlier, during the first two centuries A.D. there was little conscious attempt to wrestle with the theological and philosophical issues of what we now term the doctrine of the Trinity. We find the use of the triadic formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but relatively little attempt to expound or explain it. Such thinkers as Justin and Tatian stressed the unity of essence between the Word and the Father and used the imagery of the impossibility of separating light from its source, the sun. In this way they illustrated that, while the Word and the Father are distinct, they are not divisible or separable?

#### *The “Economic” View of the Trinity*

In Hippolytus and Tertullian, we find the development of an “economic” view of the Trinity. There was little attempt to explore the eternal relations among the three; rather, there was a concentration on the ways in which the Triad were manifested in creation and redemption.

9. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 61. 2; 128. 3f.

While creation and redemption showed the Son and the Spirit to be other than the Father, they were also regarded as inseparably one with him in his eternal being. Like the mental functions of a man, God’s reason, that is, the Word, was regarded as being immanently and indivisibly with him.

In Tertullian’s view, there are three manifestations of the one God. Although they are numerically distinct, so that they can be counted, they are nonetheless manifestations of a single indivisible power. There is a distinction (*distinctio*) or distribution (*dispositio*), not a division or separation (*separatio*). As illustrations of the unity within the Godhead, Tertullian points to the unity between a root and its shoot, a source and its river, the sun and its light. The Father, Son, and Spirit are one identical substance; this substance has been extended into three manifestations, but not divided.<sup>10</sup>

By way of a quick evaluation, we note that there is something of a vagueness about this view of the Trinity. Any effort to come up with a more exact understanding of just what it means will prove disappointing.

#### *Dynamic Monarchianism*

In the late second and third centuries, two attempts were made to come up with a precise definition of the relationship between Christ and God. Both of these views have been referred to as monarchianism (literally, “sole sovereignty”), since they stress the uniqueness and unity of God, but only the latter claimed the designation for itself. An examination of these two theologies will help us better understand the view upon which orthodox Christianity finally settled.

The originator of dynamic monarchianism was a Byzantine leather merchant named Theodosius, who introduced it to Rome about 190 A.D. In many areas of doctrine, such as divine omnipotence, the creation of the world, and even the virgin birth of Jesus, Theodosius was fully orthodox. He maintained, however, that prior to baptism Jesus was an ordinary man, although a completely virtuous one. At the baptism, the Spirit, or Christ, descended upon him, and from that time on he performed miraculous works of God. Some of Theodosius’s followers maintained that Jesus actually became divine at this point or after the resurrection, but Theodosius himself denied this. Jesus was an ordinary man, inspired but not indwelt by the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

A later representative of this type of teaching was Paul of Samosata, who propounded his views early in the second half of the third century

10. Tertullian *Apology* 21. 11-13.

11. Tertullian *De praescriptione haereticorum* 53; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.

and was condemned at the synod of Antioch in 268. He claimed that the Word (the Logos) was not a personal, self-subsistent entity; that is, Jesus Christ was not the Word. Rather, the term refers to God's commandment and ordinance. God ordered and accomplished what he willed through the man Jesus. This is the meaning of "Logos." If there is one common element between the views of Theodosius and Paul of Samosata, it is that God was dynamically present in the life of the man Jesus. There was a working or force of God upon or in or through the man Jesus, but there was no real substantive presence of God within him. Dynamic monarchianism was never a widespread, popular movement. It had a rationalist appeal, and tended to be a rather isolated phenomenon.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Modalistic Monarchianism*

By contrast, modalistic monarchianism was a fairly widespread, popular teaching. Whereas dynamic monarchianism seemed to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, modalism appeared to affirm it. Both varieties of monarchianism desired to preserve the doctrine of the unity of God. Modalism, however, was also strongly committed to the full deity of Jesus. Since the term **Father** was generally regarded as signifying the Godhead itself, any suggestion that the Word or Son was somehow other than the Father upset the modalists. It seemed to them to be a case of bitheism.

Among the names associated with modalism are Noetus of Smyrna, who was active in the latter part of the second century; Praxeas (this may actually be a nickname meaning "busybody" for an unidentified churchman), who was combated by Tertullian early in the third century;<sup>13</sup> and Sabellius, who wrote and taught early in the third century. It was Sabellius who developed this doctrinal conception in its most complete and sophisticated form.

The essential idea of this school of thought is that there is one Godhead which may be variously designated as Father, Son, or Spirit. The terms do not stand for real distinctions, but are merely names which are appropriate and applicable at different times. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical—they are successive revelations of the same person. The modalistic solution to the paradox of threeness and oneness was, then, not three persons, but one person with three different names, roles, or activities.<sup>14</sup>

12. Athanasius *On the Decrees of the Nicene Synod (Defense of the Nicene Council)* 5. 24; *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 2.26; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 7.30.

13. Tertullian *Adversus Praxeam* 1.

14. Athanasius *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 3.23.4.

Another basic idea expressed by modalism was that the Father suffered along with Christ, since he was actually present in and personally identical with the Son. This idea, labeled "patriconciliarism," was considered heretical and was one of the factors leading to the rejection of modalism. (It may well be that the chief reason for the repudiation of patriconciliarism was not its conflict with the biblical revelation, but with the Greek philosophical conception of impassibility.<sup>15</sup>)

It must be acknowledged that in modalistic monarchianism we have a genuinely unique, original, and creative conception, and one which is in some ways a brilliant breakthrough. Both the unity of the Godhead and the deity of all three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are preserved. Yet the church in assessing this theology deemed it lacking in some significant respects. In particular, the fact that the three occasionally appear simultaneously upon the stage of biblical revelation proved to be a major stumbling block to this view. Some of the trinitarian texts noted earlier proved troublesome. The baptismal scene, where the Father speaks to the Son, and the Spirit descends upon the Son, is an example, together with all those passages where Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit, or speaks of or to the Father. If modalism is accepted, Jesus' words and actions in these passages must be regarded as misleading. Consequently, the church, although some of its officials and even Popes Zephyrinus and Callistus I toyed with the ideas of modalism for a time, came eventually to reject it as insufficient to account for the full range of biblical data.

#### *The Orthodox Formulation*

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was enunciated in a series of debates and councils which were in large part prompted by the controversies sparked by such movements as monarchianism and Arianism. It was at the Council of Constantinople (381) that there emerged a definitive statement in which the church made explicit the beliefs which had been held implicitly. The view which prevailed was basically that of Athanasius (293–373), as it was elaborated and refined by the Cappadocian theologians—Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.

The formula which expresses the position of Constantinople is "one οὐσία in three ὑποστάσεις." The emphasis often seems to be more on the latter part of the formula, that is, on the separate existence of the three persons rather than on the one indivisible Godhead. The one Godhead exists simultaneously in three modes of being or hypostases. The idea of "coincidence" or, as later termed, perichoresis of the persons is

15. Tertullian *Adversus Praxeam* 29.

emphasized. The Godhead exists “undivided in divided persons.” There is an “identity of nature” in the three hypostases. Basil says:

For all things that are the Father’s are beheld in the Son, and all things that are the Son’s are the Father’s; because the whole Son is in the Father and has all the Father in himself. Thus the hypostasis of the Son becomes as it were form and face of the knowledge of the Father, and the hypostasis of the Father is known in the form of the Son, while the proper quality which is contemplated therein remains for the plain distinction of the hypostases.<sup>16</sup>

The Cappadocians attempted to expound the concepts of common substance and multiple separate persons by the analogy of a universal and its particulars—the individual persons of the Trinity are related to the divine substance in the same fashion as individual men are related to the universal man (or humanity). Each of the individual hypostases is the *ousia* of the Godhead distinguished by the characteristics or properties peculiar to him, just as individual humans have unique characteristics which distinguish them from other individual human persons. These respective properties of the divine persons are, according to Basil, paternity, sonship, and sanctifying power or sanctification.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that the orthodox formula protects the doctrine of the Trinity against the danger of modalism. Has it done so, however, at the expense of falling into the opposite error-tritheism? On the surface, the danger seems considerable. Two points were made, however, to safeguard the doctrine of the Trinity against tritheism.

First, it was noted that if we can find a single activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which is in no way different in any of the three persons, we must conclude that there is but one identical substance involved. And such unity was found in the divine activity of revelation. Revelation originates in the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Spirit. It is not three actions, but one action in which all three are involved.

Second, there was an insistence upon the concreteness and indivisibility of the divine substance. Much of the criticism of the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity focused on the analogy of a universal manifesting itself in particulars. To avoid the conclusion that there is a multiplicity of Gods within the Godhead just as there is a multiplicity of men within humanity, Gregory of Nyssa suggested that, strictly speaking, we ought not to talk about a multiplicity of men, but a multiplicity of the one universal man. Thus the Cappadocians continued to emphasize that,

<sup>16</sup> Basil *Letters* 38. 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. 5; 214. 4; 236. 6.

while the three members of the Trinity can be distinguished numerically as persons, they are indistinguishable in their essence or substance. They are distinguishable as persons, but one and inseparable in their being.

It should be reiterated here that *ousia* is not abstract, but a concrete reality. Further, this divine essence is simple and indivisible. Following the Aristotelian doctrine that only what is material is quantitatively divisible, the Cappadocians at times virtually denied that the category of number can be applied to the Godhead at all. God is simple and incomposite. Thus, while each of the persons is one, they cannot be added together to make three entities.

#### Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity

Before attempting a contemporary construction of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is important to pause to note the salient elements which must be included.

1. We begin with the unity of God. Monotheism is deeply implanted within the Hebrew-Christian tradition. God is one, not several. The unity of God may be compared to the unity of husband and wife, but we must keep in mind that we are dealing with one God, not a joining of separate entities.

2. The deity of each of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, must be affirmed. Each is qualitatively the same. The Son is divine in the same way and to the same extent as is the Father, and this is true of the Holy Spirit as well.

3. The threeness and the oneness of God are not in the same respect. Although the orthodox interpretation of the Trinity seems contradictory (God is one and yet three), the contradiction is not real, but only apparent. A contradiction exists if something is A and not A at the same time and in the same respect. Modalism attempted to deal with the apparent contradiction by stating that the three modes or manifestations of God are not simultaneous; at any given time, only one is being revealed. Orthodoxy, however, insists that God is three persons at every moment of time. Maintaining his unity as well, orthodoxy deals with the problem by suggesting that the way in which God is three is in some respect different from the way in which he is one. The fourth-century thinkers spoke of one *ousia* and three hypostases. Now comes the problem of determining what these two terms mean, or, more broadly, what the difference is between the nature or locus of God’s oneness and that of his threeness.

4. The Trinity is eternal. There have always been three, Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit, and all of them have always been divine. One or more of them did not come into being at some point in time, or at some point become divine. There has never been any alteration in the nature of the Triune God. He is and will be what he has always been.

5. The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence. Each of the three persons of the Trinity has had, for a period of time, a particular function unique to himself. This is to be understood as a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end, not a change in his status or essence. In human experience, there is functional subordination as well. Several equals in a business or enterprise may choose one of their number to serve as the captain of a task force or the chairperson of a committee for a given time, but without any change in rank. The same is true in military circles. In the days of **multimember** aircraft crews, the pilot, although the ranking officer on the ship, would follow the instructions of the bombardier, a lower-ranking officer, during the bombing run. In like fashion, the Son did not become less than the Father during his earthly incarnation, but he did subordinate himself functionally to the Fathers will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (see John 14-16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that he is less than they are.

6. The Trinity is incomprehensible. We cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. When someday we see God, we shall see him as he is, and understand him better than we do now. Yet even then we will not totally comprehend him. Because he is the unlimited God and we are limited in our capacity to know and understand, he will always exceed our knowledge and understanding. We will always be human beings, even though perfected human beings. We will never become God. Those aspects of God which we will never fully comprehend should be regarded as mysteries that go beyond our reason rather than as paradoxes which conflict with reason.

### The Search for Analogies

The problem in constructing a statement of the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely to understand the terminology. That is in itself hard enough; for example, it is difficult to know what "person" means in this context. More difficult yet is to understand the interrelationships among the members of the Trinity. The human mind occasionally seeks analogies which will help in this effort.

On a popular level, analogies drawn from physical nature have often

been utilized. A widely-used analogy, for example, is the egg: it consists of yolk, white, and shell, all of which together form one whole egg. Another favorite analogy is water: it can be found in solid, liquid, and vaporous forms. At times other material objects have been used as illustrations. One pastor, in instructing young catechumens, attempted to clarify the threeness yet oneness by posing the question, "Is (or are) trousers singular or plural?" His answer was that trousers is singular at the top, and they are plural at the bottom.

Note that these analogies and illustrations, as well as large numbers of similar analogies drawn from the physical realm, tend to be either tritheistic or **modalistic** in their implications. On one hand, the analogies involving the egg and the trousers seem to suggest that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate parts of the divine nature. On the other hand, the analogy involving the various forms of water has modalistic overtones, since ice, liquid water, and steam are modes of existence. A given quantity of water does not simultaneously exist in all three states.

In recent years, some theologians, drawing upon the insights of analytical philosophy, have intentionally utilized grammatical "category transgressions" or 'logically odd qualifiers' to point out the tension between the oneness and the threeness. Examples of their attempts at clarification are statements like "God are one" and "they is three." Yet these odd sentences serve better to state the issue than to clarify it.

One of the most creative minds in the history of Christian theology was Augustine. In *De trinitate*, which may be his greatest work, he turned his prodigious intellect to the problem of the nature of the Trinity. He reflected upon this doctrine throughout his entire Christian life and wrote his treatise on the subject over a twenty-year period (399-419). In keeping with the Western or Latin tradition, his view emphasizes the unity of God more than the threeness. The three members of the Trinity are not separate individuals in the way in which three members of the human race are separate individuals. Each member of the Trinity is in his essence identical with the others or with the divine substance itself. They are distinguished in terms of their relations within the Godhead.

The major contribution of Augustine to the understanding of the Trinity is his analogies drawn from the realm of human personality. He argued that since man is made in the image of God, who is triune, it is therefore reasonable to expect to find, through an analysis of man's nature, a reflection, however faint, of God's triunity. Beginning with the biblical statement that God is love, Augustine noted there are three necessary elements in love: the lover, the object loved, and the love which unites them, or at least tends to do so.<sup>18</sup> While this analogy has

<sup>18</sup> Augustine *De trinitate* 8. 10.

received a great deal of attention, it was for Augustine merely a starting point, a steppingstone to a more significant analogy based upon the inner man and, in particular, upon the mind's activity in relationship to itself or to God. Already in the *Confessions*, we see the analogy based upon the inner man in the triad of being, knowing, and willing.<sup>19</sup> In *De trinitate* the analogy based on the mind's activity is presented in three stages or three trinities: (1) the mind, its knowledge of itself, and its love of itself;<sup>20</sup> (2) memory, understanding, and the will;<sup>21</sup> (3) the mind remembering God, knowing God, and loving God.<sup>22</sup> While all of these stages of the analogy give us insight into the mutual relations among the persons of the Trinity, Augustine feels that the last of the three is the most helpful, reasoning that when man consciously focuses upon God, he most fully bears the image of his Maker.

In practice even orthodox Christians have difficulty clinging simultaneously to the several components of the doctrine. Our use of these several analogies suggests that perhaps in practice or in our unofficial theology none of us is really fully trinitarian. We tend to alternate between tritheism, a belief in three equal, closely related Gods, and modalism, a belief in one God who plays three different roles or reveals himself in three different fashions.

Augustine's suggestion that analogies can be drawn between the Trinity and the realm of human personality is a helpful one. In seeking for thought forms or for a conceptual basis on which to develop a doctrine of the Trinity, we have found the realm of individual and social relationships to be a more fruitful source than is the realm of physical objects. This is true for two reasons. The first is that God himself is spirit; the social and personal domain is, then, closer to God's basic nature than is the realm of material objects. The second is that there is greater interest today in human and social subjects than in the physical universe. Accordingly, we will examine two analogies drawn from the realm of human relationships.

The first analogy is drawn from the realm of individual human psychology. As a self-conscious person, I may engage in internal dialogue with myself. I may take different positions and interact with myself. I may even engage in a debate with myself. Furthermore, I am a complex human person with multiple roles and responsibilities in dynamic interplay with one another. As I consider what I should do in a given situation, the husband, the father, the seminary professor, and the United

19. Augustine *Confessions* 13. 11.

20. Augustine *De trinitate* 9. 2-8.

21. [bid., 10. 17-19.

22. [bid., 14. 11-12.

States citizen that together constitute me may mutually inform one another.

One problem with this analogy is that in human experience it is most clearly seen in situations where there is tension or competition, rather than harmony, between the individual's various positions and roles. The discipline of abnormal psychology affords us with extreme examples of virtual warfare between the constituent elements of the human personality. But in God, by contrast, there are always perfect harmony, communication, and love.

The other analogy is from the sphere of interpersonal human relations. Take the case of identical twins. In one sense, they are of the same essence, for their genetic makeup is identical. An organ transplant from one to the other can be accomplished with relative ease, for the recipient's body will not reject the donor's organ as foreign; it will accept it as its very own. Identical twins are very close in other ways as well. They have similar interests and tastes. Although they have different spouses and different employers, a close bond unites them. And yet they are not the same person. They are two, not one.

These two analogies emphasize different aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. The former puts major stress upon the oneness. The latter illustrates more clearly the threeness. A few years ago, I tended to the former analogy, which reflects a modal (but not modalistic) view. More recently, however, I have come to the conclusion that both must be equally emphasized. The Greek (Cappadocians') stress on the three persons and the Latin (Western) stress on God's unity are equally vital. Each group had seized upon an indispensable facet of the truth. And yet, from a logical standpoint, both cannot be true simultaneously, at least as far as we can understand. May it not be that what we have here is a mystery? We must cling to both, even though we cannot see the exact relationship between the two.

Perhaps this mystery which we must cling to in order to preserve the full data is, as Augustus Strong puts it, "inscrutable." Yet the theologian is not the only one who must retain two polarities as he functions. Physicists have never finally and perfectly resolved the question of the nature of light. One theory says that it is waves. The other says it is quanta, little bundles of energy as it were. Logically it cannot be both. Yet, to account for all the data, one must hold both theories simultaneously. As one physics major put it: "On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, we think of light as waves; on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, we think of it as particles of energy." Presumably, on Sundays physicists do not concern themselves with the nature of light. One cannot explain a mystery; he can only acknowledge its presence.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a crucial ingredient of our faith. Each of the three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to be worshiped, as is the Triune God. And, keeping in mind their distinctive work, it is appropriate to direct prayers of thanks and of petition to each of the members of the Trinity, as well as to all of them collectively. Furthermore, the perfect love and unity within the Godhead model for us the oneness and affection that should characterize our relationships within the body of Christ.

It appears that Tertullian was right in affirming that the doctrine of the Trinity must be divinely revealed, not humanly constructed. It is so absurd from a human standpoint that no one would have invented it. We do not hold the doctrine of the Trinity because it is self-evident or logically cogent. We hold it because God has revealed that this is what he is like. As someone has said of this doctrine:

**Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind;  
But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul.**

---

---

## PART FOUR

# What God Does

- 16. God's Plan**
- 17. God's Originating Work: Creation**
- 18. God's Continuing Work: Providence**
- 19. Evil and God's World: A Special Problem**
- 20. God's Special Agents: Angels**

## God's Plan

### Key Definitions

The Biblical Teaching

The Terminology

The Old Testament Teaching

The New Testament Teaching

The Nature of the Divine Plan

Logical Priority: God's Plan or Human Action?

A Moderately Calvinistic Model

Various Understandings of History

**W**here is history going, and why? What if anything is causing the pattern of history to develop as it is? These are questions which confront every thinking person and which crucially affect his way of life. Christianity's answer is that God has a plan which includes everything that occurs, and that he is now at work carrying out that plan.

### Key Definitions

We sometimes refer to the plan of God as the decrees of God. There are several reasons, however, why in this volume we will use the term

*plan* rather than decrees. First, it stresses the unity of God's intention together with the resultant consistency and coherence of his actions. Second, it emphasizes what God does, that is, what he wills, rather than what man must do or what happens to man as a consequence of God's will. Third, it emphasizes the intelligent dimension of God's decisions. They are not arbitrary or haphazard.

We may define the plan of God as his eternal decision rendering certain all things which shall come to pass. There are several analogies which, though necessarily insufficient, may help us to understand this concept. The plan of God is like the architect's plans, drawn first in his mind and then on paper, according to his intention and design, and only afterward executed in an actual structure. Or God may be thought of as being like an athletic coach who has a carefully conceived game plan which his team seeks to carry out. Or he may be likened to a business executive planning the strategy and tactics of his firm. He is like the student who plans carefully her schedule of work for the term so that she is able to do a good job on all her required assignments and to complete them on time.

It is necessary at this point to clarify certain terminology. Many theologians use the terms *predestinate* and *foreordain* virtually synonymously. For our purposes, however, we shall use them somewhat differently. "Predestinate" carries a somewhat narrower connotation than does "foreordain." Since it literally suggests the destiny of someone or something, it is best used of God's plan as it relates in particular to the eternal condition of moral agents. We will use the term *foreordain* in a broader sense, that is, to refer to the decisions of God with respect to any matters within the realm of cosmic history. "Predestination" will be reserved for the matter of eternal salvation or condemnation. Within predestination, "election" will be used of God's positive choice of individuals, nations, or groups to eternal life and fellowship with him. "Election" will refer to positive predestination, while "reprobation" will refer to negative predestination or God's choice of some to suffer eternal damnation or lostness. The use of "predestination" is limited in this volume to either election or reprobation or both; "foreordination," on the other hand, while it also may refer to election, reprobation, or both, has a far broader range of meaning. In this I am adopting basically the usage of Louis Berkhof,<sup>1</sup> as over against that of B. B. Warfield, who said, "'Foreordain' and 'predestinate' are exact synonyms, the choice between which can be determined only by taste."<sup>2</sup>

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 109.

2. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Predestination," in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University, 1929), p. 4.

### The Biblical Teaching

#### *The Terminology*

The Bible contains a rich set of teachings regarding the divine plan. Several terms in both Hebrew and Greek are used to refer to God's design. יְצָרָה (*yutsar*), which is probably the most explicit of the Hebrew terms, appears in Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 22:11; 37:26; and 46:11. It carries the idea of purpose and prior determination. Another common Hebrew term, יָצַא (*ya'ats*), is used by Isaiah several times (14:24, 26, 27; 19:12, 17; 23:9) and by Jeremiah (49:20; 50:45). Its substantive derivative, יְצָהָה (*'etsah*), is both common and precise (Job 38:2; 42:3; Pss. 33:11; 106:13; 107:11; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 5:19; 14:26; 19:17; 46:10, 11; Jer. 32:19; 49:20; 50:45; Mic. 4:12). יְצָהָה frequently occurs together with מְחַשֵּׁבָה (*machashabah*) (Jer. 50:45; Mic. 4:12—for independent occurrences of the latter term see Ps. 92:5[6]; Isa. 55:8; Jer. 29:11; 51:29), which is derived from the verb חִשְׁבָּה (*chushab*) (Gen. 50:20; Jer. 18:11; 26:3; 29:11; 36:3; 49:20; 50:45; Lam. 2:8; Mic. 2:3). There are several other less frequent terms, and some which refer to particular decrees regarding salvation and fellowship with God.

In the New Testament, the most explicit term used with reference to the plan of God is προορίζω (Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29, 30; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:5, 11). Similar words are προτάσσω (Acts 17:26), προτίθημι (Eph. 1:9) and its substantive πρόθεσις (Rom. 8:28; 9:11; Eph. 1:11; 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9), and προετοιμάζω (Rom. 9:23; Eph. 2:10). Other terms stressing advance knowledge of one sort or another are προβλέπω, προοράω (*προεῖδον*), προγινώσκω, and its substantive πρόγνωσις. The idea of appointing is found in προχειρίζω and προχειροτονέω, as well as sometimes in the simple ὄριζω (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 17:26, 31; Heb. 4:7). The idea of willing and wishing is conveyed by βουλή, βούλημα, βούλομαι, θέλημα, θέλησις, and θέλω, while the good pleasure of the Father is designated by εὐδοκία and εὐδοκέω.

#### *The Old Testament Teaching*

In the Old Testament presentation, the planning and ordaining work of God is very much tied up with the covenant which the Lord made with his people. As we read of all that God did in choosing and taking personal care of his people, two truths about him stand out. On one hand, God is supremely powerful, the creator and sustainer of all that is. On the other hand is the loving, caring, personal nature of the Lord. He is not mere abstract power, but is thought of as a loving person.<sup>3</sup>

3. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

For the Old Testament writers, it was virtually inconceivable that anything could happen independently of the will and working of God. As evidence of this, consider that common impersonal expressions like "It rained" are not found in the Old Testament. For the Hebrews, rain did not simply happen; God sent the rain. They saw him as the all-powerful determiner of everything that occurs. Not only is he active in everything that occurs, but he has planned it. What is happening now was planned long ago. God himself comments, for example, concerning the destruction wreaked by the king of Assyria: "Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins" (Isa. 37:26). Even something as seemingly trivial as the building of reservoirs is described as having been planned long before (Isa. 22:11). There is a sense that every day has been designed and ordered by the Lord. Thus the psalmist writes, "Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy 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). A similar thought is expressed by Job (14:5). There is in God's plan a concern for the welfare of the nation of Israel, and of every one of God's children (Pss. 27:10-11; 37; 65:3; 91; 121; 139:16; Dan. 12:1; Jonah 3:5). We find in Psalms 91 and 121 a confidence in the goodness, provision, and protection of God that in many ways reminds us of Jesus' teaching about the birds and the flowers (Matt. 6:25-29).

The Old Testament also enunciates belief in the efficaciousness of God's plan. What is now coming to pass is doing so because it is (and has always been) part of God's plan. He will most assuredly bring to actual occurrence everything in his plan. What he has promised, he will do. Isaiah 46:10-11 puts it this way: "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it." Similar statements are found in Isaiah 14:24-27. Here we read not only of God's faithfulness to his avowed purpose, but also of the futility of opposing it: "For the **LORD** of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (v. 27; cf. Job 42:2; Jer. 23:20; Zech. 1:6).

It is particularly in the wisdom literature and the prophets that the idea of an all-inclusive divine purpose is most prominent.<sup>4</sup> God has from the beginning, from all eternity, had an inclusive plan encompassing the whole of reality and extending even to the minor details of life. "The

**LORD** has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble" (Prov. 16:4; cf. 3:19-20; Job 38, especially v. 4; Isa. 40:12; Jer. 10:12-13). Even what is ordinarily thought of as an occurrence of chance, such as the casting of lots, is represented as the Lord's doing (Prov. 16:33). Nothing can deter or frustrate the accomplishment of his purpose. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the **LORD** that will be established" (cf. 21:30-31; Jer. 10:23-24). We humans may not always understand as God works out his purpose in our lives. This was the experience of Job throughout the book that bears his name; it is articulated particularly in 42:3, "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

Thus, in the view of the Old Testament believer, God had created the world, he was directing history, and all this was but the unfolding of a plan prepared in eternity and related to his intention of fellowship with his people. Creation in its vast extent and the details of individual lives were included in this plan and would surely come to pass as God designed. As a result, the prophets could speak of coming events with certainty. Future events could be prophesied because God had planned them, and his plan would surely come to fruition.

#### The New Testament Teaching

The plan and purpose of God is also prominent in the New Testament. Jesus saw the events of his life and events in the future as necessarily coming to pass because of the plan of God. Jesus affirmed that God had planned not only the large, complex events, such as the fall and destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-22), but details as well, such as the apostasy of and betrayal by Judas, and the faithfulness of the remaining disciples (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22; John 17:12; 18:9). The fulfilment of God's plan and Old Testament prophecy is a prominent theme in the writing of Matthew (1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56) and of John (12:38; 19:24, 28, 36). While critics may object that some of these prophecies were fulfilled by people who knew about them and may have had a vested interest in seeing them fulfilled (e.g., Jesus fulfilled Psalm 69:21 by saying, "I thirst" [John 19:28]), it is notable that other prophecies were fulfilled by persons who had no desire to fulfil them and probably had no knowledge of them, such as the Roman soldiers in their casting lots for Jesus' garment and not breaking any of his bones.<sup>5</sup>

4. Ibid., p. 15.

5. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), p. 88.

Even where there was no specific prophecy to be fulfilled, Jesus conveyed a sense of necessity (*δεῖ*) concerning future events. For example, he said to his disciples, “And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. … And the gospel must first be preached to all nations” (Mark 13:7, 10). He also had a profound sense of necessity concerning what he must do; the Father’s plan needed to be completed. Thus, he said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43), and ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life’ (John 3:14–15). We know that he had this consciousness already at the age of twelve, for when his worried parents found him in the temple, he responded, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (literally, “in the things of my Father”—Luke 2:49).

The apostles also laid emphasis upon the divine purpose. Peter said in his speech at Pentecost, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). And after Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin, the disciples lifted their voices to God, noting that Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, had been gathered in Jerusalem “to do [against Jesus] whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28). Peter also noted that various events which had occurred were in fulfillment of the predictions of Scripture—the apostasy of Judas (Acts 1:16), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (2:16–21), and the resurrection of Jesus (2:24–28). In writing the Book of Revelation the apostle John gave us a particularly striking example of belief in the divine plan. The note of certainty pervading the whole book, the entire series of events predicted there, derives from belief in God’s plan and foreordination.

It is in Paul’s writings that the divine plan according to which everything comes to pass is made most explicit. Everything that occurs is by God’s choice and in accordance with his will (1 Cor. 12:18; 15:38; Col. 1:19). The very fortunes of nations are determined by him (Acts 17:26). God’s redemptive work unfolds in accordance with his intended purpose (Gal. 3:8; 4:4–5). The choice of individual and nation to be his own and the consequent events are God’s sovereign doing (Rom. 9–11). Paul sees himself as having been set apart even before his birth (Gal. 1:15). One might well take the image of the potter and the clay, which Paul uses in a specific and somewhat narrow reference (Rom. 9:20–23), and see it as expressive of his whole philosophy of history. Paul regards “all things” that happen as part of God’s intention for his children (Eph. 1:11–12). Thus Paul says that “in everything God works for good for those who are

called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), his purpose being that we might be “conformed to the image of his Son” (v. 29).

### The Nature of the Divine Plan

We now need to draw together, from these numerous and varied biblical references, some general characteristics of God’s plan. This will enable us to understand more completely what the plan is like and what we can expect from God.

1. God’s plan is from all eternity. We have noted that the psalmist spoke of God’s having planned all of our days before there were any of them (Ps. 139:16), and that Isaiah spoke of God’s having “planned it long ago” (22:11). Paul in Ephesians indicates that God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (1:4), and later in the same letter Paul speaks of “the eternal purpose which [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (3:11). The apostle also writes to Timothy that God has “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago” (2 Tim. 1:9). These decisions are not made as history unfolds and events occur. God manifests his purpose within history (2 Tim. 1:10), but his decisions have been made long before. They have always been God’s plan, from all eternity, from before the beginning of time.

Being eternal, the plan of God does not have any chronological sequence within it. This is one reason for referring to the plan of God rather than the decrees. There is no before and after within eternity. There is, of course, a logical sequence (e.g., the decision to let Jesus die on the cross logically follows the decision to send him to the earth), and there is a temporal sequence in the enacting of the events which have been decreed; but there is no temporal sequence to God’s willing. It is one coherent simultaneous decision.

2. The plan of God and the decisions contained therein are free on God’s part. This is implied in expressions like “the good pleasure of his will” (*εὐδοκία*). It is also implicit in the fact that no one has advised him (for that matter, there is no one who could advise him). Isaiah 40:13–14 says, “Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as his counselor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” Paul quotes this very passage as he concludes his great statement on the sovereignty and inscrutability of God’s workings (Rom. 11:34). After adding a word from Job 35:7 to the effect that God is indebted to no one, he closes with, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”

(Rom. 11:36). Paul also quotes Isaiah 40:13 in 1 Corinthians. After speaking of the wisdom of God as having been decreed before the ages (1 Cor. 2:7), he asks, "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" (v. 16). That man has had no input into what God has planned might at first seem to be something of a disadvantage. But on reflection we see that it is instead a source of comfort. For, being without man's input, God's plan is not subject to the incompleteness of knowledge and the errors of judgment so characteristic of human plans.

Not only do God's decisions not stem from any sort of external determination, they are not a matter of internal compulsion either. That is to say, although God's decisions and actions are quite consistent with his nature, they are not constrained by his nature. He is not like the gods of pantheism, which are virtually constrained by their own nature to will what they will and do what they do. God did not have to create. He had to act in a loving and holy fashion in whatever he did, but he was not required to create. He freely chose to create for reasons not known to us. While his love requires him to act lovingly toward any creatures he might bring into existence, it did not require that he create in order to have objects to love. There had been eternally an expression of love among the several members of the Trinity (see, e.g., John 17:24).

3. In the ultimate sense, the purpose of God's plan is God's glory. This is the highest of all values, and the one great motivating factor in all that God has chosen and done. Paul indicates that "all things were created through him [Christ] and for him" (Col. 1:16). God chose us in Christ and destined us "according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5-6). The twenty-four elders in Revelation who fall down and worship the Lord God Almighty sing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11). What God does, he does for his own name's sake (Isa. 48:11; Ezek. 20:9). The purpose of the whole plan of salvation is the glory of God through the good works which God has prepared for his people to do (Eph. 2:8-10). Jesus said that his followers were to let their lights so shine that men would see their good works and glorify their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16; cf. John 15:8). We have been appointed to live for the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:12). We have been sealed with the Spirit to the praise of his glory (vv. 13-14).

This is not to say that there are no secondary motivations behind God's plan and resultant actions. He has provided the means of salvation in order to fulfil his love for mankind and his concern for their welfare. This, however, is not an ultimate end, but only a means to the greater end, God's own glory. We must bear in mind that God is truly the Lord. We exist for his sake, for his glory and pleasure, rather than he for ours.

4. The plan of God is all-inclusive. This is implicit in the great variety of items which are mentioned in the Bible as parts of God's plan. Beyond that, however, are explicit statements of the extent of God's plan. Paul speaks of God as the one who "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The psalmist says that "all things are thy servants" (Ps. 119:91). While all ends are part of God's plan, all means are as well. Thus the comprehensiveness of the divine decisions goes beyond what we might expect. Although we tend at times to think of sacred and secular areas of life, no such division exists from God's standpoint. There are no areas that fall outside the purview of his concern and decision.

5. God's plan is efficacious. What he has purposed from eternity will surely come to pass. The Lord says, "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand. ... For the **Lord** of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (Isa. 14:24, 27). He will not change his mind, nor will he discover hitherto unknown considerations which will cause him to alter his intentions. "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose," says the Lord in Isaiah 46:10. Because the counsel of the Lord is from all eternity and is perfect, it will never fade nor be replaced; it endures forever: "The counsel of the **Lord** stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11).

6. God's plan relates to his actions rather than his nature. It pertains to his decisions regarding what he shall do, not to his personal attributes. This is to say that God does not decide to be loving and powerful, for example. He is loving and powerful simply by virtue of his being God. He does not have to choose to be loving and powerful; indeed, he could not choose to be otherwise. Thus, the decisions of God relate to objects, events, and processes external to the divine nature, not to what he is or what transpires within his person.<sup>6</sup>

7. The plan of God relates primarily to what God himself does in terms of creating, preserving, directing, and redeeming. It also involves human willing and acting, but only secondarily, that is, as means to the ends he purposes, or as results of actions which he takes. Note that God's role here is to decide that certain things will take place in our lives, not to lay down commands to act in a certain way. To be sure, what God has decided will come to pass does involve an element of necessity. The particulars of God's plan, however, should be thought of less as imperatives than as descriptions of what will occur. The plan of God does not force men to act in particular ways, but renders it certain that they will freely act in those ways.

6. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 353-54.

8. Thus, while the plan of God relates primarily to what God does, the actions of men are also included. Jesus noted, for example, that the responses of individuals to his message were a result of the Father's decision: "All that the Father gives me will come to me. . . . No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:37, 44; cf. 17:2, 6, 9). Luke said in Acts 13:48 that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

God's plan includes what we ordinarily call good acts. Cyrus, who did not personally know or acknowledge Jehovah, was foreordained to help fulfil God's purpose of rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple (Isa. 44:28). Paul says that we believers "are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). On the other hand, the evil actions of men, which are contrary to God's law and moral intentions, are also seen in Scripture as part of God's plan, as foreordained by him. The betrayal, conviction, and crucifixion of Jesus are a prominent instance of this (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). (The particular way in which God's will relates to evil actions will be more fully discussed later in this chapter; at this point we must simply note that these actions also fall within the scope of God's plan.)

9. The plan of God in terms of its specifics is unchangeable. This idea has already been introduced in the statement regarding the efficaciousness of God's plan. Here we wish to emphasize that God does not change his mind or alter his decisions regarding specific determinations. This may seem strange in light of the seeming alteration of his intentions with regard to Nineveh (Jonah), and his apparent repentance for having made man (Gen. 6:6). The statement in Genesis 6, however, should be regarded as an anthropomorphism, and Jonah's announcement of impending destruction should be viewed as a warning used to effect God's actual plan for Nineveh. We must keep in mind here that constancy is one of the attributes of God's greatness (pp. 278-81).

#### Logical Priority: God's Plan or Human Action?

We must now consider whether God's plan or human action is logically prior. While Calvinists and Arminians are agreed that human actions are included in God's plan, they disagree as to what is the cause and what is the result. Do people do what they do because God has decided that this is exactly how they are going to act, or does God first foresee what they will do and then on that basis make his decision as to what is going to happen?

1. Calvinists believe that God's plan is logically prior and that man's

decisions and actions are a consequence. With respect to the particular matter of the acceptance or rejection of salvation, God in his plan has chosen that some shall believe and thus receive the offer of eternal life. He foreknows what will happen because he has decided what is to happen. This is true with respect to all the other decisions and actions of human beings as well. God is not dependent upon what man decides. It is not the case, then, that God determines that what men will do will come to pass, nor does he choose to eternal life those who he foresees will believe. Rather, God's decision has rendered it certain that every individual will act in a particular way.<sup>7</sup>

2. Arminians, on the other hand, place a higher value upon human freedom. God allows and expects man to exercise the will he has been given. If this were not so, we would not find the biblical invitations to choose God, the "whosoever will" passages, such as "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The very offering of such invitations implies that man can either accept or reject them. There is a genuine possibility of both options. This, however, seems inconsistent with the position that God's decisions have rendered the future certain. If they had, there would be no point in issuing invitations to man, for God's decisions as to what would happen would come to pass regardless of what man does. The Arminians therefore look for some other way of regarding the decisions of God.

The key lies in understanding the role of God's foreknowledge in the formation and execution of the divine plan. In Romans 8:29 Paul says, "Whom he foreknew he also predestined." From this verse the Arminian draws the conclusion that God's choice or determination of each individual's destiny is a result of foreknowledge. Thus, those who God foreknew would believe are those he decided would be saved. A similar statement can be made of all human actions, of all other aspects of life for that matter. God knows what all of us are going to do. He therefore wills what he foresees will happen.<sup>8</sup> Note that human action and its effects are not a result of God's decision. The human action is logically prior. On this basis, the concept of human freedom is preserved. Every individual has genuine options. It is the human who renders his actions certain; God simply acquiesces. One might therefore say that in the Arminian view this aspect of God's plan is conditional upon human decision; in the Calvinistic view, on the other hand, God's plan is unconditional.

7. J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), p. 78.

8. Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 157.

### A Moderately Calvinistic Model

Despite difficulties in relating divine sovereignty to human freedom, we nonetheless come to the conclusion on biblical grounds that the plan of God is unconditional rather than conditional upon man's choice. There simply is nothing in the Bible to suggest that God chooses humans because of what they are going to do on their own. The Arminian concept of foreknowledge (*πρόγνωσις*), appealing though it is, is not borne out by Scripture. The word means more than simply having advance knowledge or precognition of what is to come. It appears to have in its background the Hebrew concept of *יְדָה* ('yada'), which often meant more than simple awareness. It suggested a kind of intimate knowledge—it was even used of sexual intercourse.<sup>9</sup> When Paul says that God foreknew the people of Israel, he is not referring merely to an advance knowledge which God had. Indeed, it is clear that God's choice of Israel was not upon the basis of advance knowledge of a favorable response on their part. Had God anticipated such a response, he would certainly have been wrong. Note that in Romans 11:2 Paul says, "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew," and that a discussion of the faithlessness of Israel follows. Certainly in this passage foreknowledge must mean something more than advance knowledge. In Acts 2:23, foreknowledge is linked with the will (*θουλῆ*) of God. Moreover, in 1 Peter 1 we read that the elect are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God (v. 2) and that Christ was foreknown from before the foundation of the world (v. 20). To suggest that foreknowledge here means nothing more than previous knowledge or acquaintance is to virtually deprive these verses of any real meaning. We must conclude that foreknowledge as used in Romans 8:29 carries with it the idea of favorable disposition or selection as well as advance knowledge.

Furthermore, there are passages where the unconditional nature of God's selecting plan is made quite explicit. This is seen in Paul's statement regarding the choice of Jacob over Esau: "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call [*ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος*], she [Rebecca] was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Rom. 9:11-13). Paul seems to be taking great pains to emphasize the unmerited or unconditional nature of God's choice of Jacob. Later in the same chapter Paul comments, "So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills" (v. 18). The import

9. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), pp. 393-95.

of the subsequent image of the potter and the clay is very difficult to escape (vv. 20-24). Similarly, Jesus told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). Because of these and similar considerations, we must conclude that the plan of God is unconditional rather than conditional upon actions of men which he has foreseen.

At this point we must raise the question of whether God can create genuinely free beings and yet render certain all things that are to come to pass, including the free decisions and actions of those beings. The key to unlocking the problem is the distinction between rendering something certain and rendering it necessary. The former is a matter of God's decision that something *will* happen; the latter is a matter of his decreeing that it *must* occur. In the former case, the human being will not act in a way contrary to the course of action which God has chosen; in the latter case, the human being cannot act in a way contrary to what God has chosen. What we are saying is that God renders it certain that a person who could act (or could have acted) differently does in fact act in a particular way (the way that God wills).<sup>10</sup>

What does it mean to say that I am free? It means that I am not under constraint. Thus, I am free to do whatever pleases me. But am I free with respect to what pleases me and what does not? To put it differently, I may choose one action over another because it holds more appeal for me. But I am not fully in control of the appeal which each of those actions holds for me. That is quite a different matter. I make all my decisions, but those decisions are in large measure influenced by certain characteristics of mine which I am not capable of altering by my own choice. If, for example, I am offered for dinner a choice between liver and steak, I am quite free to take the liver, but I do not desire to do so. I have no conscious control over my dislike of liver. That is a given that goes with my being the person I am. In that respect my freedom is limited. I do not know whether it is my genes or environmental conditioning which has caused my dislike of liver, but it is apparent that I cannot by mere force of will alter this characteristic of mine.

There are, then, limitations upon who I am and what I desire and will. I certainly did not choose the genes that I have; I did not select my parents nor the exact geographical location and cultural setting of my birth. My freedom, therefore, is within these limitations. And here arises the question: Who set up these factors? The theistic answer is, "God did."

10. I hold what Antony Flew has called "compatibilistic freedom": human freedom is compatible with (in this case) God's having rendered certain everything which occurs—"Compatibilism, Free Will, and God," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 231-32.

I am free to choose among various options. But my choice will be influenced by who I am. Therefore, my freedom must be understood as my ability to choose among options in light of who I am. And who I am is a result of God's decision and activity. God is in control of all the circumstances that bear upon my situation in life. He may bring to bear (or permit to be brought to bear) factors which will make a particular option appealing, even powerfully appealing, to me. Through all the factors that have come into my experience in time past he has influenced the type of person I now am. Indeed, he has affected what has come to pass by willing that it was I who was brought into being.

Whenever a child is conceived, there are an infinite number of possibilities. A countless variety of genetic combinations may emerge out of the union of sperm and ovum. We do not know why a particular combination actually results. But now, for the sake of argument, let us consider the possibility of a hypothetical individual whose genetic combination differs infinitesimally from my own. He is identical to me in every respect; in every situation of life he responds as I do. But at one particular point he will choose to move his finger to the left whereas I will move mine to the right. I am not compelled to move my finger to the right, but I freely choose to do so. Now by making sure that it was I, and not my hypothetical double, who came into existence, and setting the circumstances of my life, God rendered it certain that at that one particular point I would freely move my finger to the right.

This is in many ways similar to the argument of Gottfried von Leibniz in his *Theodicy*.<sup>11</sup> God knows all of the infinite possibilities. He chooses which of these he will actualize. And by meticulously selecting the very individuals he brings into existence, individuals who will respond to specific stimuli exactly as he intends, and by making sure these specific factors are present, he renders certain the free decisions and actions of those individuals. Where our view differs from Leibniz's view is that we

11. Gottfried W. von Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1952). In Leibniz's view, God knows the realm of essences, which contains an infinite number of possibilities. Among the attributes of each possible individual are every decision he will ever make and the course of action he will follow in every situation he encounters. God, foreknowing the infinite possibilities, chooses to bring into existence the individual who will freely decide to respond to every situation precisely as God intends. By so doing, God renders **certain**, but not **necessary**, the free decisions and actions of the individual. This distinction is crucial to understanding the position being developed in this chapter. In terms of the illustration we have used, God brings into being the individual who will freely choose to move his finger to the right rather than an individual who is identical in every respect except that he will choose to move his finger to the left. Thus we can say that when the individual who has in fact been brought into being moves his finger to the right, he is choosing freely what God knows he will choose.

see the decisions of God as completely free in this matter, not in any sense determined. Furthermore, in rendering human action certain, God does not merely choose to bring a being into existence and then leave him to function in a mechanistic, determined world. God is actively at work within this world, influencing what takes place. Thus, the deistic overtones of Leibniz's view are avoided.

The position being advocated here is what B. B. Warfield regarded as the most diluted form of Calvinism (there are, in fact, some Calvinists who would deny that it deserves to be called Calvinistic at all). Warfield termed this position "congruism," for it holds that God works congruously with the will of the individual; that is, God works in such a suasive way with the will of the individual that he freely makes the choice that God intends.<sup>12</sup> With respect to the offer of salvation, this means that God does not begin by regenerating those he has chosen, transforming their souls so that they believe; rather, he works in an appealing, persuading fashion so that they freely choose to believe, and then he regenerates them. What we are adding to this position is the idea that God is operative in the life of the individual long before his work of suasion and regeneration: God has from eternity decided that the potential individual who comes into actual existence is the one who will respond to this set of circumstances precisely as God intends.

Is God's having rendered human decisions and actions certain compatible with human freedom? How one responds depends on his understanding of freedom. According to the position we are espousing, the answer to the question, "Could the individual have chosen differently?" is yes, while the answer to the question, "But would he have?" is no. In our understanding, for human freedom to exist, only the first question need be answered in the affirmative. But others would argue that human freedom exists only if both questions can be answered in the affirmative; that is, if the individual not only could have chosen differently, but could also have desired to choose differently. In their view, freedom means total spontaneity, random choice. We would point out to them that when it comes to human decisions and actions, nothing is completely spontaneous or random. There is a measure of predictability with respect to human behavior; and the better we know an individual, the better we can anticipate his responses. For example, a good friend or relative might say, "I knew you were going to say that." Television networks can project the outcome of elections by analyzing returns from a

12. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), pp. 90-91. In the final analysis, the exact relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom is necessarily a mystery. It is important, however, not to invoke "mystery" prematurely. We must go as far as we can with our human reasoning and understanding before we label something a mystery.

few bellwether precincts. We conclude that if by freedom is meant random choice, human freedom is a practical impossibility. But if by freedom is meant ability to choose between options, human freedom exists and is compatible with God's having rendered our decisions and actions certain.

It should be noted that if certainty of outcome is inconsistent with freedom, divine foreknowledge, as the Arminian understands that term, presents as much difficulty for human freedom as does divine foreordination. For if God knows what I will do, it must be certain that I am going to do it. If it were not certain, God could not know it; he might be mistaken (I might act differently from what he expects). But if what I will do is certain, then surely I will do it, whether or not I know what I will do. It will happen! But am I then free? In the view of those whose definition of freedom entails the implication that it cannot be certain that a particular event will occur, presumably I am not free. In their view, divine foreknowledge is just as incompatible with human freedom as is divine foreordination.

It might seem that the divine choice we have argued for is the same as the Arminian idea of foreknowledge. There is a significant difference, however. In the Arminian understanding, there is a foreknowledge of actual existing entities. God simply chooses to confirm, as it were, what he foresees real individuals will decide and do. In our scheme, however, God has a foreknowledge of possibilities. God foresees what possible beings will do if placed in a particular situation with all the influences that will be present at that point in time and space. On this basis he chooses which of the possible individuals will become actualities and which circumstances and influences will be present. He foreknows what these individuals will freely do, for he in effect made that decision by choosing them in particular to bring into existence. With respect to salvation, this means that, in logical order, God decided that he would create humans, that they would fall, and then that among this group who would be brought into existence, all of whom would come under the curse of sin, some individuals would, acting as he intends, freely choose to respond to him.<sup>13</sup>

Our position that God has rendered certain everything that occurs raises another question: Is there not a contradiction at certain points between what God commands and says he desires and what he actually wills? For example, sin is universally prohibited, yet apparently God wills for it to occur. Certainly murder is prohibited in Scripture, and yet the

13. This statement of the logical order of God's decrees reflects the variety of Calvinism known as sublapsarianism. The varieties of Calvinism will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 39.

death of Jesus by execution was apparently willed by God (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23). Further, we are told that God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), yet apparently he does not actually will for all to be saved, since not everyone is saved. How are we to reconcile these seemingly contradictory considerations?

We must distinguish between two different senses of God's will, which we will refer to as God's "wish" (will<sub>w</sub>) and God's "will" (will<sub>W</sub>). The former is God's general intention, the values with which he is pleased. The latter is God's specific intention in a given situation, what he decides shall actually occur. There are times, many of them, when God wills to permit, and thus to have occur, what he really does not wish. This is the case with sin. God does not desire sin to occur. There are occasions, however, when he simply says, in effect, "So be it," allowing a human to choose freely a sinful course of action. Joseph's treatment at the hands of his brothers did not please God; it was not consistent with what he is like. God did, however, will to permit it; he did not intervene to prevent it. And interestingly enough, God used their action to produce the very thing it was intended to prevent—Joseph's ascendancy.

God does not enjoy the destruction of the ungodly. It brings him sorrow. Yet he chooses to permit them, by their own volition, to reject and disbelieve. Why he does this we do not know. But what we are talking about here is not as unique and foreign to us as we might at first think. It is not unlike the way parents sometimes treat their children. A mother may wish for her son to avoid a particular type of behavior, and may tell him so. Yet there are situations in which she may, unobserved by her son, see him about to engage in the forbidden action, yet choose not to intervene to prevent it. Here is a case in which the parent's wish is clearly that the child not engage in certain behavior, yet her will is that he do what he has willed to do. By choosing not to intervene to prevent the act, the mother is actually willing that it take place.

We must understand that the will of God permits rather than causes sin. God never says, "Commit this sin!" But by his permitting the conditions which lead a person to commit a sin and by his not preventing the sin, God in effect wills the sin. If one maintains that failure to prevent something constitutes causation or responsibility, then God would have to be regarded, in this secondary sense, as causing evil. But, we should note, this is not the way that responsibility is usually assigned.

Another issue that must be examined concerns whether our view of the all-encompassing plan of God removes incentives for activity on our part. If God has already rendered certain what is to occur, is there any point in our seeking to accomplish his will? Does what we do really make any difference in what happens? This issue relates particularly to evangelism. If God has already chosen (elected) who will be saved and

who will not, what difference does it make whether we (or anyone else for that matter) seek to propagate the gospel? Nothing can change the fact that the elect will be saved and the nonelect will not.

Two points should be made by way of response. One is that if God has rendered certain the end, his plan also includes the means to that end. His plan may well include that our witness is the means by which an elect person will come to saving faith. Thus it is foreordained by God that we should witness to that person. The other consideration is that we do not know in detail what God's plan is. So we must proceed on the basis of what God has revealed of his wish. Accordingly, we must witness. This may mean that some of our time is spent on someone who will not ultimately enter the kingdom of heaven. But that does not mean that our time has been wasted. It may well have been the means to fulfilling another part of God's plan. And ultimately it is faithfulness, not success, that is God's measure of our service.

### Various Understandings of History

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Christianity's doctrine of the divine plan responds specifically to the questions of where history is going and what is moving it. Some understandings of the movement of history are quite negative. This is particularly true of cyclical views, which do not see history as progressing, but as simply repeating the same pattern, albeit in somewhat different fashion. The Eastern religions tend to be of this type, particularly Hinduism, with its emphasis upon reincarnation. One goes through cycles of death and rebirth, with the status of one's life in each new incarnation largely determined by his conduct in the previous life. Salvation, if one may term it that, consists in Nirvana, escape from the repeated process.

Doomsday philosophies abound in our time. It is believed that history will soon come to a disastrous end as a result of either an economic collapse, an ecological crisis involving massive pollution of the environment, or an outbreak of nuclear warfare.<sup>14</sup> Man is doomed because he has failed to manage the world about him wisely.

Another prominent twentieth-century pessimistic philosophy is existentialism. The idea of the absurdity of the world, of the paradoxical and the ironic in reality, of the blind randomness of much that occurs, leads to despair. Since there is no discernible pattern in the events of history, one must create his own meaning by a conscious act of free will.

14. E.g., Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine, 1976).

On the other hand, there have been a number of quite optimistic views, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Darwinism was extended from the biological realm to other areas, particularly to society. In the thought of Herbert Spencer, it became an all-inclusive philosophy entailing the growth, progress, and development of the whole of reality. Although this view proved rather unrealistic, it had considerable influence in its time. In more recent years, utopianisms employing the methods of the behavioral sciences have sought to restructure society or at least individual lives.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most militant current philosophy of history on a global scale is dialectical materialism, the philosophy upon which communism is based. Adapting Georg Hegel's philosophy, Karl Marx replaced its idealistic metaphysic with a materialistic view. The forces of material reality are impelling history to its end. Through a series of steps, the economic order is being changed. Each stage of the process is characterized by a conflict between two antithetical groups or movements. The prevailing means of production is changing from feudalism to capitalism to a final socialistic stage where there will be no private ownership. In the classless society, the dialectic which has moved history through the rhythmical process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis will cease, and all evil will wither away. Note that this trust is in an impersonal force. Consequently, many of the people under communism find it neither personally satisfying nor societally effective.

Finally, there is the Christian doctrine of the divine plan, which affirms that an all-wise, all-powerful, good God has from all eternity planned what is to occur and that history is carrying out his intention. There is a definite goal toward which history is progressing. History is not, then, merely chance happenings. And the force causing its movements is not impersonal atoms or blind fate. It is, rather, a loving God with whom we can have a personal relationship. We may look forward with assurance, then, toward the attainment of the telos of the universe. And we may align our lives with what we know will be the outcome of history.

15. E.g., B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

# 17

## God's Originating Work: Creation

Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation

Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation

Creation out of Nothing

Its All-inclusive Nature

Rejection of Dualism

The Work of the Triune God

Its Purpose: God's Glory

God's Later Creative Work

The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine

The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science

The Age of Creation

Development Within the Creation

The Uniqueness of God's Creative Work

Implications of the Doctrine of Creation

**T**he plan of God may be thought of as being like the architect's plans and drawings for a building that is to be constructed. But the plan was not merely a scheme in the mind of God. It has been translated into reality by God's actions. At this point in our study we turn to these various works of God. In this part we will concentrate on those works

which are attributed especially, although not exclusively, to the work of God the Father. The first of these is creation. By creation we mean the work of God in bringing into being, without the use of any preexisting materials, everything that is.

### Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation

1. There are several reasons for giving careful study to the doctrine of creation. First is the fact that the Bible places great significance upon it. The very first statement of the Bible is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). While order of treatment is not an infallible indicator of relative importance, in this case it is apparent **that** God thought the fact of creation significant enough to put it first. It is one of the first assertions in the Gospel according to John, the most theologically oriented of the New Testament Gospels. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). The doctrine of creation is found in the faith chapter of Hebrews: "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (11:3). And in the great vision of the future in the Book of Revelation, the twenty-four elders praise the Lord God Almighty in part because he is the Creator: "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11). The creative work of God plays a prominent role in the biblical presentation of God.

2. The doctrine of creation has been a significant part of the church's faith; it has been a highly important aspect of its teaching and preaching. The first article of the Apostles' Creed says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Although this particular element (i.e., the phrase dealing with creation) was not in the earliest form of the creed, but added somewhat later, nonetheless, it is significant that in a formulation as brief as the Apostles' Creed, creation was rather early thought important enough to be included.

3. Our understanding of the doctrine of creation is important because of its effect upon our understanding of other doctrines. Man was created by God as a separate being; man did not emanate from God. Man has come from the hand of a good God; he is not a carry-over from the work of an evil being. Since the whole of nature was created by God and pronounced good by him, there is no inherent evil in being material rather than spiritual. These various facets of the doctrine of creation tell

us a great deal about the status of man. Moreover, since the universe is God's doing rather than a mere chance happening, we are able to discern something about the nature and the will of God from an examination of creation. Alter the doctrine of creation at any point, and you have also altered these other aspects of Christian doctrine.

4. The doctrine of creation helps differentiate Christianity from other religions and world-views. While some might think that at root there are similarities between Christianity and Hinduism, for example, a close examination reveals that the Christian doctrine of God and creation is quite different from Hinduism's Brahma-Atman teaching. The doctrine of creation is a major aspect of what makes Christianity what it is.

5. The study of the doctrine of creation is one point of potential dialogue between Christianity and natural science. At times the dialogue has been quite furious. The great evolution debate of the early twentieth century makes it clear that while theology and science run in parallel courses most of the time, not intersecting in a common topic, the issue of the origin of the world is one point where they do encounter one another. It is important to understand just what the Christian and biblical position is upon this subject, and what is at stake. It is not only biological science (Darwin's theory of evolution) which can engage in dialogue with Christianity on this issue. In addition, there may be encounter between the Christian doctrine of creation and Henri Bergson's view of creative evolution or the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

6. There needs to be a careful understanding of the doctrine of creation because there sometimes have been sharp disagreements within Christian circles. In the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century, the struggle was on a large scale-evolution versus creation. Today, by contrast, there seem to be internal disputes within evangelicalism between the theory of progressive creationism and the view that the earth is only a few thousand years old. A careful look must be taken at precisely what the Bible does teach on this subject.

### Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation

#### *Creation out of Nothing*

We begin our examination of the doctrine of creation by noting that it is creation out of nothing, or without the use of preexisting materials. This does not mean that all of God's creative work was direct and immediate, occurring at the very beginning of time. (Certainly there was

immediate or direct creation, the bringing into being of all reality; but there has also been mediate or derivative creation, God's subsequent work of developing and fashioning what he had originally brought into existence.) Rather, what we are here affirming is that the whole of what now exists was begun by God's act of bringing it into existence—he did not fashion and adapt something which already existed independently of him.

At times an effort has been made to derive from the Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bara'*) this truth that creation occurred without the use of previously existent materials. The word appears in the Old Testament thirty-eight times in the Qal stem and ten times in the Niphal. The nominal form בְּרִיאָה (*beri'ah*—creation) occurs just once (Num. 16:30). The Qal and Niphal stems are used only of God, not of man. It is apparent that in its theological usage the verb expresses the uniqueness of this work of God as contrasted with man's fashioning and making various objects out of already existing materials. In poetic texts, however, it is used in parallelism with a number of terms for making or fashioning: תָּשַׁׂאֵה ('asah)—to make or do (Isa. 41:20; 43:7; 45:7, 12, 18; Amos 4:13); יָצַר (yatsar)—to form (Isa. 43:1, 7; 45:7, 18; Amos 4:13); קָנַן (kun)—to establish (Isa. 45:18); יָסַד (yasad)—to found (Ps. 89:11–12[12–13]); and שָׁׂדֵךְ (chadash)—to renew (Ps. 51:10[12]). Karl-Heinz Bernhardt notes that "to a certain extent this results in a leveling of its meaning."<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that בָּרָא never appears with an accusative which denotes an object upon which the Creator works to form something new. Thus, the idea of creation out of nothing is not excluded as the meaning of this word, although it has not been conclusively proved to be its meaning either.

The idea of *ex nihilo* creation can, however, be found in a number of New Testament passages where the aim is not primarily to make a statement about the nature of creation. In particular, there are numerous references to the beginning of the world or the beginning of creation:

"from [since, before] the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8)

"from the beginning" (Matt. 19:4, 8; John 8:44; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 John 1:1; 2:13–14; 3:8)

"from the beginning of the world" (Matt. 24:21)

1. Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, בָּרָא, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), vol. 2, p. 246.

- "from the beginning of the creation" (Mark 10:6; 2 Peter 3:4)
- "from the beginning of creation which God created" (Mark 13:19)
- "since the creation of the world" (Rom. 1:20)
- "Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning" (Heb. 1:10)
- "the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14)

Regarding these several expressions Werner Foerster says, "These phrases show that creation involves the beginning of the existence of the world, so that there is no pre-existent matter."<sup>2</sup> While the verb κτίζω in itself does not establish *ex nihilo* creation, even as בָּרָא does not, nonetheless, these usages argue that a more specific meaning than merely making or fashioning is involved here.

There are indications from other usages of κτίζω that it is suited to bear the meaning of originating from nothing. For instance, it is used of the founding of cities, games, houses, and sects. It is "the basic *intellectual* and volitional act by which something comes into being."<sup>3</sup> Thus, while it does have meanings other than *ex nihilo* creation, that particular meaning is certainly not excluded.

Nor should the Hebrew word בָּרָא be totally discarded as not significant for our purposes. While the etymology of this verb suggests "to cut" or "to cleave," it is never paired with a direct object denoting material upon which God works to make something new. Further, in the Qal and Niphal stems it is never used with a human as its subject.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the expression "in the beginning" in Genesis 1:1, which is used without any further qualification, seems to parallel in many ways the usages of κτίζω noted above.

In the New Testament we can find several more-explicit expressions of the idea of creating out of nothing. We read that God calls things into being by his word. Paul says that God "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). God said, "Let light shine out of darkness" (2 Cor. 4:6). This surely suggests the effect occurred without the use of any antecedent material cause. God created the world by his word "so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (Heb. 11:3). While it might be argued that what God did was to use invisible or spiritual reality as the raw material from which he fashioned visible matter, this seems an artificial and strained idea.

2. Werner Foerster, κτίζω, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), vol. 3, p. 1029.

3. Ibid., p. 1025.

4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 135.

If our emphasis upon the *ex nihilo* creation by God seems a bit superfluous and obvious, it should be observed that *ex nihilo* creation is not obvious from the perspective of process theology. John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Griffin make quite clear that God does not create out of *absolute* nothingness. Rather, “process theology affirms instead a doctrine of creation out of chaos.”<sup>5</sup> They assert that this view is supported by more Old Testament passages than is the doctrine of creation out of nothingness. In a state of absolute chaos there would be only very low-grade actual occasions occurring at random; they would, of course, not be ordered into “enduring individuals.” But God is constantly creating. As a result, there is a moment-by-moment emergence of an infinite variety of occasions of experience. God makes a contribution to the emergence of each actual occasion.

The expression *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing” has sometimes given rise to misunderstanding. “Nothing” has come to be regarded by some thinkers as virtually a something out of which everything has been made, a kind of substance. For some existentialists, such as Martin Heidegger, nonbeing has a virtual metaphysical reality all its own, with a capability of resisting being.<sup>6</sup> This concept is reminiscent of certain elements in Greek philosophy. When we speak of creation out of nothing, however, we are not thinking of nothing as a something out of which everything was made. Nothing, rather, is the absence of reality. Thus, the expression “without the use of preexisting materials” is preferable. There was no material involved in God’s bringing into being the whole of the reality about us.

In bringing the whole of reality into being, God created merely by his word. In Genesis 1, for instance, we read that God spoke and his statement became immediate reality (vv. 3, 6, 9). The mere statement “Let there be light” was sufficient for light to come into existence. We can draw several conclusions. For one, God has the power simply to will situations to be, and they immediately come to pass exactly as he has willed. Second, creation is an act of his will, not an act to which he is driven by any force or consideration outside himself. Further, God does not involve himself, his own being, in the process. Creation is not something made out of him. It is not a part of him or an emanation from his reality.

#### *Its All-inclusive Nature*

God did not create merely a certain part of reality, with the remainder attributable to some other origin. The entirety of reality has come into

5. John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 65.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

being through his act. In the opening statement of Genesis (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”), the expression “the heavens and the earth” is not intended to designate those items alone. It is an idiom referring to everything that is. It is an affirmation that the whole universe came into being through this act of God.

The universal extent of the creative work of God is also affirmed through the use of the term *τὰ πάντα* (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11). In addition, several enumerations or specifications of the various parts of creation make clear that everything is included: “heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it” (Rev. 10:6); “the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (Acts 4:24; 14:15); “the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:24). (Cf. Rev. 5:13, where “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein,” are described as praising and glorifying God.)

While all of these are positive affirmations of the extent of God’s creative work, John 1:3 makes the same point most emphatically and explicitly in both positive and negative terms: “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Here are an affirmation of the creaturehood of all that is, and a rejection of the notion that something might have been made by someone or something other than God.

#### *Rejection of Dualism*

The biblical teaching on creation disallows any type of dualism. The Creator is unique: he is the only one who has brought reality into being. Thus, the idea of an inherently evil segment of creation, which takes its origin from some powerful evil being, such as the devil, is rejected. While the devil may be able to modify or corrupt the created material, he cannot bring anything into being. Further, because God is responsible for the origin of everything, there is no neutral segment of the creation devoid of spiritual significance. Thus, there is no division of reality into the inherently good and the evil, nor into the sacred, that which is spiritually significant, and the secular, that which is spiritually indifferent.

#### *The Work of the Triune God*

Creation is the work of the Triune God. A large number of the Old Testament references to the creative act attribute it simply to God, rather than to the Father, Son, or Spirit, for the distinctions of the Trinity had not yet been fully revealed (e.g., Gen. 1:1; Ps. 96:5; Isa. 37:16; 44:24; 45:12; Jer. 10:11–12). In the New Testament, however, we find differentiation. First Corinthians 8:6, which appears in a passage where Paul discusses

the propriety of eating food which had been offered to idols, is particularly instructive. In contrasting God with idols, Paul follows the argument of several Old Testament passages-Psalm 96:5; Isaiah 37:16; Jeremiah 10:11-12. The crux of those Old Testament passages is that the true God has created all that is, whereas idols are incapable of creating anything. As Paul discusses food offered to idols, he notes that there are many so-called gods, and then advances on the argument of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the psalmist. Paul says, "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Paul is including both the Father and the Son in the act of creation and yet also distinguishing them from one another. The Father apparently has the more prominent part; he is the source from whom all things come. The Son is the means or the agent of the existence of all things. While creation was primarily the work of the Father, the Son is the one through whom it was carried out. There is a similar affirmation in John 1:3-it is through the Son that all things were made. Hebrews 1:10 refers to the Son as the Lord who founded the earth in the beginning. In addition, there are references which seem to indicate the Spirit of God was active in creating as well-Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psalm 104:30; and Isaiah 40:12-13. In some of these cases, however, it is difficult to determine whether the reference is to the Holy Spirit or to God's working by means of his breath, since the word *רוּחַ*(*ruach*) can be used for either one.

There may seem to be a conflict between attributing creation to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and maintaining that each member of the Trinity has his own distinctive work. Yet this is not a problem, unless we think that there is but one form of causation. When a house is built, who actually builds it? In one sense, it is the architect who designs it and creates the plans from which it is constructed. In another sense, however, it is the contractor who actually carries out the plan. Yet the contractor himself probably does none of the actual construction. It is the construction workers who build the house. But without the materials which go into the making of the house there would be no structure. Thus, the building-material suppliers may be said to be the cause of the house's construction. Or the lending agency which supplies the money for the construction and which holds the mortgage might be said to have built the house. Finally, the owner, although he may not drive a single nail, is in a sense the one who builds the house, since he signs the legal papers authorizing its construction, and will make the mortgage payments each month. Each one, in his own way, is the cause of the house. A similar statement can be made about creation. It appears from Scripture that it was the Father who brought the created universe into

existence. But it was the Spirit and the Son who fashioned it, who carried out the details of the design. Although the creation is *from* the Father, it is *through* the Son and *by* the Holy Spirit.

#### *Its Purpose: God's Glory*

While God did not have to create, he did so for good and sufficient reasons. He had a purpose in bringing reality into being. And the creation fulfills that purpose of God. In particular, the creation glorifies God by carrying out his will. The inanimate creation glorifies him (Ps. 19:1); the animate creatures obey his plan for them. In the story of Jonah, we see this in rather vivid fashion. Everyone and everything (except Jonah) obeyed God's will and plan: the storm, the dice, the sailors, the great fish, the Ninevites, the east wind, the gourd, and the worm. Each part of creation is capable of fulfilling God's purposes for it, but each obeys in a different way. The inanimate creation does so mechanically, obeying natural laws which govern the physical world. The animate creation does so instinctively, responding to impulses within. Man alone is capable of obeying God consciously and willingly, and thus glorifies God most fully.

#### God's Later Creative Work

While creation in the proper sense refers to bringing into existence the whole of physical reality as well as all spiritual beings other than God himself, the term also covers the subsequent origination of new entities fashioned from this previously created material. There are hints of this even within the account in Genesis 1: God says, "Let the waters bring forth ..." (v.20), and "Let the earth bring forth ..." (v. 24). The description of the forming of man suggests the use of some type of material—"dust from the ground" (2:7). Eve is described as being formed from a part of the body of Adam (2:21). So also God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air from the ground (2:19). It may well be that what God did originally was merely to create matter from nothing, and then in his subsequent creative activity, he fashioned everything from the atoms which he had created. The various species produced at that later time would be just as much God's doing as was the origin of matter. Then, too, if God does at least part of his work through immanent means, the origination of the various later species through the laws of genetics—even recent varieties of roses, hybrid corn, cattle, dogs—is God's creative work. In these latter cases man is a partner with God in producing what comes to be. Note, however, that man is simply working with what God

has already established. Thus, even the most recent species are God's work as well, for the material from which they came to be was created by him and the laws of genetics by which they developed are also his doing.

### The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine

We turn now to examine the theological meaning of the doctrine of creation. What really is being affirmed by this teaching? And, perhaps just as important for our purposes, what is being rejected or contradicted?

1. The doctrine of creation is first and rather obviously a statement that everything that is not God has derived its existence from him. To put it another way, the idea that there is any ultimate reality other than God is rejected. There is no room for dualism. In a dualism, as the word would indicate, there are two ultimate principles. In one form of dualism there is the Lord, the Creator, the Maker. And there is what the Creator utilizes, or what he works upon, the material that he employs in creating. Much Greek thought was dualistic in one way or another. Typical was a matter-form dualism: There is the order or structure or pattern of things, the Forms or Ideas. And there is that which needs to be ordered or structured or organized, the matter. Creation then consists in someone or something uniting these two, or impressing the Forms upon the matter.<sup>7</sup> But this is not what the Christian doctrine affirms. God did not work with something which was in existence. He brought into existence the very raw material which he employed. If this were not the case, God would not really be infinite. There would be something else which also was, and presumably had always been. Consequently, God would have been limited by having to work with the intrinsic characteristics of the raw material which he employed. The Christian doctrine holds that, on the contrary, God brought the raw material into being and endowed it from the beginning with the characteristics he wanted it to have.

2. The original act of divine creation is unique. It is unlike human "creative" acts, which involve fashioning, using the materials at hand. In producing a work of art, the artist must work within the limitations of the medium employed, whether that be the malleability of the metal, the reflective characteristics of the oil paint, the nature of the language used, or the speed and resolution characteristics of the film. Moreover, even the concepts the artist expresses are dependent upon his previous experience. His work will be either an expression of an idea he has

7. Plato *Timaeus*; Aristotle *Metaphysics*.

directly experienced or a combination of elements previously experienced into some new whole; a genuinely novel idea, totally new and fresh, is very rare indeed. Even if a writer were to create a new language to embody the ideas he wants to express, the limitations of language in general would still govern what he would be able to do. God, however, is not bound by anything external to himself. His only limitations are those of his own nature and the choices he has made. God needs no materials. Therefore, his purposes, unlike those of the human "creator," will not be frustrated by any inherent qualities of material with which he must work.

3. The doctrine of creation also means that nothing made is intrinsically evil. Everything has come from God, and the creation narrative says five times that he saw that it **was good** (vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then, when he completed his creation of man, we are told that God saw everything he had made, and it was very good (v. 31). There was nothing evil within God's original creation.

In any type of dualism, there tends to be a moral distinction between the higher and the lower principles or elements.<sup>8</sup> Since the higher realm is divine and the lower is not, the former is thought of as more real than the other. Eventually this metaphysical difference tends to be regarded as a moral difference as well—the higher is good and the lower is evil. Such a distinction came to be made in the later history of Platonism. Plato had taught that the Ideas or Forms, the intelligible or invisible concepts, are more real. The perceptible or empirical objects, on the other hand, are mere shadows cast by the Forms. In neo-Platonism, there came to be a moral distinction as well. The material or perceivable realm was thought of as evil, the spiritual or invisible realm as good. Influenced by neo-Platonism and other varieties of dualism such as Manichaeism, some Christians began to regard the material world as inherently evil.

If, however, the whole of reality owes its existence to God, and if what God made was "good" throughout, we cannot think of matter as inherently or intrinsically evil.<sup>9</sup> This raises a problem: Christianity, like every system of thought which is in any sense alert to the universe, must come to grips with the presence of evil in the world. Dualisms can resolve this difficulty quite easily. Since God is good, he cannot be the source of evil. Therefore, whatever is not God, that is, the matter with which he had to work, must be the locus of evil. But this expedient cannot and will not be adopted by a thoroughgoing creationism, for it holds that nature has no

8. Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 48.

9. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

such independent status. Yet according to the biblical account, God, who created everything, cannot be blamed for evil and sin in the world. The reason he cannot be blamed is not that he did not create the world, but that he created it good, and even very good! Evil today, then, is not the result of an imperfect creation, a flaw in his work.<sup>10</sup> Whence, then, did evil arise? We will return to this question in chapter 19.

4. The doctrine of creation also thrusts a responsibility upon man. He cannot justify his evil behavior by blaming the evil realm of the material. The material world is not inherently evil. Man's sin must be an exercise of his own freedom. He cannot escape responsibility for his own actions. Nor can man blame society. Sometimes the sin of individual humans is attributed to the influence of society. The reasoning is that man is moral, but an immoral society leads him into sin. But human society was also part of what God made, and it was very good. To regard society as the cause of sin is therefore an inaccurate and misleading ploy. Since society was originally good, we must ask ourselves the question, How did it get to be the way it is today?

5. The doctrine of creation also guards against depreciating the incarnation of Christ. If the material world were somehow inherently evil, it would be very difficult to accept the fact that the second person of the Trinity took on human form, including a physical body. Indeed, there were those who, holding the view that matter is evil, consequently denied the reality of Jesus' physical body. He merely "seemed" to possess human flesh. They were called Docetists, from the Greek word *δοκέω* ("appear"). On the other hand, a correct understanding of the doctrine of creation—what God made was good—enables us to affirm the full meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, his taking of human flesh upon himself.

The doctrine of creation also restrains us from asceticism. Believing that the physical nature is evil has led some, including Christians, to shun the human body and any type of physical satisfaction. Spirit, being more divine, is the proper realm of the good and the godly. Thus, meditation is pursued, and an austere diet and abstinence from sex are regarded as conditions of spirituality. But the doctrine of creation affirms that God has made all that is and has made it good. It is therefore redeemable. Salvation and spirituality are to be found, not by fleeing from or avoiding the material realm, but by sanctifying it.

6. If all of creation has been made by God, there are a connection and an affinity among the various parts of it. I am a brother to all other men, for the same God created us and watches over us. Since inanimate material also comes from God, I am, at base, one with nature, for we are

members of the same family. We may be in conflict, but this is a case of familial quarreling rather than warfare against a foreign enemy. The whole creation belongs to God and matters to him. We have a tendency as humans to think of ourselves as God's only children, and thus as the only recipients of his paternal love. Yet Jesus indicated in an explicit statement that God loves and cares for all of his creation (Matt. 6:26–30; 10:29). It is his, and it matters to him, just as we do.

7. While the doctrine of creation excludes any dualism, it also excludes the type of monism that regards the world as an emanation from God. According to the doctrine of creation, God simply wills things into existence out of nothing. The various objects and beings which are part of the creation are clearly other than God. In the view that the world is an emanation, on the other hand, what we have is an outflow from God's nature, a part of him separated from his essence as it were. There is a tendency to regard this emanation as still divine; hence the end result of this view is usually pantheism. It is a change of status, rather than a beginning of being, that is conceived of here.

One might think that the effect of the view that the universe is an emanation from God would be to greatly enhance the status of the individual elements of the world, since they are in actuality part of the divine nature. In practice, however, the opposite has tended historically to be the case. The effect has been to deemphasize the independent status of specific objects, even to view independent existence as illusory. Since all objects and beings are part of God, it is important to reduce as much as possible any distance between God and them. Individuality is to be minimized. The aim is absorption into the one. Instead of being real substantives, entities with their own status, the individual elements of the world have virtually become adjectives attaching to the ultimate reality, God.

Christianity's doctrine of creation out of nothing rejects all of this. The individual elements of the world are genuine creatures dependent upon God their Creator. Clearly separate from him (i.e., they are not emanations from his nature), they are finite dependent creatures. Sin does not consist in finiteness; it is not evil to be separate and finite. Rather, sin consists in misuse of one's finite freedom, in seeking to be independent of (and thus equal to) God. Further, this finiteness is not done away with in the process of salvation. Salvation does not consist in the negation of creaturely humanness; it rather is the fulfilment, the restoration, of creaturely humanness.

Further, the doctrine of creation points out the inherent limitations of creaturehood. No creature or combination of creatures can ever be equated with God. He always stands over against them as their Maker; they are not and never will be God. Thus there is no basis whatsoever for

10. Ibid., p. 65.

idolatry-for worshiping nature or for revering men. Nature and men are less than God, and the distance between him and these his creations must ever be kept in mind. God has a unique status, so that he alone is to be worshiped (Exod. 20:2-3).

We sometimes think of the great metaphysical gap in the universe as a quantitative gap falling between man and the rest of the creation. In reality, however, the great metaphysical gap is quantitative **and** qualitative, and falls between God on one side and all else on the other.<sup>11</sup> He is to be the object of worship, praise, and obedience. All other existents are to be subjects who offer these acts of submission to him.

### The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science

There has been a rather long history of conflict between science and Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The tension has occurred at various points. It was probably astronomy which provided the first real encounter, with the Copernican revolution challenging the prevailing geocentric conception. Progressively the conflict moved from astronomy to geology (the age of the earth) to biology (the issue of evolution) to anthropology (the origin of man). Today the conflict focuses especially upon the behavioral sciences and such issues as freedom versus determinism and the essential goodness or depravity of man. As the conflict has shifted from one science to another, so it has also moved from one area of doctrine to another. Thus, while the prime area of tension was at one time the doctrine of creation, today it is the doctrine of man.

To some, such as Langdon Gilkey, the question of the relationship between science and theology has been settled; there is no longer any possibility of conflict. Gilkey believes that the conflict in the past was based upon two misconceptions, one concerning the respective roles of science and of theology, and the other concerning the nature of the Bible. The former misconception was a case of failing to understand the differing kinds of explanations offered by the two disciplines. Science attempts to explain what has happened and how it came to pass. It attempts to explain things in terms of efficient causation. When theology was thought of as offering the same kind of explanation, the two disciplines were seen as providing conflicting alternatives. Theology was giving an explanation in terms of efficient cause which competed with

11. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1968), pp. 94-95.

12. Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: Dover, 1960).

science's explanation in terms of efficient cause. Science explained the origin of the world in terms of the cooling and condensation of a nebular mass; theology explained it as the creative act of an almighty being. This view of theology as a quasi science must be rejected, says Gilkey. The kind of explanation which theology gives is in terms of a very different type of cause. Its explanations are teleological, that is, in terms of the end or purpose for which something is done. Scientific explanations take the form, "This event occurred because of ..."; theological explanations take the form, "This event occurred in order that. ..." Thus, there really is no conflict with science. Christian theology does not propose to tell us how the universe came into being; it tells us why God made it.<sup>13</sup>

The second misconception regards the nature of the Bible. According to Gilkey, the view that Genesis provides us with a quasi-scientific explanation of the origin of the universe stems from a period of belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Thus, all affirmations in the Bible, whether of religious or seemingly scientific character, were considered true. But then alternative views of the Bible arose which did not consider all of its affirmations true. Some people thought of the Bible as a witness to a revelation which is not primarily the communication of information, but the self-presentation of a personal God; others thought of it as a mixture of divine revelation on one hand, and human speculation and myth on the other.<sup>14</sup> With these alternative views of the Bible in mind, Gilkey and others assert that its value and authority lie strictly within the area of religion. The Bible does not help us understand empirical issues, whether of science or of history. It serves merely to bring us into the proper relationship with God.

Although Gilkey has offered a solution to the problems of the relationship between science and Christian theology, his solution cannot be adopted by someone who holds the view of the Bible expounded in the second part of this volume. It is true that in dealing with creation the Bible puts its major emphasis upon why God did what he did-his purposes in creating. But the Bible is also concerned about what God did and even, to some extent, how he did it. And there is indeed a statement about origins which, imprecise though it may be, nonetheless has implications for the proposals of natural science. We must now examine more closely two points at which theology and science do conflict: (1) the age of the universe and (2) the sequence in which the components of the creation appeared and the relationships among them.

13. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, p. 70.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

*The Age of Creation*

The age of the creation is one point where there is conflict between science and the Bible. On one hand, the biblical statement seems quite straightforward. God created the earth in six days. Since the word used in Genesis is the common term יֹם (yom), it is presumed that these were twenty-four-hour periods of time. Attempts have been made to calculate the time of creation by using the ages given in the biblical genealogies. Archbishop James Ussher arrived at a date of 4004 B.C. for the creation. On these terms the creation is no more than about six thousand years old.

Ussher's conclusion was satisfactory before the development of modern geology. And that, we should note, is only a rather recent development. William Smith, the founder of stratigraphical geology, died in 1839; and Charles Lyell, the systematizer of geological learning, died in 1875. Thus, geology of the type that we know today came of age only in the nineteenth century. When it did, however, serious problems arose for the traditional dating of creation. A number of methods have been developed for dating the earth, many of them relating to the characteristics of radioactive materials. Out of these methods came a consensus that the earth is several billion years old, perhaps five or six billion or even more. There have been several attempts to reconcile the apparent age of the earth with the biblical material: (1) the gap theory; (2) the flood theory; (3) the ideal-time theory; (4) the age-day theory; and (5) the pictorial-day theory.

1. The gap theory holds that there was an original, quite complete creation of the earth perhaps billions of years ago. That is the creation mentioned in Genesis 1:1. But some sort of catastrophe occurred. The creation *became* empty and unformed (1:2). God then re-created the earth a few thousand years ago in a period of six days, populating it with all the species. It is this creation which is described in Genesis 1:3-27. The apparent age of the earth and the fossil records showing development over long periods of time are to be attributed to the first creation. The catastrophe is often linked to the fall of Satan (Lucifer). Creation then lay in ruins for a long period of time before God's rehabilitation or restitution of it.<sup>15</sup>

2. The flood theory views the earth as only a few thousand years old. At the time of Noah, the earth was covered by a tremendous flood; there were huge waves with a velocity of a thousand miles an hour. These waves picked up various forms of life; the mud in which these forms were eventually deposited was solidified into rock under the tremendous

15. *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 4, n. 3.

pressure of the waves. The various rock strata represent various waves of the flood. Under these unusual forces, there was accomplished in a short period what geologists believe would ordinarily require three billion years to accomplish.<sup>16</sup>

3. The ideal-time theory says that God created the world in a six-day period a relatively short time ago, but that he made it as if it were billions of years old. This is a genuinely novel and ingenious view. Adam, of course, did not begin his life as a newborn baby. At any point in his life he must have had an apparent (or ideal) age many years older than his actual age (i.e., the number of years since his creation). The ideal-time theory extends this principle. If God created trees, rather than merely tree seeds, they presumably had rings indicating an ideal age rather than their real age. Thus, each element of creation must have begun somewhere in the life cycle.<sup>17</sup>

4. The age-day theory is based upon the fact that the Hebrew word יוֹם (yom), while it most frequently means a twenty-four-hour period, is by no means limited to that meaning. It can also mean epochs or long periods of time, and that is how it should be understood in this context. This view holds that God created in a series of acts over long periods of time. The geological and fossil records correspond to the order of his creative acts.<sup>18</sup>

5. The pictorial-day (or literary-framework) theory regards the days of creation as more a matter of logical structuring than of chronological order. Either God's revelation of creation came to Moses in a series of six pictures, or the author arranged his material in a logical grouping which took the form of six periods. There may be some chronological dimension to the ordering, but it is to be thought of as primarily logical. The account is arranged in two groups of three-days one through three and days four through six. Parallels can be seen between the first and fourth, the second and fifth, and the third and sixth days of creation.<sup>19</sup>

All of these views have points of strength, and each has some difficulties as well.<sup>20</sup> We must find the one which has more strengths and fewer

16. George McCready Price, *The New Geology* (Mountain View, Cal.: Pacific Press, 1923).

17. Philip H. Gosse, *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John Van Voorst, 1957).

18. Edwin K. Gedney, "Geology and the Bible," in *Modern Science and Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture, 1948), pp. 23-57.

19. N. H. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict Between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Ronald Youngblood, *How It All Began* (Ventura, Cal.: Regal, 1980), pp. 25-28.

20. For a very complete survey of views attempting to relate the data of geological science and the meaning of יוֹם (yom), see Walter L. Bradley and Roger Olsen, "The Trustworthiness of Scripture in Areas Relating to Natural Science" (Paper presented at the Summit on Biblical Hermeneutics, Chicago, Illinois, November 11-12, 1982), pp. 36-39.

difficulties than do the alternative views. At present, the view which I find most satisfactory is a variation of the age-day theory. There are too many exegetical difficulties attached to the gap theory,<sup>21</sup> while the flood theory involves too great a strain upon the geological evidence.<sup>22</sup> The ideal-time theory is ingenious and in many ways irrefutable both scientifically and exegetically, but presents the theological problem that it makes God an apparent deceiver (and deception, as we saw in chapter 13, is contrary to his nature). The pictorial-day (or literary-framework) theory resolves the problems of chronological sequence, but it does not quite match the examples from the other literature of the time, where creation accounts are arranged in three groups of two, not two groups of three.<sup>23</sup> The pictorial-day theory also has difficulties with the fourth commandment: God's enjoining rest on the seventh day because he rested on the seventh day seems to presuppose some sort of chronological sequence.<sup>24</sup> The age-day theory fits quite well with the geological record, especially if one sees some topical grouping as well. For example, while the sun, moon, and stars were created on the first day, they did not become clearly visible (as if the earth were covered with a cloud envelope) until the fourth day. Similarly, green plants were created on the third day, but were given to man for food only on the sixth day. Interpreting *וֹר* as a period of indefinite length is not a forced understanding of the word, although it is not the most common meaning. While the age-day theory seems the most plausible conclusion at present, we cannot be dogmatic. The age of the universe is a topic which demands continued study and thought.

#### Development Within the Creation

The other major point of conflict with science is the matter of development. To what extent are the present-day forms like the forms which came directly from the hand of God, and to what extent may development have taken place, resulting in modification of the existing forms and the production of new varieties? The theory of evolution maintains that from the beginning of life, all forms have developed by a gradual

21. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 201-11. The reader is referred to this volume for detailed treatments of several of these views.

22. Ibid., pp. 183-88.

23. "Akkadian Myths and Epics," trans. E. A. Speiser, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1955), p. 94; "Ugaritic Myths, Epics and Legends," trans. H. L. Ginsberg, *ibid.*, pp. 134, 144, 150.

24. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict*, p. 44.

process. Through a series of mutations or spontaneous variations, new types of living beings have come into existence. Those possessing variations which enabled them to compete better in an environment of danger and shortage have survived. Through this process of the survival of the fittest, higher, more complex beings have appeared. Thus, over a long period of time the lowest, simplest living organism developed into man merely through the functioning of immanent natural laws. There was no direct intervention by God. Evolution alone was responsible.

In contrast, some Christians have maintained that every species was directly created by God. The statement that God brought forth each animal and plant after its kind is regarded as requiring this interpretation. The assumption here, of course, is that the word translated "kind" is to be understood as biological species. But does the word require that? The Hebrew word is *מִין* (*min*), which is simply a general term for kind or variety of some type. Thus, while it could mean species, there simply is not enough specificity about the word for us to conclude that it does in fact mean species. It is merely "kind," plain and simple.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the word *מִין* does seem to place some limit upon the amount of development that can be accepted.

Some Christian theologians, even a few quite conservative ones, have adopted a view termed theistic evolution. According to this view, God created in a direct fashion at the beginning of the process, and ever since has worked from within through evolution. There may at some point have been a direct creative act modifying some living creature by giving it a soul or a spiritual nature; thus the first man came to be. Other than such an exception, however, theistic evolution views God's later creative work as occurring through immanent means.<sup>26</sup> While this view is able to handle quite well the scientific data, it has some difficulty with the biblical account of creation. And any view that is to be acceptable, given the understanding of the Bible and of general revelation adopted earlier in this volume, must be in accord with both the biblical data and the scientific data.

More adequate is the position termed progressive creationism. According to this view, God created in a series of acts over a long period of time. He created the first member of each "kind." That grouping may have been as broad as the order or as narrow as the genus. In some cases it may have extended to the creation of individual species. From that first member of the group, the others developed by evolution. So, for example, God may have created the first member of the cat family.

25. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 568. *מִין* derives from a word meaning to split the earth (in plowing), and thus became a term for division.

26. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 466-74.

From it developed lions, tigers, leopards, and just plain pussycats. Then God created another kind. There may well have been overlaps between the periods of development, so that new species within one kind were continuing to arise after God created the first member of the next kind. Note that between the various kinds there are gaps not bridged by the evolutionary development.<sup>27</sup>

This view fits well the biblical data. But what of the scientific data? Here we must note that the fossil record indicates gaps at several points, or an absence of what scientists call transitional forms. The assumption of the scientists is that these forms have been lost. But another very reasonable possibility is that they never existed, that these are the gaps between the biblical ‘kinds.’ Thus, there has been microevolution (or “intrakind” development), but not macroevolution (or “interkind” development).

### The Uniqueness of God’s Creative Work

How unique is this creative work of God? Does man also engage in such activity, or in something similar? In particular, what if man succeeds in producing life from previously nonliving material? Will this reduce the uniqueness of God’s work and, accordingly, his deity? Some scientists, working with one definition of life, claim that man has already succeeded in producing it, while others, working with another definition, maintain that it is merely a matter of time until man will indeed be successful in this endeavor. But what then? Will this show that God was not necessary for life to begin? Will this give us an alternative explanation of the origin of life?

At this point we need to carefully define what will be the precise nature of man’s first production of life from nonliving material. First, it will not be a chance occurrence like the accidental collision of atoms to form a new molecule, and then the combination of molecules over a period of time to produce the first living being. It will not follow the formula of atoms plus motion plus chance. Rather, man’s first production of life will be the result of intensive planning and effort by very intelligent beings working in a well-equipped laboratory under highly controlled conditions. In short, it will be more analogous to creation by a wise, powerful God than to the chance results of random movements of matter.

Further, the scientists involved will have begun with matter. This

27. Russell L. Mixter, *Creation and Evolution*, 5th ed. (Goshen, Ind.: American Scientific Affiliation, 1962), pp. 22-23.

matter will not have been created by them out of nothing, but will simply have been found and used by them. The raw material which they will use will have been produced by God. So, even in the act of “creating,” they will be proving themselves to be dependent upon some higher force. The production of life from nonliving matter by man will not undercut the greatness of God’s power and knowledge; it will simply underscore and reemphasize it.

### Implications of the Doctrine of Creation

What, then, are the implications of belief in creation? The doctrine has a significant impact upon how we view and treat life and the world.

1. Everything that is has value. We must not regard something as illusory or insignificant simply because it is not divine. Everything that is, while it is not God, has been made by him. He made it because he was pleased to do so, and it was good in his sight. It was a wise plan that brought into being just what there is within the creation. Each part has its place, which is just what God intended for it to have. God loves all of his creation, not just certain parts of it. Thus we should also have concern for all of it, to preserve and guard and develop what God has made. We are part of the creation, but only a part. While God intended man to use the creation for his own needs, man is also to have dominion over it, to govern it for its good. We therefore have a large stake in the ecological concern. In fact, Christians should be at the very forefront of the concern for the preservation and welfare of the creation, for it is not merely something that is there; it is what God has made. Everything within creation has its function; that of man is to care for the rest of God’s world.

We must not despise any part of God’s creation. As different as some creatures may be from us, they have integrity as part of God’s plan. Nothing is inherently evil. Although sin may well have disturbed the universe God created, the world was good when it came from his hand. There is no particular virtue, then, in fleeing the physical creation or avoiding bodily pursuits in favor of more intellectual or spiritual activities. The fact that we are intellectual and spiritual creatures does not negate the fact that we are physical beings as well.

2. God’s creative activity includes not only the initial creative activity, but also his later indirect workings. Creation does not preclude development within the world; it includes it. Thus God’s plan involves and utilizes the best of human skill and knowledge in the genetic refinement of the creation. Such endeavors are our partnership with God in the

ongoing work of creation. Yet, of course, we must be mindful that the materials and truth we employ in those endeavors come from God.

3. There is justification for scientifically investigating the creation. Science assumes that there is within the creation some sort of order or pattern which it can discover. If the universe were random and, consequently, all the facts scientists gather about it were merely a haphazard collection, no real understanding of nature would be possible. But by affirming that everything has been made in accordance with a logical pattern, the doctrine of creation substantiates science's assumption. It is significant that historically science developed earliest and most rapidly in European culture, where there was a belief in a single God who had created according to a rational plan, rather than in some other culture where there was a belief in several gods who engage in conflicting activities.<sup>28</sup> Knowing that there is an intelligent pattern to the universe, the Christian is motivated to seek for it.

4. Nothing other than God is self-sufficient or eternal. Everything else, every object and every being, derives its existence from him. It exists to do his will. Only God is deserving of our worship. Everything else exists for his sake, not he for its sake. Although we will highly respect the creation, since it has been made by him, we will always maintain a clear distinction between God and it.

28. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 12.

# 18

## God's Continuing Work: Providence

Providence as Preservation

Providence as Government

The Extent of God's Governing Activity

The Relationship Between God's Governing Activity and Sin

The Major Features of God's Governing Activity

Providence and Prayer

Providence and Miracles

**W**hile creation is God's originating work with respect to the universe, providence is his continuing relationship to it. By providence we mean the continuing action of God by which he preserves in existence the creation which he has brought into being, and guides it to his intended purposes for it. In terms of the daily dynamics of our lives, therefore, providence has in many ways more actual pertinence than does the doctrine of creation. The word derives from the Latin *providere*, which literally means to foresee. But more than merely knowing about the future is involved. The word also carries the connotation of acting prudently or making preparation for the future.

Providence in certain ways is central to the conduct of the Christian life. It means that we are able to live in the assurance that God is present

and active in our lives. We are in his care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that he is not unaware and uninvolved.

The doctrine of providence often appears in discussions of general revelation and in the arguments of natural theology, for it is concerned with those aspects of God's work which to a large extent are accessible to everyone. It is at least possible to see the hand of God in the workings of history and nature. Here, then, there will be some overlap between theology and the areas of history and science. Insofar as history is not merely a chronicling of events that occur but also an attempt to interpret them or to find some sort of pattern within those events, the historians' work may support the doctrine of providence. But if the historian sees no pattern, his work will contradict the doctrine. Moreover, providence as described in the Bible extends to the unusual events called miracles, which seem somehow to defy science's picture of the regularity of the universe. There is therefore the potential for conflict between science and the Christian doctrine of providence as well.

Providence may be thought of as having two aspects. One aspect is God's work of preserving his creation in existence, maintaining and sustaining it; this is generally called preservation or sustenance. The other is God's activity in guiding and directing the course of events to fulfil the purposes which he has in mind. This is termed government or providence proper. Preservation and government should not be thought of as sharply separate acts of God, but as distinguishable aspects of his unitary work.

#### Providence as Preservation

Preservation is God's maintaining his creation in existence. It involves God's protection of his creation against harm and destruction, and his provision for the needs of the elements or members of the creation.

Numerous biblical passages speak of God's preserving the creation as a whole. In Nehemiah 9:6, Ezra says, "Thou art the LORD, thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and thou preservest all of them; and the host of heaven worships thee." After a statement about the role of Christ in creation, Paul links him to the continuation of the creation as well: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Son as "upholding the universe by his word of power" (1:3).

The import of such passages is to deny that any part of the creation is

self-sufficient. Some people tend to think of God's work as ending with creation. In their view, after creation all things have remained in existence simply by virtue of some innate power. This is expressly rejected by the teaching of Scripture, however. Both the origination and the continuation of all things are a matter of divine will and activity.

God's presence is particularly evident in the preservation of Israel as a nation.<sup>1</sup> For example, the hand of God was present in providing for the needs of his people at the time of the great famine. God had brought Joseph to Egypt to make provision for feeding the people in the time of shortage. The sparing of the people in the time of Moses is also particularly noteworthy. By ordering the killing of the Israelite male children the Egyptians attempted to prevent Israel from multiplying and gaining strength (Exod. 1). Yet the midwives saved these children, and remarkable circumstances spared Moses' life. The series of plagues designed to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors culminated in the death of the first-born of all households in Egypt. Yet the first-born children of the Israelites were spared. When they fled and were pursued by the Egyptians, the children of Israel were enabled to pass through the Red Sea on dry land, while the Egyptians were engulfed in the waters and drowned. In their wanderings through the wilderness, God's chosen nation received miraculous provision, primarily manna, but quails and water as well. They were given victories in battle, sometimes against great odds, as they sought to take the land promised to them from those who then occupied it.

In the Book of Daniel, God's work of preservation is again very striking. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were condemned to be burned in the fiery furnace for failure to worship the golden image that had been set up. Yet they emerged unharmed from the furnace, while those who cast them in were destroyed by the heat. Daniel, because he prayed to his God, was thrown into a den of lions, yet he also emerged unharmed. Certainly God's preserving of his people was never clearer.

Jesus has also given clear teaching regarding the Father's work of preservation. The disciples were concerned about the necessities of

1. It should be noted that our concept of preservation differs somewhat from Augustus H. Strong's concept of preservation. In his view (*Systematic Theology* [Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907], pp. 410ff.), preservation is the maintaining in existence of all that is. However, one gets the impression that Strong has only the physical universe or physical matter in mind, not human beings. Further, he seems to be thinking only of the end of preservation, and not the means, which he regards as a matter of government. In our view, on the other hand, preservation includes providing the means for humans to remain in existence. Thus, preservation is not something totally distinct from government. They are aspects, sometimes overlapping, of a unified working of God. See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 74ff.

life—what they would eat and what they would wear. Jesus reassured them that the Father feeds the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the fields. He would surely do the same for them. After teaching that God provides for the lesser members of his creation, Jesus' argument moves to humans: they are of more value than birds (Matt. 6:26) and flowers (v. 30). It therefore is not necessary for humans to be anxious about food and clothing, for if they seek God's kingdom and righteousness, all these things will be added to them (vv. 31-33). This is a reference to God's provision. In Matthew 10, Jesus focuses on God's care. Once again the logic of the argument is that what God does for the lesser creatures, he will do to an even greater extent on behalf of his human children. They need not fear those who can destroy the body, but cannot kill the soul (v. 28). Even though two sparrows are sold for a penny, not one of them can fall to the ground without the Father's will (v. 29). Even the hairs of our heads are numbered—so great is the Father's knowledge of what transpires within his creation (v. 30). Then comes the familiar conclusion: "Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (v. 32).

Another important emphasis, both in Jesus' teaching and that of Paul, is the inseparability of God's children from his love and keeping. In John 10, Jesus draws a contrast between his sheep and the unbelievers who had just asked for a plain statement about his messiahship. His sheep recognize and respond to his voice. They shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of his hand; no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (vv. 27-30). Paul strikes a similar note when he asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35). After rehearsing the various possibilities, all of which he rejects, he summarizes by saying, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 38-39). Both Jesus and Paul emphasize that neither physical nor spiritual danger need be feared, for God spares us from their effects. The provision, protection, and deliverance of God will even enable us to endure temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).

One salient dimension of God's preserving us and supplying us with what we need is that the believer is not spared from danger or trial, but preserved within it. There is no promise that persecution and suffering will not come. The promise is that they will not prevail over us. Jesus spoke of great tribulation which was to come upon the elect, but which would not overcome them (Matt. 24:15-31). Peter spoke of the various trials which believers would have to suffer (1 Peter 1:6). He warned his readers not to think of these things as strange. We are not to be

surprised by the fiery trials (1 Peter 4:12), but to rejoice in them, since such ordeals enable us to identify with Christ's sufferings (4:13) and prove the reality of our faith (1:7). Paul wrote that God would supply all of our needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). Writing those words from prison, Paul indicated that he had learned to be content in any state in which he found himself (v. 11). He had learned the secret of facing either plenty and abundance or hunger and want (v. 12); he could do all things through him who strengthened him (v. 13). Jesus himself, of course, asked to be spared from the cup that he was about to drink, praying that if it were possible, it might pass from him, but that not his will, but that of the Father, might be done. Jesus was not spared the death of the cross, but was enabled to overcome it.

The Scripture writers see the preserving hand of God everywhere. In particular, the psalmists' hymns of praise emphasize God's preserving work throughout nature. An outstanding example is Psalm 104. God has set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken (v. 5). He sends the streams into the valleys (v. 10) and waters the mountains (v. 13). He makes the darkness so that the beasts of prey can seek their sustenance (vv. 20-21). All of the creatures of God receive their food from him (vv. 24-30). Job similarly sees God as controlling the whole of creation—he sends rain (5:10) and snow (37:10). God is at work through the processes of nature to provide for the needs of his creatures.

The biblical teaching regarding the divine work of preservation excludes two opposite ideas. On the one hand is the deistic idea that God has simply made the world, established its patterns of action so that whatever is needed by each member of the creation will be automatically provided, and then allowed the world to go on its way.<sup>2</sup> Given this model, the creation will remain unless God acts to terminate it. Given the biblical model, however, creation would cease to be apart from God's continued willing it to persist. The creation has no resident or inherent power of existence. God is directly and personally concerned about and involved with the continuation of his creation.

The doctrine of preservation must also be seen as countering the opposite idea—continuous creation. Here we do not have in mind the sort of expression sometimes used by some Reformed writers which aims at affirming that divine providence is no less significant a work than is creation.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we are referring to something quite different. Karl Heim is a recent advocate of the idea that God actually creates the universe anew in each instant of time. Thus, it is continually ceasing to

2. G. C. Joyce, "Deism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1955), vol. 4, pp. 5-11.

3. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 179.

be, and God is continually calling it back into existence.<sup>4</sup> There is an ever-repeated performance of the wonderful creation out of nothing. Continuous creation is something like the constantly repeated cycle of alternating current—the current rises to full voltage, then drops to zero, and rises again to the full voltage in the opposite polarity. What appears to be a continuous application of current is in actuality a constantly repeated series of changes in the flow of voltage. The process is repeated sixty times per second. If the frequency is much less than this, the naked eye can sometimes detect a flicker of a lamp bulb, as sometimes happens where the cycle occurs fifty times per second. So, in this view, creation is constantly ceasing to be as it were, and then being created again and again by God.

Nothing in the biblical descriptions of the divine work of preservation suggests that there is a series of atomistic and incessantly repeated “acts” of the same nature as creation. While there is no guarantee of the existence of anything, the idea that all things tend to fall back into nonbeing is derived from sources other than the biblical witness. There is, to be sure, no Hebrew word for preservation, so that the matter cannot be finally settled on linguistic grounds.<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that the idea of continuous creation does have a major flaw: it makes all of God’s working direct; it denies that he can employ means to achieve his ends.

An image to help us correctly understand God’s work of preservation can be drawn from the world of mechanics. We can start a manual electric drill by engaging the switch and then activate a locking device which will keep the drill running until definite action is taken to release the lock. The drill will remain on indefinitely if simply left by itself. It would be possible to start the drill, activate the lock, lay the drill down, and walk away. The drill would continue to run without any human attention. This is like the deistic view of God’s work of preservation. There are other tools, such as power saws, which do not have built-in locking devices. Such tools require continuous application of pressure to the switch. This is like the “dead man’s switch” in a railroad locomotive. If the person operating the machine fails for whatever reason to continue to apply pressure, it comes to a halt: It cannot continue unless someone constantly wills it to function and takes the necessary action. Such machines can serve as metaphors of the biblical view of preservation.

Another illustration of deism is an automobile with a speed control. The speed, once set, will be maintained, even if the driver removes his or

her foot from the accelerator. An automobile without such a speed control can illustrate the biblical view of preservation. As soon as the driver’s foot is removed from the accelerator, the car will begin to slow and eventually coast to a stop. Similarly, if God did not continue to will actively the existence of his creation, it would cease to be. It has no inherent ability to persist. By contrast, the idea of continuous creation can be illustrated by a machine which continually loses power and must be switched back on or restarted again and again and again. Some of us have had automobiles which at times behaved this way, particularly in very cold weather. The process of starting the engine had to be repeated continually. However, it is not the case that God must again and again bring the creation into being out of nothing, for it is not constantly ceasing to be, or beginning to cease to be.

One other idea of preservation or sustenance needs to be avoided. This is the idea that God is like a celestial repairman: The creation has been established and ordinarily functions as God intends. At times, however, it is necessary for God to intervene to make an adjustment before something goes amiss, or perhaps to make a repair after something has gone wrong. In this view, his task is essentially a negative one. He is not needed when all goes well. When things are going as they were designed to, God merely observes, approvingly. However, the Bible pictures a much more active involvement by God on a continuing basis.<sup>6</sup> While God is not so immanent as to create continuously and repeatedly, he is, nonetheless, immanently at work in his creation, constantly willing it to remain.

The biblical writers who understood the divine work of preservation had a definite sense of confidence. For example, Psalm 91 describes the Lord as our refuge and fortress. The believer need not fear “the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday” (vv. 5-6). Even in the midst of battle there can be confidence, for the angels of the Lord are watching over and guarding the believer (v. 11). The psalmist had learned the lesson that Jesus was to teach his disciples—not to fear the one who can destroy the body but cannot touch the soul (Matt. 10:28). This is not a belief that death cannot touch the believer, for death comes to all (Heb. 9:27). Rather, it is the confidence that physical death is not the most significant factor, that even death cannot separate one from God’s love. The resurrection of Christ is the proof that God has conquered even death. Having learned this very lesson Paul could say, “Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). The worst that can befall us is to be killed, but that

4. Karl Heim, *Glaube und Denken* (Hamburg: Furche, 1931), p. 230.

5. Berkouwer, *Providence of God*, p. 72.

6. Ibid., p. 74.

holds no terror for the believer who has learned that no harm can come to him contrary to the will of God. While the doctrine of God's work of preservation is no justification for foolhardiness or imprudence, it is a guard against terror or even anxiety.

God's work of preservation also means that we can have confidence in the regularity of the created world. It is possible to plan and to carry out our lives because there is a constancy to our environment. We take this fact for granted, yet it is essential to any sort of rational functioning in the world. We are able to sit down in a chair because we know it will not vaporize or disappear. Barring a practical joke by someone while our back is turned, it will be there. Yet from a purely empirical standpoint, there is no real basis for such an expectation. In the past, we have found that our expectations of the future proved true when that future became present. Thus, we assume that our present expectations of the future, because they resemble previous expectations of now past futures, will be fulfilled. But this argument assumes the very thing that it purports to establish, namely, that future futures will resemble past futures. That is equivalent to assuming that the future will resemble the past. There really is no empirical basis for knowing the future until we have had a chance to actually experience that future. While there may be a psychological tendency to expect a certain thing to occur, there are no logical grounds for it, unless there is a belief that reality is of such a nature that it will persist in existence. The assumption that matter persists, or that the laws of nature will continue to function, brings us into the realm of metaphysics. The Christian's belief at this point is not in a material or impersonal ground of reality, but in an intelligent, good, and purposeful being who continues to will the existence of his creation, so that ordinarily no unexpected events occur.

### Providence as Government

#### *The Extent of God's Governing Activity*

By the government of God we mean his activity in the universe so that all its events fulfil his plan for it. As such, the governing activity of God of course broadly includes the matter which we have referred to as preservation. Here, however, the emphasis is more fully upon the purposive directing of the whole of reality and the course of history to the ends that God has in mind. It is the actual execution, within time, of his plans devised in eternity.

This governing activity of God extends over a large variety of areas. God is described as controlling nature, so much so that its elements are

personified as obeying his voice. In the Psalms the praise of God often takes the form of extolling his power over nature: "For I know that the **LORD** is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the **LORD** pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses" (Ps. 135:5-7). Jesus held the same faith: "Your Father who is in heaven ... makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

Particularly dramatic evidence of God's power over nature can be seen in the case of Elijah, who told Ahab that it would not rain except by the word of God, and it did not rain for three-and-a-half years, and who prayed at Mount Carmel for God to send down lightning from heaven, and it was done. We have already noted that God performed miracles involving nature in connection with the exodus of the people of Israel. In addition, Jesus' power over nature was part of what caused the disciples to recognize that he was God. During a severe storm, he spoke only the words, "Peace! Be still!" and the storm abated (Mark 4:39). The disciples asked themselves, "Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?" (Luke 8:25). When they had fished all night and caught nothing, Jesus commanded them to take their boats out into the deep water and let down their nets. They obeyed and were amazed to find that they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. (For similar expressions of the Lord's governance of the forces of nature, see Job 9:5-9; 37; Pss. 104:14; 147:8-15; Matt. 6:25-30.)

Scripture tells us that God guides and directs the animal creation. In Psalm 104:21-29, the beasts, from the young lions to the teeming sea creatures, are depicted as carrying out his will and as depending upon him for their provisions. In 1 Kings 17:4, Jehovah tells Elijah that he will provide for him during the coming drought: "You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." In verse 6 we are told that the ravens brought Elijah bread and meat in the morning and evening. Incapable of conscious choice, animals instinctively obey God's command.

Further, God's government involves human history and the destiny of the nations. A particularly vivid expression of this is found in Daniel 2:21: "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." And there is a dramatic illustration in Daniel 4:24-25. The Lord uses Assyria to accomplish his purposes with Israel, and then in turn brings destruction upon Assyria as well (Isa. 10:5-12). This is simply part of his working among all the nations: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I

have brought down those who sat on thrones" (v. 13). Paul, in his Mars Hill address, said that God has "made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). (For similar expressions of God's direction of human history, see Job 12:23; Pss. 47:7-8; 66:7.)

The Lord is also sovereign in the circumstances of the lives of individual persons. Hannah, inspired by the miraculous answer to her prayer (the Lord had given her a son, Samuel), expressed her praise: "The **LORD** kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The **LORD** makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts" (1 Sam. 2:6-7). Mary similarly glorified God: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52). Paul asserts that even before he was born God had set him apart for his task (Gal. 1:15-16). Paul urges his readers to be humble since everything they have and are has been received from God. They are "to live according to Scripture, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:6-7). Christians have differing gifts. That is because God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, has chosen sovereignly to give particular gifts to particular persons (Rom. 12:3-6; 1 Cor. 12:4-11).

David found comfort in the fact that God was sovereign in his life: "But I trust in thee, O **LORD**, I say, 'Thou art my God.' My times are in thy hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors!" (Ps. 31:14-15). He continued to trust in the Lord in the midst of adversity and enemies, believing that the Lord would ultimately vindicate him. Human explanations of the fortunes and misfortunes of life are shallow and mistaken: "For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up; but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another... But I will rejoice for ever, I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. All the horns of the wicked he will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted" (Ps. 75:6-7, 9-10).

The Lord also is sovereign even in what are thought of as the accidental occurrences of life. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the **LORD**." This is illustrated in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. When the great storm came upon the ship on which Jonah was traveling to Tarshish, the sailors cast lots to determine who was responsible for the evil Corning upon them; the Lord used that system to single out Jonah (Jonah 1:7). When the early believers sought someone to replace Judas within the circle of the apostles, they in effect nominated two, and then prayed that God would show them which of the two, Barsabbas or Matthias, was his choice. They then cast lots; and when the lot fell on Matthias, they enrolled him

with the eleven apostles (Acts 1:23-26). Even accidental manslaughter is regarded as being directed by God. Note how the ordinance in Exodus describes unpremeditated murder: "If [the murderer] did not lie in wait for [the victim], but God let him fall into his hand," then the murderer could flee to a city of refuge (Exod. 21:13). This is a powerful indication that God is in control of all the circumstances of life, that nothing is pure chance. Although the name of God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, it is worth noting that in proposing that Esther go to the king on behalf of her people, Mordecai asks, "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14).

God's governing activity is to be thought of in the widest possible setting. The psalmist says, "The **LORD** has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." The psalmist then proceeds to call upon all the angels, all the hosts of the Lord, the ministers that do his will, all his works, in all the places of his dominion, to bless him (Ps. 103:19-22). When Nebuchadnezzar comes to his senses, he blesses the Lord: "For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing; and he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What doest thou?'" (Dan. 4:34-35). Paul says that God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The very idea of the kingdom of God, which plays such a prominent role both in the Old Testament and in the teaching of Jesus, suggests the universal ruling power of God. His rule is universal in terms of both time (it is eternal) and extent (everyone and everything is totally subject to it).

But the sovereignty of God is not merely a matter of the circumstances of life or the behavior of the subhuman creation. The free actions of humans are also part of God's governmental working. When the people of Israel were to leave Egypt, the Lord told them that they would not depart empty-handed, for he would give them favor in the sight of the Egyptians (Exod. 3:21). This was fulfilled when the time of departure came: "The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked of the Egyptians jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing; and the **LORD** had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they despoiled the Egyptians" (Exod. 12:35-36). While it might be argued that the Lord coerced the Egyptians in this matter through the plagues and particularly the death of their first-born, the Bible is clear that the granting of the Israelites' requests was a free decision on the part of the Egyptians.

Another example is in 1 Samuel 24. Saul interrupted his pursuit of David to go into a cave to relieve himself. It so happened that David and his men were hiding in that very cave. David was able to cut off the skirt of Saul's robe, but did not harm him. Shortly thereafter, both David and Saul interpreted the king's ostensibly free action in entering the cave as actually the Lord's doing. David said to Saul, "The LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave" (v. 10); and Saul responded, "You did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands" (v. 18). Psalm 33:15 says that the Lord fashions the hearts of all the inhabitants of the earth. Proverbs says that man's plans and actions will eventuate in the fulfilment of God's purposes: "The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD" (16:1); "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (19:21). When Ezra was refurbishing the temple, King Artaxerxes of Persia provided resources out of his nation's funds. Ezra comments: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:27).

Even the sinful actions of humans are part of God's providential working. Probably the most notable instance of this is the crucifixion of Jesus, which Peter attributed to both God and sinful men: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). It might be argued that only the delivering up of Jesus (i.e., the betrayal by Judas), rather than the actual crucifixion, is here represented as part of God's plan. The point is the same, nevertheless: what sinful men did is considered part of God's providential working.

In 2 Samuel 24:1, the Lord is said to have incited David to number the people; elsewhere Satan is said to have induced David to commit this sin (1 Chron. 21:1). Another reference sometimes cited as evidence that human sin is part of God's providential activity is 2 Samuel 16:10. David observes that Shimei is cursing him at the Lord's command. This is put in the form of a hypothetical statement ("If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David'"), but in verse 11 David says categorically, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD has bidden him." In 2 Thessalonians, Paul notes that Satan has deceived "those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." Then he adds, "Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2:10-12). Here it appears that Paul is attributing what Satan has done to the working of God as well.

#### *The Relationship Between God's Governing Activity and Sin*

At this point we must address the difficult problem of the relationship between God's working and the committing of sinful acts by humans. It is necessary to distinguish between God's normal working in relation to human actions and his working in relation to sinful acts. The Bible makes quite clear that God is not the cause of sin. James writes, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:14). John states: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:16). But if the sinful actions of men are not caused by God, what do we mean when we say that they are within his governing activity? There are several ways in which God can and does relate to sin: he can (1) prevent it; (2) permit it; (3) direct it; or (4) limit it.<sup>7</sup> Note that in each case God is not the cause of man's sin, but acts in relationship to it.

1. God can prevent sin. At times he deters or precludes people from performing certain sinful acts. When Abimelech, thinking that Sarah was Abraham's sister rather than his wife, took her to himself, the Lord came to him in a dream. He said to Abimelech, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her" (Gen. 20:6). David prayed that God would keep him from sin: "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" (Ps. 19:13).

2. God does not always prevent sin. At times he simply wills to permit it. Although it is not what he would wish to happen, he acquiesces in it. By not preventing the sin we determine to do, God renders it *certain* that we will indeed commit it; but he does not cause us to sin, or render it *necessary* that we act in this fashion. At Lystra Paul preached that "in past generations [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16). And in Romans 1 he says that God gave men up to impurity, dishonorable passions, a base mind, improper conduct (vv. 24, 26, 28). Similarly, Jesus said regarding Moses' permitting divorce: "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). In 2 Chronicles 32:31 we read that "God left [Hezekiah] to himself, in order to try him and to know all that was in his heart." These were concessions by God to let men perform sinful acts which were not his desire, acts which they could not have performed had he so decided. This is probably put most clearly by

7. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 423-25.

the Lord in Psalm 81:12–13: “So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!”

3. God can also direct sin. That is, while permitting some sins to occur, God nonetheless directs them in such a way that good comes out of them. This is what Ethelbert Stauffer has called the law of reversal.<sup>8</sup> Probably the most dramatic case of this in Scripture is the story of Joseph. His brothers wished to kill him, to be rid of him. This desire certainly was not good; it was neither caused nor approved by God. Yet he permitted them to accomplish their desire—but with a slight modification. Reuben urged the other brothers not to kill Joseph, but merely to throw him into a pit, thinking to free him later (Gen. 37:21–22). But then another factor entered. Midianite traders came by and the brothers (unbeknownst to Reuben) sold Joseph as a slave. None of this was what God had wished, but he allowed it and used the evil intentions and actions of the brothers for ultimate good. The Lord was with Joseph (Gen. 39:2). Despite the scheming and lying of Potiphar’s wife and the lack of faithfulness by the chief butler, Joseph became successful and through his efforts large numbers of people, including his father’s family, were spared from starvation. Joseph was wise enough to recognize the hand of God in all this. He declared to his brothers: “So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Gen. 45:8). And after the death of Jacob he reiterated to them: “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). Peter saw that God had in like manner used the crucifixion of Jesus for good: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Paul spoke of the Jews’ rejection of Christ as the means by which reconciliation came to the world (Rom. 11:13–15, 25).

God is like a counterpuncher or, perhaps more accurately, like a judo expert who redirects the evil efforts of sinful men and Satan in such a way that they become the very means of doing good. We must recognize here the amazing nature of divine omnipotence. If God were great and powerful, but not all-powerful, he would have to originate everything directly, or he would lose control of the situation and be unable to accomplish his ultimate purposes. But our omnipotent God is able to allow evil men to do their very worst, and still he accomplishes his purposes.

4. Finally, God can limit sin. There are times when he does not prevent

8. Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 207.

evil deeds, but nonetheless restrains the extent or effect of what evil men and the devil and his demons can do. A prime example is the case of Job. God permitted Satan to act, but limited what he could do: “Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand” (Job 1:12). Later, the Lord said, “Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life” (2:6). David expressed the faith of Israel when he wrote, “If it had not been the **Lord** who was on our side, let Israel now say—if it had not been the **Lord** who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us” (Ps. 124:1–3). And Paul reassured his readers that there are limits upon the temptation they will encounter: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Even when God permits sin to occur, he imposes limits beyond which it cannot go.

#### **The Major Features of God's Governing Activity**

We need now to summarize the major features and the implications of the doctrine of divine government.

1. God’s governing activity is universal. It extends to all matters, that which is obviously good and even that which seemingly is not good. Paul wrote, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This means there are no limits upon whom God uses. He may even use seemingly “unclean” agents, such as Cyrus (Isa. 44–45), to accomplish his ends. The sensitive believer will be alert to what God is intending and attempting to do, even in unexpected or unplanned or unlikely situations. An example is Jesus’ interview with the Samaritan woman. This was not a planned meeting. It was not on the agenda of evangelistic endeavors. It came when Jesus was “off duty”—during a rest period on a traveling day (John 4:3, 6). Yet Jesus saw this as an opportunity providentially sent by the Father, and hence an opportunity to be utilized. So he spoke to the woman regarding the living water, and brought her to faith in him. The wise Christian will be similarly alert to the opportunities that come in what seem at first glance to be accidental circumstances. That life is pregnant with divinely sent possibilities gives us a sense of expectancy and excitement.

2. God’s providence does not extend merely to his own people. While there is a special concern for the believer, God does not withhold his goodness entirely from the rest of mankind. Jesus said this quite openly in Matthew 5:45: “he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,

and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." This goes contrary to an opinion held by some Christians, an opinion which was expressed humorously a few years ago in a comic strip entitled "The Reverend." One day the Reverend, attired in his clerical garb, was leaving on vacation. His neighbor offered to water his lawn while he was gone. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness," replied the Reverend, "but I've made other arrangements." In the last panel, rain was pouring down on the Reverend's lawn, but not on the adjacent yards. That, says Jesus, is *not* how God ordinarily works. The unbeliever as well as the believer benefits from the Fathers goodness. My father was a Christian; the man whose farm was next to ours was a non-Christian who worked seven days a week. But when it rained, it usually rained on both farms alike.

3. God is good in his government. He works for the good, sometimes directly bringing it about, sometimes countering or deflecting the efforts of evil men toward good. We have seen this in Romans 8:28. We must be careful, however, not to identify too quickly and easily the good with what is pleasant and comfortable for us. In Romans 8:28 the good is associated with God's purpose, and that in turn is identified as the conforming of his children to the image of his Son (v. 29). Being conformed to the Son's image may sometimes involve suffering trials (1 Peter 1:6-9) or enduring discipline (Heb. 12:6-11).

That God is good in his government should produce in the believer a confidence in the ultimate outcome of the events of life. When Abraham was called upon to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice, he was confident that Isaac would somehow be spared. Abraham said to the servants, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). The Hebrew word translated "come again" is clearly in the first-person plural. When Isaac asked where the lamb for the burnt offering was, Abraham responded, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Abraham had no prior knowledge or guarantee of what would happen on the mountain. He may even have expected that Isaac was to die and be resurrected (cf. Heb. 11:19). But whatever was going to happen, Abraham knew from personal experience what kind of God he served. God had provided and cared for him when he obeyed and went out from Ur of the Chaldees to a place that he had never seen. In the knowledge that God is good and had promised that Isaac would be his heir, Abraham was confident that he and Isaac would somehow return again from the mountain. God is not only in control; he is directing matters according to the goodness and graciousness of his character. Therefore, the believer ought not hold back from doing God's will for fear that some dreadful thing will befall him.

4. God is personally concerned about those who are his. We should not think that God handles us impersonally in a sort of bureaucratic

fashion. Because of the size and complexity of the kingdom of God we might be tempted to draw this conclusion. But various pictures Jesus gives us of the Father indicate the personal dimension of his care. He cares about the one lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) and searches until he finds it. The good shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name. They recognize his voice and come, whereas they would disregard the voice of a stranger (John 10:3-6, 14, 27). The shepherd watches over his sheep, protects them, even gives his life for them if need be (v. 11). The Father knows the very hairs of the heads of those who are his (Matt. 10:30).

The personal dimension of God's government speaks significantly to the contemporary situation. With growing automation and computerization has also come increased depersonalization. We are only cogs in the machinery, faceless robots, numbers on file, punches in computer cards, or entries on tape. The government of our nation is distant and depersonalized. A brilliant English major, applying to graduate school, was assigned a number by one institution and told that it would not be necessary to use his name in future correspondence; the number would be sufficient. He chose a different university, one which still uses names. The doctrine of the providence of God assures us that his personal relationship to us is important. He knows each of us and each one matters to him.

5. Our activity and the divine activity are not mutually exclusive. We have no basis for laxity, indifference, or resignation in the face of the fact that God is at work accomplishing his goals. As we have seen, his providence includes human actions. Sometimes humans are conscious that their actions are fulfilling divine intention, as when Jesus said that he must do the Father's will (e.g., Matt. 26:42). At other times there is an unwitting carrying out of God's plan. Little did Caesar Augustus know when he made his decree (Luke 2:1) that the census he was ordering would make possible the fulfilment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but he helped fulfil it nonetheless. The certainty that God will accomplish something in no way excuses us from giving ourselves diligently to bringing about its accomplishment. God accomplishes the ends he has in mind, but he does so by employing means (including human actions) to those ends.

Nor should there be any loss of belief in the providence of God simply because there is now less need for spectacular divine intervention. Modern secular man sees little place for God in this world. In ancient times, God was the solution to mysteries. He was behind everything that happened. He was the explanation of the existence of the universe, and the complexity of creation. He was the solver of problems. Yet today man has come to understand his universe much more completely. He now knows what makes a person ill (at least in many cases) and medical

science can prevent or cure the illness. Prayers for healing seem inappropriate (except in critical or hopeless cases). God's providence appears to be a foreign concept.<sup>9</sup> Yet we have seen that providence includes the immanent working of God; thus, God is providentially at work as much in the cure wrought by the physician as in a miraculous healing.

6. God is sovereign in his government. This means that he alone determines his plan and knows the significance of each of his actions. It is not necessary for us to know where he is leading. We need to be careful, then, to avoid dictating to God what he should do to give us direction. Sometimes the Christian is tempted to tell God, "If you want me to do A, then show me by doing X." This fails to take into account the complexity of the universe, and the large numbers of persons whom God must be concerned about. It would be far better, Gideon's fleece (Judg. 6:36–40) notwithstanding, if we simply allow God to illumine us—if he so wishes and to the extent he wishes—as to the significance of his working. We know that everything does have a significance within God's plan, but we must be careful not to assume that the meaning of everything should be obvious, and that we should be able to identify that meaning. To suppose that we should be able to understand the significance of all of God's leading and that he will spell it out for us through some means akin to Gideon's fleece is superstition, not piety.

7. We need to be careful as to what we identify as God's providence. The most notable instance of a too ready identification of historical events with God's will is probably the "German Christians" who in 1934 endorsed the action of Adolf Hitler as God's working in history. The words of their statement are sobering to us who now read them: "We are full of thanks to God that He, as Lord of history, has given us Adolf Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot. We acknowledge that we, with body and soul, are bound and dedicated to the German state and to its Führer. This bondage and duty contains for us, as evangelical Christians, its deepest and most holy significance in its obedience to the command of God."<sup>10</sup> A statement a year earlier had said, "To this turn of history [i.e., Hitler's taking power] we say a thankful Yes. God has given him to us. To Him be the glory. As bound to God's Word, we recognize in the great events of our day a new commission of God to His church."<sup>11</sup> From our perspective, the folly of such statements seems obvious. But are there perhaps some pronouncements we are making today which will be seen as similarly mistaken by those who come a few decades

9. Karl Heim, *Christian Faith and Natural Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 15.

10. Quoted in Berkouwer, *Providence of God*, pp. 176-77.

11. Quoted in Karl Barth, *Theologische Existenz Heute* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1934), p. 10.

after us? While we need not necessarily go so far as did Karl Barth in rejecting a natural theology based upon the developments of history, in his condemnation of the German Christians' action there is a word of caution that is instructive to us.

### Providence and Prayer

One problem that has concerned thoughtful Christians when considering the nature of providence is the role of prayer. The dilemma stems from the question of what prayer really accomplishes. On the one hand, if prayer has any effect upon what happens, then it seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place. Providence is in some sense dependent upon or altered by whether and how much someone prays. On the other hand, if God's plan is established and he is going to do what he is going to do, then does it matter whether we pray?

We should note that this is simply one particular form of the larger issue of the relationship between human effort and divine providence. Accordingly, we can approach it with the same analytical considerations that we apply to the examination of the broader issue. We need to note two facts: (1) Scripture teaches that God's plan is definite and fixed—it is not subject to revision; and (2) we are commanded to pray and taught that prayer has value (James 5:16). But how do these two facts relate to each other?

It appears from Scripture that in many cases God works in a sort of partnership with man. God does not act if man does not play his part. Thus, when Jesus ministered in his hometown of Nazareth, he did not perform any major miracles. All he did was to heal a few sick people. That Jesus "marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:6) suggests that the people of Nazareth simply did not bring their needy ones to him for healing. It is clear that in many cases the act of faith was necessary for God to act—and such faith was lacking in Nazareth. On the other hand, when Jesus walked on the water (Matt. 14:22–33), Peter asked to be bidden to go to Jesus on the water and was enabled to do so. Presumably Jesus could have enabled all of the disciples to walk on the water that day, but only Peter did because only he asked. The centurion bringing his request for the healing of a servant (Matt. 8:5–13) and the woman with the hemorrhage (Matt. 9:18–22), clinging to Jesus' garment, are examples of faith which, demonstrated in petition, resulted in God's working. When God wills the end (in these cases, healing), he also wills the means (which includes a request to be healed, which in turn presupposes faith). That is, God wills the healing in part by willing that those in need should bring their entreaties. Thus, prayer does not change what

he has purposed to do. It is the means by which he accomplishes his end. It is vital, then, that a prayer be uttered, for without it the desired result will not come to pass.

This means that prayer is more than self-stimulation. It is not a method of creating a positive mental attitude in ourselves so that we are able to do what we have asked to have done. Rather, prayer is in large part a matter of creating in ourselves a right attitude with respect to God's will. Jesus taught his disciples and us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," before "Give us this day our daily bread." Prayer is not so much getting God to do our will as it is demonstrating that we are as concerned as is God that his will be done. Moreover, Jesus taught us persistence in prayer (Luke 11:8-10—note that the imperatives of verse 9 and the participles in verse 10 are present tense: keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking). It takes little faith, commitment, and effort to pray once about something and then cease. Persistent prayer makes it apparent that our petition is important to us, as it is to God.

We do not always receive what we ask for. Jesus asked three times for the removal of the cup (death by crucifixion); Paul prayed thrice for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. In each case, the Father granted instead something that was more needful (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:9-10). The believer can pray confidently, knowing that our wise and good God will give us, not necessarily what we ask for, but what is best. For as the psalmist put it, "No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11).

### Providence and Miracles

What we have been examining thus far are matters of ordinary or normal providence. While they are supernatural in origin, they are relatively common and hence not too conspicuous or spectacular. They do not in any obvious way strike one as somehow departing radically from the normal course of events. We must, however, examine one additional species of providence-miracles. Here we are referring to those striking or unusual workings by God which are clearly supernatural. By miracle we mean those special supernatural works of God's providence which are not explicable on the basis of the usual patterns of nature.

One of the important issues regarding miracles involves their relationship to natural laws or the laws of nature. To some, miracles have been, not an aid to faith, but an obstacle, since they are so contrary to the usual patterns of occurrence as to appear very unlikely or even incredible. Thus, the question of how these events are to be thought of

in relationship to natural law is of great importance. There are at least three views of the relationship between miracles and natural laws.

The first conception is that miracles are actually the manifestations of little known or virtually unknown natural laws. If we fully knew and understood nature, we would be able to understand and even predict these events. Whenever the rare circumstances which produce a miracle reappear in that particular combination, the miracle will reoccur.<sup>12</sup> Certain biblical instances seem to fit this pattern, for example, the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5. According to this view, Christ did not create fish for the occasion, nor did he somehow drive them from their places in the lake to where the net was to be let down. Rather, unusual conditions were present so that the fish had gathered in a place where they would not ordinarily be expected. Anytime those particular circumstances were present, the fish gathered in that spot. Thus, Jesus' miracle was not so much a matter of omnipotence as of omniscience. The miracle came in his knowing where the fish would be. Other types of miracles come to mind as well. Some of the healings of Jesus could well have been psychosomatic healings, that is, cases of powerful suggestion removing hysterical symptoms. Since many illnesses involving physical symptoms are functional rather than organic in origin and character, it seems reasonable to assume that Jesus simply utilized his extraordinary knowledge of psychosomatics to accomplish these healings.

There is much about this view that is appealing, particularly since some of the biblical miracles fit this scheme quite well; it may well be that some of them were of this nature. There are certain problems with adopting this view as an all-inclusive explanation, however. There are some miracles that are very difficult to explain in terms of this view. For example, was the instance of the man born blind (John 9) a case of psychosomatic *congenital* blindness? Now of course none of us knows what laws there may be that we do not know. That is the nature of ignorance: we often do not know what it is that we do not know. But it is reasonable to assume that we should have at least some hint of what those unknown laws might be. The very vagueness of the theory is at the same time its strength and its weakness. To say, without further argument, that there are laws of nature which we do not know can never be either confirmed or refuted.

A second conception is that miracles break the laws of nature. In the case of the axhead that floated, for example (2 Kings 6:6), this theory suggests that for a brief period of time, in that cubic foot or so of water,

<sup>12.</sup> Patrick Nowell-Smith, "Miracles," in New *Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 245-48.

the law of gravity was suspended. It simply did not apply. In effect, God turned off the law of gravity until the axhead was retrieved, or he changed the density of the axhead or of the water. This view of miracles has the virtue of seeming considerably more supernatural than the preceding one. But there are certain drawbacks attaching to it. For one thing, such suspending or breaking of the laws of nature usually introduces complications requiring a whole series of compensating miracles. In the story of Joshua's long day (*Josh. 10:12–14*), for example, numerous adjustments would have to be made, of which there is no hint in the narrative, if God actually stopped the revolution of the earth on its axis. While this is certainly possible for an almighty God, there is no indication of it in the astronomical data.<sup>13</sup> There are two other problems, one psychological and one theological. Psychologically, the apparent disorderliness introduced into nature by the view that miracles are violations of natural law unnecessarily predisposes scientists to be prejudiced against them. This definition makes miracles particularly difficult to defend. As a matter of fact, there are those who categorically reject miracles strictly on the basis of this definition.<sup>14</sup> And, theologically, this view seems to make God work against himself, thus introducing a form of self-contradiction.

A third conception is the idea that when miracles occur, natural forces are countered by supernatural force. In this view, the laws of nature are not suspended. They continue to operate, but supernatural force is introduced, negating the effect of the natural law.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the axhead, for instance, the law of gravity continued to function in the vicinity of the axhead, but the unseen hand of God was underneath it, bearing it up, just as if a human hand were lifting it. This view has the advantage of regarding miracles as being genuinely supernatural or extranatural, but without being antinatural, as the second view makes them to be. To be sure, in the case of the fish, it may have been the conditions in the water which caused the fish to be there, but those conditions would not have been present if God had not influenced such factors as the water flow and temperature. And at times there may have been acts of creation as well, as in the case of the feeding of the five thousand.

There should really be no problem when we encounter events which run contrary to what natural law would dictate. Twentieth-century

13. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 156–61. A simpler explanation is that a miracle of refraction resulted in a prolongation of daylight.

14. E.g., David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 10, part 1.

15. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 59–61.

science is more likely than was the nineteenth century to recognize natural laws as merely statistical reports of what has happened. From a purely empirical standpoint, one has no logical grounds, but only a psychological inclination, to predict the future on the basis of the past. Whether the course of nature is fixed and inviolable, or whether it can be successfully opposed, is a question bringing us into the realm of metaphysics. If we are open to the possibility that there are reality and force outside the system of nature, then miracles are a possibility. It then becomes a question of examining the historical evidence to determine whether they have occurred. We will do that in connection with the supreme miracle, the resurrection of Jesus, in our treatment of Christology (pp. 776–77).

At this point, however, we should mention the purposes of miracles. There are at least three. The most important is to glorify God. The beneficiaries and observers of the biblical miracles generally responded by glorifying God. This means that when miracles occur today, we should credit God, who is the source of the miracle, not the human agent who is the channel. In biblical times, a second purpose of miracles was to establish the supernatural basis of the revelation which often accompanied them. That the Greek word *σημεῖα* ("signs") frequently occurs in the New Testament as a term for miracles underscores this dimension. We note, too, that miracles often came at times of especially intensive revelation. This can be seen in the ministry of our Lord (e.g., Luke 5:24). Finally, miracles occur to meet human needs. Our Lord frequently is pictured as moved with compassion for the needy, hurting people who came to him. He healed them to relieve the suffering caused by such maladies as blindness, leprosy, and hemorrhaging. He never performed miracles for the selfish purpose of putting on a display.

We have seen that the doctrine of providence is not an abstract conception. It is the believer's conviction that he or she is in the hands of a good, wise, and powerful God who will accomplish his purposes in the world.

Be not dismayed whate'er betide, God will take care of you;  
Beneath His wings of love abide, God will take care of you.

Through days of toil when heart doth fail, God will take care of you;  
When dangers fierce your path assail, God will take care of you.

All you may need He will provide, God will take care of you;  
Nothing you ask will be denied, God will take care of you.

No matter what may be the test, God will take care of you;  
 Lean, weary one, upon His breast, God will take care of you.

God will take care of you, through every day, o'er all the way;  
 He will take care of you, God will take care of you.

(Civilla Durfee Martin, 1904)

# 19

---



---

## Evil and God's World: A Special Problem

### The Nature of the Problem

#### Types of Solutions

- Finitism: Rejection of Omnipotence
- Modification of the Concept of God's Goodness
- Denial of Evil

#### Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil

- Evil as a Necessary Accompaniment of the Creation of Man
- A Reevaluation of What Constitutes Good and Evil
- Evil in General as the Result of Sin in General
- Specific Evil as the Result of Specific Sins
- God as the Victim of Evil
- The Life Hereafter

### The Nature of the Problem

We have spoken of the nature of God's providence and have noted that it is universal: God is in control of all that occurs. He has a plan for the entire universe and all of time, and is at work bringing about that good plan. But a shadow falls across this comforting doctrine: the problem of evil.

The problem may be stated in a simple or a more complex fashion.

David Hume put it succinctly when he wrote of God: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?"<sup>1</sup> The existence of evil can also be seen as presenting a problem for the mealtime prayer that many children have been taught to pray: "God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food." For if God is great, then he is able to prevent evil from occurring. If God is good, he will not wish for evil to occur. But there is rather evident evil about us. The problem of evil then may be thought of as a conflict involving three concepts: God's power, God's goodness, and the presence of evil in the world. Common sense seems to tell us that all three cannot be true.

In varying degrees, the problem is a difficulty for all types of strong theism. Specifically, it is a difficulty for the theology which we have been presenting in this writing. We have discussed the omnipotence of God: his ability to do all things which are proper objects of his power. We have noted that creation and providence are implementations of this omnipotence, meaning respectively that God has by his own free decision and action brought into being everything that is and that he is in control of that creation, maintaining and directing it to the ends he has chosen. Further, we have observed the goodness of God-his attributes of love, mercy, patience. Yet evil is obviously present. How can this be, in light of who and what God is?

The evil that precipitates this dilemma is of two general types. On one hand, there is what is usually called natural evil. This is evil that does not involve human willing and acting, but is merely an aspect of nature which seems to work against man's welfare. There are the destructive forces of nature: hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and the like. These catastrophic occurrences produce large losses of life as well as property. And much suffering and loss of human lives are caused by diseases such as cancer, cystic fibrosis, multiple sclerosis, and a host of other illnesses. The other type of evil is termed moral evil. These are evils which can be traced to the choice and action of free moral agents. Here we find war, crime, cruelty, class struggles, discrimination, slavery, and injustices too numerable to mention. While moral evils can to some extent be removed from our consideration here by blaming them upon man's exercise of his own free will, natural evils cannot be dismissed from our consideration. They simply seem to be there in the creation which God has made.

We have noted that the problem of evil arises to varying degrees for different theologies; in addition, it takes differing forms. Indeed, John Feinberg argues that we are not dealing with a problem, but with a set

1. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10.

or series of problems appearing in varying combinations. Moreover, the problem of evil may occur as either a religious or a theological problem or both.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the distinction made in the opening chapter of this book, religion is the level of spiritual practice, experience, and belief. Theology is the secondary level of reflection upon religion, involving analysis, interpretation, and construction. In general, the religious form of the problem of evil occurs when some particular aspect of one's experience has had the effect of calling into question the greatness or goodness of God, and hence threatens the relationship between the believer and God. The theological form of the problem is concerned with evil in general. It is not a question of how a specific concrete situation can exist in light of God's being what and who he is, but of how any such problem could possibly exist. Occurrence of the religious form of the problem does not necessarily imply personal experience, but there will have been a specific situation at least vicariously encountered. The theological form of the problem, however, does not necessarily imply any such specific situation at all. One's focus on the problem may well move from religious to theological as a result of such an occurrence, or concentration on evil in general may devolve from much broader considerations. It is important to note these distinctions. For, as Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, the person for whom some specific evil (this is perhaps more accurate than the problem of evil) is presenting a religious difficulty may need pastoral care rather than help in working out intellectual difficulties.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, to treat one's genuine intellectual struggle as merely a matter of feelings will not be very helpful. Failure to recognize the religious form of the problem of evil will appear insensitive; failure to deal with the theological form will appear intellectually insulting. Particularly where the two are found together, it is important to recognize and distinguish the respective components.

### Types of Solutions

There have been many different types of attempted solutions to the problem. For the most part, (our analysis here is somewhat oversimplified) these attempted solutions work at reducing the tension by modifying one or more of the three elements which in combination have caused the dilemma: the greatness of God, his goodness, and the presence of evil. Thus, a theodicy may attempt to show that the conception of God as omnipotent is inaccurate in some respect. Either God is

2. John Feinberg, *Theologies and Evil* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), p. 3.

3. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 63-64.

not completely unlimited, or whether God prevents or fails to prevent a particular evil is not really a question of his omnipotence. Or a theodicy may attempt to show that God is not good in the sense we have assumed. Either God is not fully good, or preventing a particular evil is not really a matter of his goodness. For example, preventing a particular evil (or, for that matter, giving someone what he feels he needs) might not be a case of love but of indulgence. Or the position taken by a theodicy attempting to show that God is not good in the sense we have assumed may be that God is not bound by the standards that we seek to impose upon him. He is completely free; whatever he wills or decrees to be good is therefore good, simply because he declares it to be so. Or a theodicy may work at changing the understanding of evil. It may seek to show that what is thought to be evil is actually either partially or entirely good. We will examine examples of each of these strategies of dealing with evil.

We should not set our expectations too high in our endeavor to deal with the problem of evil. Something less than complete resolution will have to suffice for us. It is important to recognize that this is a very severe problem, perhaps the most severe of all the intellectual problems facing theism. At one evangelical Christian college noted for the high intellectual level of the faculty and student body, a sampling of seniors showed that the problem of evil headed their list of the most vexing intellectual problems facing them in connection with their faith. We are dealing here with a problem that has occupied the attention of some of the greatest minds of the Christian church, intellects of such stature as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. None of them was able to put the problem to rest finally and completely. We should therefore not be unduly depressed if we cannot settle the issue in some final fashion. Although we will not be able to resolve the problem, we may be able to alleviate it somewhat and to see the directions from which final solution might come had we more complete knowledge and understanding.

#### *Finitism: Rejection of Omnipotence*

One way of solving the tension of the problem which we have been describing is to abandon the idea of God's omnipotence. Often this takes the form of a dualism, such as Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism. The latter philosophy, which came at a later time and was more influential upon Christianity, was especially appealing to Augustine for a while, since it offered an explanation of the internal struggle which he was experiencing. Dualisms propose that there are not one but two ultimate principles in the universe. In addition to God, there is also the power of evil. This is generally thought of as uncreated, simply a force that has always been present. There is therefore a struggle between God and this

evil power, with no certainty as to the ultimate outcome. God is attempting to overcome evil, and would if he could, but he is simply unable to do so.

A twentieth-century example of such finitism is the late Edgar S. Brightman, for many years professor of philosophy at Boston University. He was the leading spokesman for what is known as personalism or personal idealism. He developed the concept of a finite God as the solution to the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup> Brightman's God is a personal consciousness of eternal duration, an eternally active will. This God works with the "Given." This "Given" consists in part of the eternal, uncreated laws of reason-logic, mathematical relations, and the Platonic Ideas. It also consists of "equally eternal and uncreated processes of nonrational consciousness which exhibit all the ultimate qualities of sense objects (*qualia*), disorderly impulses and desires, such experiences as pain and suffering, the forms of space and time, and whatever in God is the source of surd evil."<sup>5</sup> All constituent elements of the "Given" are distinguished by two characteristics: (1) they are eternal within the experience of God; (2) they are not a product of will or creative activity?

The concept of surd evil needs a bit of exposition. There are intrinsic goods which are good in and of themselves. There are also instrumental goods, which may be the means to good, but which also may become instrumental evils. Sometimes something is simultaneously both good and evil. The same train may carry a saintly person and a group of criminals to the same city, where they will do, respectively, good and evil. It is thus, *instrumentally*, both good and evil? Much of what appears evil to us may become good under God's attention and activity. But this is not true of surd evil. Surd evil is like a surd number in mathematics, which is a quantity not expressible in rational numbers. Similarly, a surd evil "is an evil that is not expressible in terms of good, no matter what operations are performed on it."<sup>6</sup> There is something which in effect places a limitation upon what God is able to will. Brightman says that "all theistic finitists agree that there is something in the universe not created by God and not a result of voluntary self-limitation, which God finds as either obstacle or instrument to his will."<sup>7</sup> Unlike theists who say that God is not limited by the human free will, but that he consciously and voluntarily limited himself in choosing to give man free will,

4. Edgar S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1940), p. 336.

5. Ibid., p. 337.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 242.

8. Ibid., p. 245n.

9. Ibid., p. 314.

Brightman insists that God did not choose to give man free will. Rather, human free will is simply something which God finds and must work with.

Brightman is quite critical of what he calls "absolute theism," which entails the proposition that all apparent evil is actually good. He particularly objects to its effect on ethical and moral considerations. It tends to make good and evil indistinguishable. By arguing that all that seems unredeemable evil is actually good, in effect absolute theism has opened the door for someone to argue that what seems to be good is actually evil.<sup>10</sup> This can result in a complete skepticism about values. In addition, it cuts the nerve of moral endeavor. If everything is actually already perfect, why try to improve it? Finitism, on the other hand, is based upon a realistic recognition of good and evil. It maintains the distinction between the two. And it motivates our participation in the struggle to overcome evil: "*Finitism is an inspiring challenge to eternal co-operative moral endeavor-a cooperation between God and man.*"<sup>11</sup>

Unlike most finitists, who hold to a dualism in which something external to God limits what he can do, Brightman understands this limitation to be part of the very nature of God. He says we should speak of a God whose will is finite rather than a finite God.<sup>12</sup> The limitation is within God's nature.

In some ways Brightman's finitism solves the difficulty. It accounts for the presence of evil by virtually rejecting the concept of the omnipotence of God. In so doing, however, it pays a high price. It may be said that what finitism has solved is not the problem of *evil* but the problem of *the problem of evil*. That is to say, it gives an explanation as to why there is evil, but does not offer us real encouragement for believing that evil will be ultimately overcome. There is no assurance of the outcome. Presumably, from what Brightman says, God has been at work from eternity, but has not yet succeeded in overcoming evil. If this is the case, then what basis have we for assuming that sometime in the future he will succeed in doing what he has been unable to accomplish to this point?<sup>13</sup> And if there is no assurance that he will win, is there real motivation for us to enter the struggle? He may assure us that the victory will be his, but being limited in knowledge as well as power, he may be wrong. The suggestion that God will gain the upper hand because he has made progress in bringing the intelligent being, man, into the battle on his behalf is not convincing, for it is not at all clear that

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 311-12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>13</sup> Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 288-90.

all men or even the most capable or most intelligent of men are at work on God's side. Thus, there may well be a resulting triumph of evil rather than good. Two world wars, as well as more limited wars and other evidences of tragedy and cruelty, make it difficult for any twentieth-century person to draw much encouragement from the suggestion that man has been joining God in the struggle against evil.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Brightman's finitism casts a question mark upon the goodness of God. If the "Given" with which God struggles and which is the source of the surd evil which is irreducible to good is a part of God's own nature, how can he be referred to as good?<sup>15</sup> Is it not the case, as Henry Nelson Wieman claimed, that Brightman "unites under the one label of deity two diametrically opposed realities, namely, the perfect and holy will of God and the evil nature which opposes that will"?<sup>16</sup>

#### Modification of the Concept of God's Goodness

A second way of lessening the tensions of the problem is to modify the idea of God's goodness. While few if any who call themselves Christian would deny the goodness of God, there are those who, at least by implication, suggest that the goodness must be understood in a sense that is slightly different from what is usually meant. One who falls into this category is Gordon H. Clark.

Clark is a staunch Calvinist. He does not hesitate to use the term *determinism* to describe God's causing of all things, including human acts. He argues that human will is not free. In describing the relationship of God to certain evil actions of human beings, he rejects the concept of the permissive will of God. He even states, "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do it,"<sup>17</sup> comparing God's role in this particular act to his willing that Jesus should be crucified. Clark does draw a distinction between the preceptive and the decreative will of God, however. The preceptive will is what God commands, such as the Ten Commandments. This is what *ought* to be done. God's decreative will, however, causes every event. It causes what *is* done. Clark says, "It may seem strange at first that God would decree an immoral act, but the Bible shows that he did."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>15</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Nelson Wieman, in Henry Nelson Wieman and W. M. Horton, *The Growth of Religion* (New York: Willett, Clark, 1938), p. 356.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), p. 221.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

This of course raises the question of whether God is the cause of sin. Here again, Clark does not hesitate: "Let it be unequivocally said that this view certainly makes God the cause of sin. God is the sole ultimate cause of everything. There is absolutely nothing independent of him. He alone is the eternal being. He alone is omnipotent. He alone is sovereign."<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that God is the author of sin. He is the *ultimate* cause of sin, not the immediate cause of it. God does not commit sin; humans commit sin although God wills it decretively, determines that it shall happen, and is the ultimate cause of it. It was Judas, not God, who betrayed Christ. God neither sins nor is responsible for sin.<sup>20</sup>

The concept that God causing a man to sin is not itself sin needs a bit of further explanation. By definition, God cannot sin. Clark offers several points in elucidating his position:

1. Whatever God does is just and right simply because he does it. There is no law superior to God which forbids him to decree sinful acts. Sin is transgression of, or want of conformity to, the law of God. But he is "Ex-lex," he is above law. He is by definition the standard of right.<sup>21</sup>

2. While it is true that it is sinful for a man to cause or try to cause another man to sin, it is not sinful for God to cause a man to sin. A man's relationship to another man is different from God's relationship to him, just as man's relationship to the law of God differs from God's relationship to it. God is the Creator of all things and has absolute and unlimited rights over them. No one can punish him.<sup>22</sup>

3. The laws God imposes on men literally do not apply to him. He cannot steal, for example, for everything belongs to him. There is no one to steal from.<sup>23</sup>

4. The Bible openly states that God has caused prophets to lie (e.g., 2 Chron. 18:20-22). Such statements are not in any sense incompatible with the biblical statements that God is free from sin.<sup>24</sup>

What Clark has done is to redefine the goodness of God. Clark's solution to the problem of evil takes a form somewhat like the following syllogism:

Whatever happens is caused by God.

Whatever is caused by God is good.

Whatever happens is good.

19. Ibid., pp. 237-38.

20. Ibid., pp. 238-39.

21. Ibid., pp. 239-40.

22. Ibid., p. 240.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

The problem is in effect solved by understanding that it is good and right that God (ultimately) causes such evil acts as a drunken man's shooting his family, although God does not sin and is not responsible for this sinful act. But in this solution to the problem of evil the term goodness has undergone such transformation as to be quite different from what is usually meant by the goodness of God. Several observations need to be made by way of response.

1. While it may well be that in some cases God does not have the same obligations as do his creatures (we noted, for example, that the prohibition against stealing does not apply to him), to emphasize this is to make these moral qualities so equivocal that they begin to lose their meaning and force. In Clark's scheme, the statements "God does good" and "man does good" are so dissimilar that we virtually cannot know what it means to say, "God is good."

2. It would seem that at one point or another, Clark is in danger of holding that God's will is arbitrary. (This reminds us of William of Ockham, who believed that God could have decided otherwise as to what is right and what is wrong.) We note that in Clark's view God's preceptive will and decretive will can be and are quite dissimilar. Clark also emphatically rejects the idea that God is bound by any external law higher than himself. What, then, is the status of his preceptive law? Is it in conformity with his nature? If it is not, then (since there is no higher law) it must be an arbitrary willing as to what is good. But if it is, then God's decretive will, at least at those points where it is in contradiction to his precepts, must not be in conformity with his nature. Either God's decretive will or his preceptive will is arbitrary.

3. The nature of goodness itself is called in question by Clark's discussion of responsibility. He says that "man is responsible because God calls him to account; man is responsible because the supreme power can punish him for disobedience. God, on the contrary, cannot be responsible for the plain reason that there is no power superior to him; no greater being can hold him accountable; no one can punish him."<sup>25</sup> This appears to come perilously close to the position that right and wrong is a matter of expediency. Accountability determines morality: an action is right if it will be rewarded, wrong if it will be punished. While on a lower level such considerations may motivate man, on a higher level they do not apply. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Part of what makes the death of Christ such a good act is that while he was not accountable to anyone, and would not (indeed could not) be punished for not submitting to the cross, he did in fact lay down his life.

25. Ibid., p. 241.

*Denial of Evil*

A third proposed solution to the problem of evil rejects the reality of evil, rendering unnecessary any account of how it can coexist with an omnipotent and good God. We find this viewpoint in various forms of pantheism. The philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, for example, maintains that there is just one substance and all distinguishable things are modes or attributes of that substance. Everything is deterministically caused; God brings everything into being in the highest perfection.<sup>26</sup>

A more popularly held, but considerably less sophisticated version of this solution to the problem of evil is to be found in Christian Science. While the writings of Mary Baker Eddy lack the erudition and philosophical refinement of Spinoza, there are notable parallels. The basic metaphysic is idealistic; the reality of matter is denied. The only reality is God, infinite mind. Spirit is real and eternal; matter is unreal and temporal.<sup>27</sup> Matter has no real existence even in the mind. It is an illusion held by an illusion. Not only is matter unreal, but the senses are the source of error and, ultimately, of evil.

Evil in particular is unreal: "Evil has no reality. It is neither person, place nor thing, but is simply a belief, an illusion of material sense."<sup>28</sup> This conclusion follows from the Christian Science view of God, which, though it is unclear in Eddy's statement here, seems to be that God is actually everything. At other times she depicts God as the originator of everything: "If God made all that was made, and it was good, where did evil originate?" In either case, the result is the same: "It [evil] never originated or existed as an entity. It is but a false belief."<sup>29</sup>

What is true of evil in general is also true of one of the most serious of evils, disease. It is an illusion; it has no reality.<sup>30</sup> What is experienced as disease is caused by wrong belief, failure to recognize the unreality of disease.<sup>31</sup> As in all other areas, the senses deceive one here as well. The cure for sickness is not to be achieved through the medical means that most persons mistakenly utilize. It is to be found in knowledge of the truth, which in this case means that the person must recognize the imaginary nature of the pain he feels. When sickness and pain are seen to be unreal, they will no longer afflict the individual. Death is also

26. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 33, note 2.

27. Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings* (Boston: Trustees under the will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1924), p. 21.

28. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Trustees under the will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1934), p. 71.

29. Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 45.

30. Eddy, *Science and Health*, p. 348.

31. Ibid., p. 378.

illusory: "Sin brought death, and death will disappear with the disappearance of sin. Man is immortal, and the body cannot die, because matter has no life to surrender." The promise of 1 Corinthians 15:26, that death is the last enemy to be destroyed, is claimed. Death is but another phase of the dream that existence is material.<sup>32</sup>

What are we to say by way of assessment of this view? Three problems in particular stand out:

1. Christian Science has not fully banished evil. For while Christian Scientists assert that disease does not exist but is only an illusion, the illusion of disease is still present, and it produces the illusion of pain very genuinely. Thus, although the existence of evil is no longer a problem, the existence of the illusion of evil is. So the problem is shifted, but is no less difficult.

2. The existence of the illusion must be explained. How, in a world in which all is God, and matter is unreal, could such a widespread delusion arise and persist? What is the source of such error, unless there is within the universe something perverse which is producing it? And why does God not eliminate this false belief?

3. The theory does not work. The claim is that correct understanding will dispel evil. Yet, Christian Scientists do become ill and die. Their response that illness and death result from insufficient faith seems to founder upon the fact that even the originator and head of the movement, author of its major authority (in addition to the Bible) and presumably the epitome of its faith, died.

While some of what has been said in this critique applies only to Christian Science, much of it is applicable to all forms of the view that evil is illusory insofar as they are monistic and pantheistic in tendency. This is particularly true of the first two criticisms.

Some theologies, particularly those of a philosophical bent, follow a rather strict system. The more rigid or extreme is the system, the more clear-cut will be the choice of solution to the problem of evil. The three views we have examined illustrate this quite well: Brightman's internal dualism led him to qualify the omnipotence of God; belief in absolute

32. The death of Mary Baker Eddy presented a real problem for Christian Science, for supposedly someone of her faith should have overcome it. She had never really recognized death, for she never prepared an official funeral ceremony, although she had provided orders of service for other occasions. Some of her followers did not believe that she had died; some expected her to be resurrected. The officers of Christian Science, however, issued an official statement that they were not expecting her return to the world. See Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 188-89; cf. Ernest S. Bates and John V. Dittemore, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Truth and the Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 451.

divine sovereignty led Clark to define divine goodness in such a way as to include causing (but not being responsible for) evil; and monism led Christian Science to deny the reality of evil.

A number of classifications of theodicies have been offered in recent years. These classifications are based upon varying criteria. In *Evil and the God of Love* John Hick classifies theodicies as Augustinian or Irenaean. The Augustinian type regards evil as actually a part of the creation which is necessary for its greater good. The Irenaean type of theodicy regards evil as part of God's process of soul making. Norman Geisler classifies theodicies as "greatest world" and "greatest way" approaches.<sup>33</sup> Gottfried von Leibniz, for example, tried to show that this is the best of all possible worlds; Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, attempted to show that what God is doing is the best way to achieve his ends within this world. John Feinberg speaks of theonomist and rationalist approaches. In the former, theology is prior to logic.<sup>34</sup> William of Ockham, for example, held that God is free to will whatever he chooses, and whatever he wills is by definition good. Rationalists, like Leibniz, make logic prior to theology. What God wills is in effect determined by the laws of logic.

Feinberg has well observed that the problem of evil must be considered within the context of a given theology. One must evaluate a given theology's solution to the problem of evil in terms of what such concepts as evil, good, and freedom mean *within that system*. It is quite unfair, for example, to criticize a given theodicy for not accounting for evil as understood by some other school of thought unless a proof is advanced that all schools of thought must necessarily regard the concept of evil in this fashion.<sup>35</sup>

As we attempt to formulate a theodicy, there are a few factors to keep in mind. We should not assume that all instances of evil are of the same fundamental type. And if they are of different types, then perhaps there are different explanations for different types of evil. We must not be guilty of overemphasizing one type of evil to the neglect of others. Furthermore, perhaps it is not wise or helpful to concentrate our attention upon just one of those elements which in combination constitute the problem. In other words, perhaps the sharp distinction between the types of approaches we have already examined needs to be avoided, so that valid insights from each may be utilized. While each of the approaches outlined succeeds in resolving the tension among the three factors by modifying one of them (God's greatness, God's goodness, and

33. Norman Geisler, *The Roots of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 43.

34. Feinberg, *Theologies and Evil*, p. 6.

35. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

the existence of evil, respectively), the cost is too high. It may be that the best approach is to reduce the tension by reexamining each of the three factors. This process may reveal that the problem of evil is a result of a misunderstanding or overstatement of one or more of these factors.

### Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil

It has already been noted that a total solution to the problem of evil is beyond human ability. So what we will do here is to present several themes which in combination will help us to deal with the problem. These themes will be consistent with the basic tenets of the theology espoused in this writing. (It is possible that some particular theme may be the major element of some radically different theology's attempt to deal with the problem of evil.) This theology can be characterized as a mild Calvinism (congruism) which gives primary place to the sovereignty of God, while seeking to relate it in a positive way to human freedom and individuality. This theology is a dualism in which the second element is contingent upon or derivative from the first. That is, there are realities distinct from God which have a genuine and good existence of their own, but which ultimately received their existence from him by creation (not emanation). This theology also affirms the sin and fall of the human race and the consequent sinfulness of each human; the reality of evil and of personal demonic beings headed by the devil; the incarnation of the second person of the Triune God, who became a sacrificial atonement for man's sins; and an eternal life beyond death. It is in the context of this theological structure that the following themes are presented as helps in dealing with the problem of evil:

#### *Evil as a Necessary Accompaniment of the Creation of Man*

There are some things God cannot do. God cannot be cruel, for cruelty is contrary to his nature. He cannot lie. He cannot break his promise. These moral attributes were discussed in chapter 13. There are some other things that God cannot do without certain inevitable results. For example, God cannot make a circle, a true circle, without all points on the circumference being equidistant from the center. Similarly, God cannot make a human without certain accompanying features.

Man would not be man if he did not have free will. This has given rise to the argument that God cannot create a genuinely free being and at the same time guarantee that this being will always do exactly what God desires of him. This view of freedom has come under criticism by a number of philosophers and theologians; we have dealt with it at some

length in chapter 16. Note, however, that whether humans are free in the sense assumed by Arminians (what Antony Flew calls noncompatibilistic freedom)<sup>36</sup> or free in a sense not inconsistent with God's having rendered certain what is to happen (compatibilistic freedom), God's having made man as he purposed means that man has certain capacities (e.g., the capacities to desire and to act) which he could not fully exercise if there were no such thing as evil. If God had prevented evil, he would have had to make man other than he is.<sup>37</sup> If man is to be truly human, he must have the ability to desire to have and do things some of which will not be what God wants man to have and to do. Apparently God felt that, for reasons which were evident to him but which we can only partly understand, it was better to make human beings than androids. And evil was a necessary accompaniment of God's good plan to make man fully human.

Another dimension of this theme is that for God to make the physical world as it is required certain concomitants. Apparently, for humans to have a genuine moral choice with the possibility of genuine punishment for disobedience meant that they would be capable of dying. Further, the sustenance of life required conditions which could lead to death instead. So, for example, we need water to live. But the same water which we drink can in other circumstances enter our lungs, cutting off our supply of oxygen, and thus cause us to drown. The water which is necessary to sustain life can also cut it off. Similarly, warmth of a certain degree is necessary for the maintenance of life. But under certain conditions, the very fire providing that warmth can kill us. Further, that fire could not have started without oxygen, which is vital to our life as well. The ability of water, fire, and oxygen to sustain life means that they are also able to bring death.

If God was to have a world in which there would be genuine moral choices along with genuine punishment for disobedience and ultimately death, there would have to be warning signals of sufficient intensity to cause us to alter our behavior. And this signal, pain, is of such a nature that it can become a considerable evil under certain circumstances. But could not God have created his world in such a way that evil intentions or evil results would not occur, or could he not intervene within it to alter the course of events? For example, a hammer might be solid and firm when used for driving in nails, but spongy and resilient when someone intends to use it to bludgeon another person to death. But in

<sup>36</sup> Antony Flew, "Compatibilism, Free Will, and God," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 231-32.

<sup>37</sup> Despite his rejection of the argument that genuine human freedom and a guarantee that man will do exactly what God desires him to do are incompatible, Feinberg virtually reinstates a mild form of it with his concept of human "desires."

such a world, life would be virtually impossible. Our environment would be so unpredictable that no intelligent planning would be possible. Therefore, God has created in such a way that the good of his world may be perverted into evil when we misuse it or something goes awry with the creation.<sup>38</sup>

At this point someone might raise the question, "If God could not create the world without the accompanying possibility of evil, why did he create at all, or why did he not create the world without man?" In a sense, we cannot answer that question since we are not God, but it is appropriate to note here that God chose the greater good. That is, it was evidently better, in terms of what God ultimately intends, that he create rather than not create, and create human beings rather than something lesser. God decided to create beings who would fellowship with and obey him, beings who would choose to do so even in the face of temptations to do otherwise. This was evidently a greater good than to introduce "man" into a totally antiseptic environment from which even the logical possibility of desiring anything contrary to God's will would have been excluded.

But why does not God eradicate evil now? This sounds like a quick and easy solution, but one should ponder what it might entail. Perhaps the only way to eradicate evil now would be to destroy every moral agent possessing a will capable of leading to evil. But who of us can claim such perfection as to say that we do not ever contribute to the evil in this world, either by commission or by omission, by word, deed, or thought? Thus, for God to eradicate evil might mean wiping out the entire human race, or at least the vast majority of it. It will not be sufficient to have him remove only that which we perceive as evil, or which we want removed; he will have to remove everything which is evil. But God has promised that he will not again wipe out virtually the entire human race (Gen. 6-7). And he cannot go back on his promise.

#### A Reevaluation of What Constitutes Good and Evil

Some of what we term good and evil may not actually be that. It is therefore necessary to take a hard look at what constitutes good and evil. We are inclined to identify good with whatever is pleasant to us at the present and evil with what is personally unpleasant, uncomfortable, or disturbing. Yet the Bible seems to see things somewhat differently. We will briefly consider three points which indicate that the identification of evil with the unpleasant is incorrect.

First, we must consider the divine dimension. Good is not to be

<sup>38</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 33f.

defined in terms of what brings personal pleasure to man in a direct fashion. Good is to be defined in relationship to the will and being of God. Good is that which glorifies him, fulfills his will, conforms to his nature. The promise of Romans 8:28 is sometimes quoted rather glibly by Christians: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." But what is this **good?** **Paul gives us the answer in** verse 29: "For [δι] those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." This then is the good: not personal wealth or health, but being conformed to the image of God's Son. It is not the short-range comfort, but the long-range welfare of man.

In considering the divine dimension we must also take note of the superior knowledge and wisdom of God. Even in regard to my own welfare, I may not be the best judge of what is good and what is evil. My assessments will often be fallible. It may seem good to me to eat sweet, sticky candy. To my dentist (unless he is simply interested in his fees), it may seem quite different, and sometime in the middle of the night I may be sharply awakened with a painful reminder of the dentist's superior knowledge of good and evil in matters of dental hygiene. Similarly, rich and fatty foods may seem good, but my doctor views them as evil. So many of our judgments of good and evil are formulated on the basis of very incomplete data, a direct result of our being human and finite, but the infinitely wise God judges the same matters quite differently. The moral precepts he gives, which seem so troublesome and tedious to me, may be what he knows will actually work for my ultimate good.

Second, we must consider the dimension of time or duration. Some of the evils which we experience are actually very disturbing on a short-term basis, but in the long term work a much larger good. The pain of the dentist's drill and the suffering of postsurgical recovery may seem like quite severe evils, but they are in actuality rather small in light of the long-range effects that flow from them. (Later in this chapter we will consider why the world has to be such that dental caries, gallstones, compound fractures, and malignant tumors occur at all.) Scripture encourages us to evaluate our temporary suffering *sub specie aeternitatis* (*in* the light of eternity). Paul said, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). He also wrote, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17; cf. Heb. 12:2 and 1 Peter 1:6-7). A problem is often magnified by its proximity to us now, so that it becomes disproportionate to other pertinent matters. A good question to ask regarding any

apparent evil is, "How important will this seem to me a year from now? five years? a million years?"

Third, there is the question of the extent of the evil. We tend to be very individualistic in our assessment of good and evil. But this is a large and complex world, and God has many persons to care for. The Saturday rainfall that spoils a family picnic or round of golf may seem like an evil to me, but be a much greater good to the farmers whose parched fields surround the golf course or park, and ultimately to a much larger number of people who depend upon the farmers' crops, the price of which will be affected by the abundance or scarcity of supply. What is evil from one narrow perspective may therefore be only an inconvenience and, from a larger frame of reference, a much greater good to a much larger number. Certainly God can perform miracles so that everyone gets just what he needs and wants, but that would not necessarily be the best course, since there is a need for constancy in the creation.

Part of what we are saying here is that what appears to be evil may actually in some cases be the means to a greater good. This may seem to be a case of what Feinberg has called the consequentialist view of ethics, which defines good as anything which has good consequences.<sup>39</sup> Note, however, that what makes something good is that God has willed and planned it. God then sees to it that his plans are fulfilled and result in good consequences. In other words, because God's plans are good (i.e., God has willed them), they have good consequences. It is not the case that God's plans and actions are made good by their consequences. To put this still another way: With respect to the goodness of specific actions on which God has not revealed his will in a precise fashion, good consequences have epistemological but no ontological value. Good consequences may indicate that these actions have promoted the plan of God, and hence should be regarded as good; but good consequences do not make these actions good. What makes the actions good is the fact that God has willed them.

#### *Evil in General as the Result of Sin in General*

A cardinal doctrine of the theology being developed in this book is the fact of racial sin. By this we do not mean the sin of race against race, but rather the fact that the entire human race has sinned and is now sinful. In its head, Adam, the entire human race violated God's will and fell

<sup>39</sup> Feinberg, *Theologies and Evil*, p. 51. See John G. Milhaven, "Objective Moral Evaluation of Consequences," *Theological Studies* 32 (1971): 410.

from the state of innocence in which God had created mankind. Consequently, all of us begin life with a natural tendency to sin. The Bible tells us that with the fall, man's first sin, a radical change took place in the universe. Death came upon mankind (Gen. 2:17; 3:2-3, 19). God pronounced a curse upon mankind which is represented by certain specifics: anguish in childbearing (3:16), male domination over the wife (v. 16), toilsome labor (v. 17), thorns and thistles (v. 18). It seems likely that these are merely a sample of the actual effects upon the creation. Paul in Romans 8 says that the whole creation has been affected by the sin of man, and is now in bondage to decay. It waits for its redemption from this bondage. Thus, it appears likely that a whole host of natural evils may also have resulted from the sin of mankind. We live in the world which God created, but it is not quite as it was when God finished it; it is now a fallen and broken world. And part of the evils which we now experience are a result of the curse of God upon creation.

One problem that arises in connection with this attribution of natural evil to the sin of mankind concerns those evils which, according to the geological record, seem to have been present on the earth before the appearance of man. Some have suggested that these evils were put there anticipatively by God in light of the sin that he knew man was to commit, but this seems highly artificial. While a full-length exploration of this issue goes beyond the scope of this volume, it seems best to think of those conditions as being present from the beginning, but neutral in character. The evil effects of those phenomena may then have resulted from the sinfulness of man. For example, earth layers may naturally shift (earthquakes). When man unwisely, perhaps as a result of greed, builds upon geological faults, the shifting of earth layers becomes an evil.

More serious and more obvious, however, is the effect of the fall in the promotion of moral evil, that is, evil which is related to human willing and acting. There is no question that much of the pain and unhappiness of human beings is a result of structural evil within society. For example, power may reside in the hands of a few who use it to exploit others. Selfishness on a collective scale may keep a particular social class or racial group in painful or destitute conditions.

There is an important question that must be asked here; namely, how could sin have happened in the first place? If man was created good, or at least without any evil nature, if he was made in the image of God, and if the creation which God had made was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), then how could sin have occurred? What could have motivated man to sin? Here we have recourse to the account of man's fall. In Genesis 3 we read that the serpent (presumably the devil) tempted Eve. Apparently sometime between the completion of the creation, which God pronounced

"very good," and the temptation of Eve, the fall of Satan had occurred. Thus, an evil force was present within the creation, and it was his appeal which stirred within Adam and Eve the desire which led them to sin.

But has this really solved the problem, or has it only pushed it back one step? The question now becomes, How could good angels, and particularly the one who became the devil, have sinned in the first place? Since they were in the very presence of God, what could possibly have led them to sin? Must there not have been some little bit of sin already present in the creation? Must there not have been some sinful component, even if just a speck? And if so, must not God have been the author of this sin, and is he not then responsible for it and also for the other sins which follow from it?

This type of thinking represents an incorrect understanding of the nature of sin; it posits that sin is some sort of substance which is necessary for sinful acts to occur. This could be termed the "germ theory" of sin: one has to "catch" or "be infected by" sin. But it is not necessary to come in contact with someone who has a fracture to fracture a bone; all that is needed is to twist a limb a bit in the wrong way, and there is a broken bone! Similarly, sin results when man's will and relationship to God are twisted the wrong way, when the wrong one of two possibilities is actualized.

For man to be genuinely free, there has to be an option. The choice is to obey or to disobey God. In the case of Adam and Eve, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolized that choice. The serpent's temptation appealed to desires which were not evil in themselves, but which could be expressed and actualized in the wrong way (by disobeying God). When that was done, a twisted or distorted relationship to God resulted. Indeed, one word for sin carries the idea of being twisted.<sup>40</sup> With this twist of relationship, sin has become a reality. Humans (and presumably also the fallen angels) have been greatly affected by sin: their attitudes, values, and relationships have changed. In the case of Adam and Eve, this change was reflected in their new awareness of their nakedness, in their fear of God, and in their unwillingness to accept responsibility for their sin.

It is clear, then, that God did not create sin. He merely provided the options necessary for human freedom, options which could result in sin. It is man who sinned, and before that, the fallen angels, not God. Some will of course object that God should have prevented the occurrence of sin, or even the possibility of it. We have already dealt with this type of objection in chapter 16.

**40.** The verb is *תַּחַטֵּא* ('awah)—Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 730.

*Specific Evil as the Result of Specific Sins*

Some specific evils are the result of specific sins or at least imprudences. Some of the evil occurrences in life are caused by the sinful actions of others. The death of a police officer can be attributed to the action of the criminal who pulled the trigger. To be sure, there may be very complex reasons as to why the criminal committed this act, but the basic fact remains that the policeman is dead because of another's action. Murder, child abuse, theft, and rape are evils tied in with the exercise of sinful choices by sinful individuals. In some cases, the victim is innocent of the evil which occurs. In other cases, however, the "victim" contributes to or provokes the evil action.

In a fair number of cases, we bring evil upon ourselves by our own sinful or unwise actions. We must be very careful here. Job's friends tended to attribute his misfortunes solely to his sins (e.g., Job 22). But Jesus indicated that tragedy is not always the result of a specific sin. When his disciples asked concerning a man who had been born blind, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but **that** the works of God might be made manifest in him" (John 9:2-3). Jesus was not saying that the man and his parents had not sinned; rather, he was refuting the idea that the blindness was the result of a specific sin. It is unwise to attribute misfortunes automatically to one's own sin. Yet there is a tendency to consider misfortunes as punishments sent from God, and either to feel guilty or to blame God for being unjust in sending a punishment we feel we do not deserve. The question "Why?" often reflects the mistaken idea that God sends each event as a direct response to our actions. We must be mindful that if God sends his sunshine and rain on the unjust and the just alike, then in a world in which sin has brought ravages of nature and disease, misfortune may also fall on the just and unjust alike. To be sure, God has rendered certain all of what happens, but he has not necessarily targeted every specific ill as a response to some specific sin. Many specific evils are a result of sin in general, as we noted before.

But having given this caveat, we need to note that there are instances of sin bringing unfortunate results upon the individual sinner. A case in point is David, whose sin with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah resulted in the death of the child of David and Bathsheba as well as conflict in David's own household. This perhaps should be thought of more in terms of the effects of certain acts than in terms of punishment from God. We do not know what was involved, but it may well be that certain

conditions pertaining at the time of the act of adultery resulted in a genetic defect in the child. In the case of the rape of Tamar by Amnon, and Absalom's murder of Amnon and sedition against David, it may well be that the seeds were sown by the children's knowledge of their father's sin, or by the failure of David to exercise discipline with his children in view of his own sense of guilt, and the feeling that it would be hypocritical on his part to rebuke his sons for doing what he had done. In other words, David's sin may have led to indulgence with his own children, which in turn led to their sins. Much of the evil recounted in Scripture came upon people as a result of their own sin, or that of someone close to them. A prime example is Achan and his family, all of whom were stoned because of his sin at Jericho (Josh. 7:24-25).

Paul said, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8). While Paul was probably thinking primarily of the eternal dimension of sin's consequences, the context (the earlier part of chapter 6) seems to indicate that he had temporal effects in mind as well. There are certain cause-and-effect relationships in the spiritual realm as well as in the physical. If one violates the law against adultery (Exod. 20:14), he or she may find that the result is the destruction of relationships of trust, not only with the spouse, but with the children as well; one may even lose his family. It is not that God is punishing the offender by inflicting these results upon him, but that the act of adultery may set in motion a chain of adverse effects. The habitual drunkard may well destroy his health with cirrhosis of the liver. God is not attacking him; rather, the drunkard's sin has brought about the disease. This is not to say, however, that God may not use the natural results of sin to chasten people.

What we have been saying about sin (violations of God's law) also holds true for unwise or imprudent behavior. Some of our problems are the result of our unwise or even foolish behavior. One traffic-safety organization recently reported that 90 percent of all persons who suffered serious injuries in traffic accidents were not wearing their seat belts at the time, and the figure for those fatally injured was even higher: 93 percent. While there is no way of calculating how many of these persons would not have died had they been wearing their seat belts, it should be apparent that the question, "Why did God allow this to happen?" may not be the most significant question. As a matter of fact, it may even be inappropriate. In addition to ignoring traffic-safety procedures, other major contributors to the evil we experience may include foolish financial management and poor health-care practices.

*God as the Victim of Evil*

That God took sin and its evil effects upon himself is a unique contribution by Christian doctrine to the solution of the problem of evil.<sup>41</sup> It is remarkable that, while knowing that he himself was to become a victim (indeed, the major victim) of the evil resulting from sin, God allowed sin to occur anyway. The Bible tells us that God was grieved by the sinfulness of man (Gen. 6:6). While there is certainly anthropomorphism here, there nonetheless is indication that the sin of man is painful or hurtful to God. But even more to the point is the fact of the incarnation. The Triune God knew that the second person would come to earth and be subject to numerous evils: hunger, fatigue, betrayal, ridicule, rejection, suffering, and death. He did this in order to negate sin and thus its evil effects. God is a fellow sufferer with us of the evil in this world, and consequently is able to deliver us from evil. What a measure of love this is! Anyone who would impugn the goodness of God for allowing sin and consequently evil must measure that charge against the teaching of Scripture that God himself became the victim of evil so that he and we might be victors over evil.

*The Life Hereafter*

There is no question that in this life there are what seem to be rather clear instances of injustice and innocent suffering. If this life were all that there is, then surely the problem of evil would be unresolvable. But Christianity's doctrine of the life hereafter teaches that there will be a great time of judgment—every sin will be recognized and the godly will also be revealed. The judgment will be thoroughly just. Punishment for evil will be administered, and the final dimension of eternal life will be granted to all who have responded to God's loving offer. Thus the complaint of the psalmist regarding how the evil prosper and the righteous suffer will be satisfied in the light of the life hereafter.

One additional problem for Christian theism relates to this matter of the life hereafter: how could a loving God send anyone to hell? While we will deal with this question more completely in connection with eschatology, we need to note here that sin consists in man's choosing to go his own way rather than follow God. Throughout life, man says to God, in effect, "Leave me alone." Hell, the absence of God, is God's simply giving man at last what he has always asked for. It is not God, but man's own choice that sends man to hell.

41. Lewis, **Problem of Pain**, pp. 119-20.

---

# 20

## God's Special Agents: Angels

### History of the Doctrine

#### Good Angels

- Terminology
- Their Origin, Nature, and Status
- Their Appearance
- Their Capacities and Powers
- Organization
- Difficult Terms
- Their Activities

#### Evil Angels

- The Status of Demonology Today
- The Origin of Demons
- The Chief of the Demons
- Activities of Demons
- Demon Possession
- The Destiny of Satan and the Demons

#### The Role of the Doctrine of Angels

**W**hen we come to the discussion of angels, we are entering upon a subject which in some ways is the most unusual and difficult of all of theology Karl Barth, who has given the most extensive treatment of the subject in any recent theology textbook, described the topic of

angels as the “most remarkable and difficult of all.”<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, a topic which it is tempting to omit or neglect. Some would say that Christian doctrine would be unaffected if we were to bypass this area, and in a sense that is true. It would be possible to maintain the doctrines of creation and providence without reference to the angels, for God most certainly created and can sustain and guide the universe by his own direct action, that is, without utilizing angels as his agents. Yet the teaching of Scripture is that he has created these spiritual beings and has chosen to carry out many of his acts through them. Therefore, if we are to be faithful students of the Bible, we have no choice but to speak of these beings.

By angels we mean those spiritual beings which God created higher than man, some of whom have remained obedient to God and carry out his will, and others of whom disobeyed, lost their holy condition, and now oppose and hinder his work.

We have noted the difficulty of the subject. One reason is that while there are abundant references to angels in the Bible, the nature of those references is not such as to make them very helpful for developing an understanding of angels. Every reference to angels is incidental to some other topic. They are not treated in themselves. God’s revelation never aims at informing us regarding the nature of angels. When they are mentioned, it is always in order to inform us further about God, what he does, and how he does it. Since details about angels are not significant for that purpose, they tend to be omitted.

#### History of the Doctrine

The topic of angels has probably had a more varied history than most doctrines. At times, there have been a virtual preoccupation with the doctrine of angels and speculation of the wildest sort regarding their nature and activities. At other times, belief in angels has been regarded as a relic of a prescientific and uncritical way of thinking. Out of a desire to avoid either of these rather ludicrous extremes, we might bypass the topic. Yet potential mishandling should not deter us from dealing with a topic of genuine importance. Barth acknowledges that in treating this topic we are approaching the border of “problems alien to the task and purpose of a dogmatics grounded on the Word of God.” He mentions several theologians who recognized the tangential nature of the topic—Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), vol. 3, part 3, p. 369.

Calvin—but nevertheless observes, “But there could, of course, be no question of abandoning the problem.”\*

The doctrine of angels has not always been considered so problematic. The second-century apologists seem to have given the angels a status verging on divinity. For example, in replying to a charge of atheism brought against the Christians, Justin listed the beings that Christians reverence and worship; he included not only the Son, but the host of angels that follow and resemble him.<sup>3</sup>

Medieval Christianity engaged in extensive discussion about angels. The major impetus was provided by the work of a pseudonymous fifth- or sixth-century writer claiming to be Dionysius the Areopagite, who had been converted by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34). He classified angels into three groups: (1) thrones, cherubim, seraphim; (2) mights, dominions, powers; (3) principalities, archangels, angels. The first group, closest to God, enlighten the second group, who in turn enlighten the third group. Dionysius made a great deal of the concept of hierarchy. Not only does it pertain within the realm of angels; it seems to be inherent in all of reality. Basing his argument upon Paul’s statement that the law was given by angels (Gal. 3:19), Dionysius maintained that man has no direct access to or manifestation of God. Rather, we as part of a lower order are brought into relationship with the divine only through the angels. Human orders, and particularly the church, should reflect a similar hierarchical structure.<sup>4</sup>

Later medieval thought had a great interest in angels. In *Summa contra Gentiles* Thomas Aquinas seeks to demonstrate by reason the existence of angels.<sup>5</sup> In the *Summa theologiae* he attempts to demonstrate various points about them: their number is greater than all material beings combined; each has his own individual nature; they are always at a particular point, but not limited to it.<sup>6</sup> Each person has a guardian angel assigned to him at birth (prior to birth each child falls under the care of his mother’s guardian angel). While the angels rejoice at the good fortune and responsiveness of the persons placed in their care, they do not grieve in the face of negative occurrences, since sorrow and pain are alien to them.<sup>7</sup> Thomas devoted no fewer than 118 individual questions to consideration of the nature and condition of angels. This interest in angels may have been what earned him the title *Angelic*

2. Ibid. p.370.

3. Justin Martyr *Apology* 1.6.

4. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De caelesti hierarchia in usum studiosae iuventutis*, ed. P. Hendrix (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), chapter 2.

5. Thomas Aquinas *Summa contra Gentiles* 2.91.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 1, questions 50-52.

7. Ibid., question 113.

*Doctor.* It is apparent from an examination of his writing that many of his ideas about angels were based upon what we would now term natural theology, a series of rational arguments and inferences.

The effect of Thomas's arguments was a heavy emphasis upon the supersensible realm of angels. After all, if their number exceeds the total number of beings bound to matter, the material or earthly realm must be secondary in importance. Thus in much succeeding theology (as indeed had been the case in much which preceded), there was a tendency to attribute everything that occurred to angelic (or demonic) activity.

The attempt to prove on rational grounds the existence of angels is not limited to the work of Thomas, however. We also find it in later theologians. Johannes Quenstedt, one of the seventeenth-century Lutheran scholastics, argued that the existence of angels, or of something similar to them, is probable, because there are no gaps in nature.<sup>8</sup> Just as there are beings purely corporeal, such as stones, and beings partly corporeal and partly spiritual, namely humans, so we should expect in creation beings wholly spiritual, that is, angels. Even Charles Hodge argued that the idea that man should be the only rational being is as improbable as that insects should be the only irrational animals: "There is every reason to presume that the scale of being among rational creatures is as extensive as that in the animal world."<sup>9</sup>

While some earlier theologies have been guilty of giving angels too large a place in the total scheme, some more-recent thought has minimized the doctrine or even eliminated angels from theological consideration. This has been especially true in Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization program. He notes that angels play a large part in the New Testament. They occupy heaven (in the case of the good angels) and hell (in the case of demons). They are not limited to heaven and hell, however. Both angels and demons are actively at work on the middle layer, earth, as well. Angels, on behalf of God, may intervene miraculously in the created order. And demons enter into man, bringing him under their control through such means as causing sickness. Today, however, we no longer believe in such spiritual beings, says Bultmann. We now understand, through our increased knowledge of nature, that disease is caused not by demons, but by viruses and bacteria. We similarly understand what brings about recovery from illness. Bultmann asserts: "It is impossible to use electric lights and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time

8. Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica, sive systema theologicum* (Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1715), part 1, p. 629.

9. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 1, p. 636.

to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."<sup>10</sup> Bultmann maintains that there is nothing unique or distinct about the New Testament writers' belief in spirits. It is merely a reflection of the popularly held ideas of their day. In other words, it is a myth. It should be noted that even many moderns who know nothing about Bultmann's highly technical and finely tuned theory of hermeneutics discard belief in angels as obsolete. Among the first areas of Christian doctrine to be popularly demythologized are the beliefs in angels and hell.

In the last part of the twentieth century, there has been a real resurgence of angelology in one rather restricted area, namely, the activity of evil angels. There has been in society in general a considerable growth of interest in the supernatural, including a fascination with the occult. Perhaps as a reaction against naturalistic scientific rationalism, explanations falling outside the realm of natural law have flourished in some circles. Christians have shown renewed interest in demonology, particularly demon possession and demonically induced illnesses. Related to that, although perhaps lagging a bit in time, has been a popular religious interest in good angels.<sup>11</sup> Yet, for all of this, there has not been a balanced inquiry into the nature and activity of angels, both the good and the evil.

## Good Angels

### Terminology

The primary Hebrew term for angel is מֶלֶךְ (*mal'ak*); the corresponding Greek word is ἄγγελος (*angelos*); in each case, the basic meaning is messenger. The two terms are used both of human messengers and of angels. When used of angels, the terms emphasize their message-bearing role. Examples of humans designated by the term מֶלֶךְ or ἄγγελος are the messenger sent by Jezebel to Elijah (1 Kings 19:2) and certain disciples of John the Baptist (Luke 7:24) and of Jesus (Luke 9:52). Some have suggested that in the Old Testament the word in the singular usually refers to divine messengers (i.e., angels), and in the plural to human messengers; but the exceptions are sufficiently numerous and important to make this observation of no real significance.<sup>12</sup> Other Hebrew expressions thought to refer to angels are "sons of the Elohim"

10. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 5.

11. Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975).

12. John Macartney Wilson, "Angel," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 1, p. 132.

(Job 1:6; 2:1) and “sons of Elim” (Pss. 29:1; 89:6). It is doubtful whether the word *Elohim* alone can represent angels, although the Septuagint so translates it in several instances, most notably Psalm 8:5. Other Old Testament terms for angels are “holy ones” (Ps. 89:5, 7) and “watchers” (Dan. 4:13,17, 23). Collectively, they are referred to as “the council” (Ps. 89:7), “the assembly” (Ps. 89:5), and “host” or “hosts,” as in the very common expression “LORD [or LORD God] of hosts,” which is found more than sixty times in the Book of Isaiah alone.

Frequently, when *ἄγγελος* appears in the New Testament, there is an accompanying phrase making clear that it is referring to angels, as, for example, “the angels of heaven” (Matt. 24:36). Other New Testament expressions believed to refer to angels are “heavenly host” (Luke 2:13), “spirits” (Heb. 1:14), and in varying combinations, “principalities,” “powers,” “thrones,” “dominions,” and “authorities” (see especially Col. 1:16; also Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). The term *archangel* appears in two passages, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9. In the latter, Michael is named as an archangel.

#### Their Origin, Nature, and Status

It is not explicitly stated in Scripture that angels were created, nor are they mentioned in the creation account (Gen. 1-2). That they were created is, however, clearly implied in Psalm 148:2, 5: “Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host! ... Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created.” The angels, as well as the celestial objects mentioned in verses 3 and 4, are declared to have been created by the Lord. This also seems to be asserted in Colossians 1:16: “For 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.” Some scholars believe that Genesis 2:1 and Job 38:7 indicate that the angels were part of the original creation, but these texts are not sufficiently clear to be utilized as a foundation for that belief. It would appear that the angels were all created directly at one time, since they presumably do not have the power to propagate themselves in the normal fashion (Matt. 22:30), and we are told of no new direct creations by God after the original creative effort was completed (Gen. 2:2-3).

Jews and Christians have long believed and taught that angels are immaterial or spiritual beings. On the other hand, angels have appeared in the form of human beings with material bodies. Here, as with the matter of their creation, explicit evidence is not abundant. Indeed, one might conclude that angels and spirits are being distinguished from one another in Acts 23:8-9, although angels may be part of the genus of spirits. The clearest statement regarding the spiritual nature of angels is

found in Hebrews 1:14, where the writer, obviously referring to angels (see vv. 5, 13), says, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” That angels are spirits may also be inferred from the following considerations:

1. Demons (fallen angels) are described as spirits (Matt. 8:16; 12:45; Luke 7:21; 8:2; 11:26; Acts 19:12; Rev. 16:14).
2. We are told that our struggle is not against “flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).
3. Paul, in Colossians 1:16, seems to identify the heavenly forces as invisible.
4. That angels are spirits seems to follow (although not necessarily) from Jesus’ assertions that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30) and do not die (Luke 20:36).

Some have argued that since there are no references to the souls of angels, they have neither souls nor bodies for souls to occupy (hence, angels must be spiritual). This inference is a bit strained, however. In addition to being an argument from silence, it involves a disputable view of the nature of the body-soul relationship.

In view of the preceding considerations, it seems safe to conclude that angels are spiritual beings; they do not have physical or material bodies. Physical manifestations recorded in Scripture must be regarded as appearances assumed for the occasion (angelophanies).

As we observed earlier in this chapter, there have at times been tendencies to exalt angels unduly, giving them worship and reverence due only to the Deity. The most extended passage on angels, Hebrews 1:5-2:9, however, makes a particular point of establishing that Christ is superior to the angels. Although he was made for a little time a little lower than the angels, he is in every way superior to them. They are not in the same category or class with the Deity. While Jesus became for a period of time subordinate to the Father, the angels always are subordinate to and carry out the will of God; they do not act on independent initiative. Although superior to man in many of their abilities and qualities, they are part of the class of created and thus finite beings. We do not know precisely when they were created, but it is apparent that God did at some point bring them into being. As totally spiritual beings they are unique among the creatures, but they are nonetheless creatures.

There are large numbers of angels. Scripture has various ways of indicating their numbers: “ten thousands” (Deut. 33:2); “twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands” (Ps. 68:17); “twelve legions” (36,000 to

72,000—the size of the Roman legion varied between 3,000 and 6,000) (Matt. 26:53); “innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb. 12:22); “thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand” (Rev. 5:11, NIV). The last reference may be an allusion to Daniel 7:10. Job 25:3 and 2 Kings 6:17 also indicate a large number of angelic beings. While there is no reason to take any of these figures as exact numbers, particularly in view of the symbolic significance of the numbers used (12 and 1,000), it is clear that the angels are a very large group.

#### *Their Appearance*

In most cases angels are not seen. The Lord had to open the eyes of Balaam before he could see the angel standing in his way (Num. 22:31). Elisha prayed that the Lord would open the eyes of his servant; then the young man saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha (2 Kings 6:17). When angels are seen, they ordinarily have a manlike appearance, so that they may well be mistaken for men (Gen. 18:2, 16, 22; 19:1, 5, 10, 12, 15, 16; Judg. 13:6; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4). Sometimes the glory of the Lord shines from them (Luke 2:9; 9:26). And they are sometimes seen to be wearing white clothing of brilliant appearance (perhaps this is the glory of the Lord shining from them). Note how Matthew describes the angel of the Lord who rolled the stone from Jesus’ sepulchre: “His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow” (Matt. 28:3; cf. Ezek. 1:13; Dan. 10:6; Rev. 1:14 and 19:12).

Some of the commonly held conceptions are not supported by the scriptural witness. There are no indications of angels appearing in female form. Nor is there explicit reference to them as winged, although Daniel 9:21 and Revelation 14:6 speak of them as flying. The cherubim and seraphim are represented as winged (Exod. 25:20; Isa. 6:2), as are the symbolic creatures of Ezekiel 1:6 (cf. Rev. 4:8). However, we have no assurance that what is true of cherubim and seraphim is true of angels in general. Since there is no explicit reference indicating that angels as a whole are winged, we must regard this as at best an inference, but not a necessary inference, from the biblical passages which describe them as flying.

#### *Their Capacities and Powers*

The angels are represented as personal beings. They can be interacted with. They have intelligence and will (2 Sam. 14:20; Rev. 22:9). They are moral creatures, some being characterized as holy (Matt. 25:31;

Mark 8:38; Luke 1:26; Acts 10:22; Rev. 14:10), while others, who have fallen away, are described as lying and sinning (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8-10).

In Matthew 24:36 Jesus implies that angels have superhuman knowledge, but at the same time expressly asserts that this knowledge is not unlimited: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” In 1 Peter 1:12 there may be an allusion to the limited nature of their knowledge. They evidently grow in knowledge by observing human actions and hearing of human repentance (Luke 12:8; 15:10; 1 Cor. 4:9; Eph. 3:10). That their knowledge is greater than that of humans is indicated by their presence at some of the heavenly counsels, their involvement in conveying revelation (Gal. 3:19), and their interpretation of visions (as in Daniel and Zechariah). To be likened to an angel may imply that one possesses great wisdom.

Just as the angels possess great knowledge but not omniscience, so they also have great and superhuman power, but not omnipotence. The fact of the angels’ great power is taught in three ways in Scripture:

1. The titles assigned to at least some of them—principalities, powers, authorities, dominions, thrones.
2. Direct assertions; for example, “angels, though greater [than humans] in might and power” (2 Peter 2:11); “Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word” (Ps. 103:20).
3. The effects attributed to their agency—see 2 Chronicles 32:21; Acts 12:7-11; and our discussion of the activities of angels (pp. 444-45).

This great power is derived from God and the angels remain dependent upon his favorable will to exercise it. They are restricted to acting within the limits of his permission. This is true even of Satan, whose ability to afflict Job was circumscribed by the will of the Lord (Job 1:12; 2:6). God’s angels act only to carry out God’s commands. There is no instance of their acting independently. Only God does the miraculous (Ps. 72:18). As creatures, angels are subject to all the limitations of creaturehood.

#### *Organization*

Rather elaborate schemes have been worked out at times regarding the organization of the angelic hosts. There is very little definite and clear information on this subject. We do know that there are archangels, who evidently are of higher stature than the ordinary angels. Only twice in the Bible is the term used, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9. Only Michael is identified by name as an archangel. Although Gabriel is often popularly thought of as an archangel, nowhere in the Bible is he so identified. Nor are we told how many archangels there are.

Attempts have been made to devise an organizational pattern from Paul's use of various terms, such as principalities, powers, and thrones. While these terms may designate different functions, there really is no way of detecting whether any chain of command is thus implied.

The cherubim and seraphim present special problems, since no statement is made regarding their relationship to angels in general. There is only one mention of seraphim: Isaiah 6:2-3 represents them as worshiping God. The cherubim, on the other hand, are mentioned quite frequently; they are described as appearing like human beings, having wings, and attending in some special way upon God, who has his throne above them (Num. 7:89; 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; Pss. 80:1; 99:1; etc.). When Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden, God placed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the tree of life (Gen. 3:24).

There have been several different types of speculations regarding the seraphim and cherubim. Some have argued that the cherubim are to be identified with the seraphim.<sup>13</sup> Augustus Strong contended that they are not to be understood as actual beings, higher in rank than man, but as "symbolic appearances, intended to represent redeemed humanity, endowed with all the creature perfections lost by the Fall, and made to be the dwelling-place of God."<sup>14</sup> In the absence of further data, it seems fruitless to speculate. The most cautious position is simply to regard the seraphim and cherubim as being among spiritual creatures designated by the general term *angel*. They may be angels with special functions, or they may be a special type of angel. In any case, we cannot assume that the characteristics of either seraphim or cherubim can be predicated of all angels. And whether they are of the higher or lower ranks, if indeed there are such ranks, we do not know.

#### *Difficult Terms*

There are two difficult terms which deserve particular attention: "sons of God" and "the angel of the Lord." In Genesis 6:2 we read that the "sons of God" took wives from among the "daughters of men." Some scholars have been led to conclude that these sons of God were in actuality angels who mated with human women to produce a race of mighty men. Among the arguments advanced in favor of this interpretation are that angels are referred to as sons of God elsewhere in Scripture (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) and that there was apparently a superhuman race on the earth at this time (v. 4). On the other hand, the fact that there was

13. Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Daniels and Smith, 1852), pp. 187-202.

14. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 449.

also great wickedness which so displeased God as to result in the flood has led to the suggestion that the sons of God may in fact have been fallen angels. But the suggestion that angels (whether good or fallen) mated with human women and produced children runs contrary to what Jesus taught us about angels (Matt. 22:30). In light of this, the interpretation which understands the "sons of God" in Genesis 6:2 to be sons of Seth who mated with pagan descendants of Cain seems to present less difficulty than does the interpretation of "sons of God" as angels. Nevertheless, it is impossible to hold this or any other alternative view with any great degree of certainty. It is necessary to conclude that there simply is not enough evidence to justify using this passage as a source of information about angels. This should not be considered a case of "evangelical demythologizing," as has been suggested by the author of a recent defense of the traditional interpretation that the "sons of God" in Genesis 6:2 are angels.<sup>15</sup> It is simply a matter of remaining skeptical in the face of insufficient evidence.

We also face the problem of the identity of "the angel of the Lord." In the Old Testament there are numerous references to the angel of the Lord or "the angel of God" (Gen. 16:7-14; 18; 22:11, 14-15; 24:7, 40; 32:24-30; 48:15-16; Exod. 3:2; 14:19; 23:20-23; 32:34-33:17; Judg. 2:1, 4; 5:23; 6:11-24; 13:3, etc.). The problem comes in the fact that while there are numerous passages where the angel of the Lord is identified with God, there are many other passages where the two are distinguished. Examples of passages in which the two are equated are Genesis 31:11 and 13, where the angel of the Lord says, "I am the God of Bethel," and Exodus 3:2 and 6, where the angel of the Lord tells Moses, "I am the God of your father." Examples of passages in which the two are distinguished are Genesis 16:11, where the angel of the Lord says to Hagar, "The **Lord** has given heed to your affliction," and Exodus 23:20, where the Lord tells the people of Israel, "Behold, I send an angel before you." There are three major interpretations of "the angel of the Lord": (1) he is merely an angel with a special commission; (2) he is God himself temporarily visible in a humanlike form; (3) he is the Logos, a temporary preincarnate visit by the second person of the Trinity.<sup>16</sup> While none of these interpretations is fully satisfactory, in light of the clear statements of identity the second seems most adequate. Where there are apparent distinctions between God and the angel of the Lord, God is referring to himself in third-person fashion. It is not possible, then, to draw from the nature of the angel of the Lord inferences that can be applied to all angels.

15. Willem A. Van Gemeren, "The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981): 320-48.

16. Wilson, "Angel," p. 134.

*Their Activities*

1. Angels continually praise and glorify God (Job 38:7; Pss. 103:20; 148:2; Rev. 5:11–12; 7:11; 8:1–4). While this activity usually takes place in God's presence, on at least one occasion it took place on earth—at the birth of Jesus the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:13–14).

2. Angels reveal and communicate God's message to man. This activity is most in keeping with the meaning of the word angel. Angels were particularly involved as mediators of the law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Although they are not mentioned in Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 33:2 says, "The Lord... came from the ten thousands of holy ones." This obscure passage may be an allusion to the mediation of angels. While they are not said to have performed a similar function with respect to the new covenant, the New Testament frequently depicts them as conveyors of messages from God. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah (Luke 1:13–20) and to Mary (Luke 1:26–38). Angels also spoke to Philip (Acts 8:26), Cornelius (Acts 10:3–7), Peter (Acts 11:13; 12:7–11), and Paul (Acts 27:23).

3. Angels minister to believers. This includes protecting believers from harm. In the early church it was an angel that delivered the apostles (Acts 5:19) and later Peter (Acts 12:6–11) from prison. The psalmist experienced the angels' care (Pss. 34:7; 91:11). The major ministry is to spiritual needs, however. Angels take a great interest in the spiritual welfare of believers, rejoicing at their conversion (Luke 15:10) and serving them in their needs (Heb. 1:14). Angels are spectators of our lives (1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Tim. 5:21), and are present within the church (1 Cor. 11:10). At the death of the believer, they convey him to the place of blessedness (Luke 16:22).

4. Angels execute judgment upon the enemies of God. The angel of the Lord brought death to 185,000 Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35), and to the children of Israel until the Lord told him to stay his hand at Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:16). It was the angel of the Lord who stood between the people of Israel and the Egyptians (Exod. 14:19–20); the result was the deliverance of the Israelites and the destruction of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. It was an angel of the Lord that killed Herod (Acts 12:23). The Book of Revelation is full of prophecies regarding the judgment to be administered by angels (8:6–9:21; 16:1–17; 19:11–14).

5. The angels will be involved in the second coming. They will accompany the Lord at his return (Matt. 25:31), just as they were present at other significant events of Jesus' life, including his birth, temptation, and resurrection. They will separate the wheat from the weeds (Matt. 13:39–42). Christ will send forth his angels with a loud trumpet call to gather the elect from the four winds (Matt. 24:31; cf. 1 Thess. 4:16–17).

What of the concept of guardian angels, the idea that each person or at least each believer has a specific angel assigned to care for him and to accompany him in this life? This idea was part of popular Jewish belief at the time of Christ and has carried over in some Christian thinking.<sup>17</sup> Two biblical texts are cited as evidence of guardian angels. Upon calling a child and placing him in the midst of the disciples, Jesus said: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). When the maid Rhoda told the others in the house that Peter was at the gate, they said, "It is his angel!" (Acts 12:15). These verses seem to indicate that angels are specially assigned to individuals.

We should note, however, that elsewhere in the Bible we read that not just one, but many angels accompanied, protected, and provided for believers. Elisha was surrounded by many horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17); Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels; several angels carried Lazarus's soul to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). Moreover, Jesus' reference to the angels of the little ones specifies that they are in the presence of the Father. This suggests that they are angels who worship in God's presence rather than angels who care for individual humans in this world. The reply to Rhoda reflects the Jewish tradition that a guardian angel resembles the person to whom he is assigned. But a report indicating that certain disciples believed in guardian angels does not invest the belief with authority. Some Christians still had mistaken or confused beliefs on various subjects. In the absence of definite didactic material, we must conclude that there is insufficient evidence for the concept of guardian angels.

**Evil Angels***The Status of Demonology Today*

Where to consider the topic of evil angels presents a problem. Dealing with them in connection with our examination of good angels would tend to suggest a parallel. Since the good angels have been treated at this point because of their obvious relationship to divine providence, are not the evil angels or demons rather out of place here? Would it not be more appropriate to handle this topic in connection with our study of sin? But discussing the evil angels at this point is justified on two grounds. First, the evil angels should be studied in close connection with

17. A. J. Maclean, "Angels," in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1916), vol. 1, p. 60.

the good angels since they have the same derivation, and much of what has been said about the latter is true of the former as well. There are many items which apply to angels in general. The good angels are yet what the evil angels once were. Second, the providence of God has about it the shadow of the problem of evil. And since we have just discussed evil, it seems wise to treat the subject of demons and the devil here. We will refer to these evil agents again when we discuss sin and temptation, and when we delve into the doctrine of the last things; but they simply cannot be ignored at this present juncture.

Theologians have recently shown a tendency to restructure the understanding of demons and Satan. One such attempt has of course been Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization, noted earlier in this chapter. According to this and allied views, demons are merely mythological conceptions drawn from the culture of the day. In particular, the biblical presentation is believed to reflect the influence of Persian mythology. As appealing as this idea is superficially, it fails to take note that the Christian view contains nothing of the dualism so commonly found in Persian thought.<sup>18</sup> The devil and demons are not an independent force opposed to God; their existence derives from God, although this existence is now distorted and contradicts its original source. Thus the view that sees a Persian origin in the biblical concept of demons is considerably flawed. And in the case of Bultmann's demythologization, there is a whole set of accompanying problems.

A second alternative approach is to depersonalize demons. The reality of evil in our day cannot be denied. Even those who reject ideas such as total depravity and original sin frequently decry the injustice and warfare in our world. There are some theologians who view all this evil not as stemming from a personal source, but as being part of the very structure of reality, and particularly of our present social reality. The term *demonic* is viewed as a characterization of powerful social forces and structures rather than personal beings. An example of those who take this approach is Paul Tillich.<sup>19</sup>

A third recent approach to demons is that of Karl Barth. He stresses the antithesis between demons and angels.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that he separates his treatments of the two topics, for he deals briefly with demons after discussing the angels. Nor does he have in mind the opposition which there is between the two. Rather, Barth's idea is that demons and angels literally have nothing in common with one another.

18. Wilson, "Angel," p. 135; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), vol. 2, p. 748.

19. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), vol. 2, p. 27.

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, part 3, p. 520.

They are not two species of one common genus, angels. There is an absolute and exclusive antithesis between the two. Just as "nonsense" is not a species of sense, so demons or evil angels are not a special species of angels, but the reality which is condemned, negated, and excluded by the good angels. The origin and nature of demons lie in nothingness, chaos, darkness.<sup>21</sup> They are not created by God, but are part of the threat to God's creation. They are simply nothingness in its dynamic. The basic problem with this position is that it denies the concreteness of evil and evil things.

#### *The Origin of Demons*

The Bible has little to say about how evil angels came to have their current moral character, and even less about their origin. We may derive something about their origin by noting what is said about their moral character. There are two closely related passages which inform us regarding the fall of the evil angels. Second Peter 2:4 says that "God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment." Jude 6 says that "the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day." The beings described in these two verses are clearly identified as angels who sinned and came under judgment. They must, then, like all the other angels, be created beings.

A problem presented by these verses is the fact that the evil angels are said to have been cast into nether gloom to be kept until the judgment. This has led some to theorize that there are two classes of fallen angels, those who are imprisoned, and those who are free to carry on their evil in the world. Another possibility is that these two verses describe the condition of all demons. That the latter is correct is suggested by the remainder of 2 Peter 2. In verse 9 Peter says that "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment." This language is almost identical to that used in verse 4. Note that the remainder of the chapter (vv. 10-22) is a description of the continued sinful activity of these people who are being kept under punishment. We conclude that, likewise, though cast into nether gloom, the fallen angels have sufficient freedom to carry on their evil activities.

Demons, then, are angels created by God and thus were originally good; but they sinned and thus became evil. Just when this rebellion

21. Ibid., p. 523.

took place we do not know, but it must have occurred between the time when God completed the creation and pronounced it all “very good,” and the temptation and fall of man (Gen. 3).

#### *The Chief of the Demons*

The devil is the name given in Scripture to the chief of these fallen angels. He is also known as Satan. The Hebrew name **שָׁנָתָן** (*satan*) derives from the verb **שָׁנַת**, which means to be or act as an adversary.<sup>22</sup> Hence he is the opponent, the one who opposes the cause of God and of the people of God. The Greek word **Σατᾶν** or **Σατανᾶς** is a transliteration of this Hebrew name. The most common Greek word for him is **διάβολος** (devil, adversary, accuser). **κατήγωρ** (accuser—Rev. 12:10) is also used. Several other terms are used of him less frequently: tempter (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), Beelzebul (Matt. 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 19), enemy (Matt. 13:39), evil one (Matt. 13:19, 38; 1 John 2:13; 3:12; 5:18), Belial (2 Cor. 6:15), adversary (1 Peter 5:8), deceiver (Rev. 12:9), great dragon (Rev. 12:3), father of lies (John 8:44), murderer (John 8:44), sinner (1 John 3:8). All of these convey something of the character and activity of the devil. Although the devil is not explicitly termed a demon in Scripture, it is clear that Jesus identified Satan with Beelzebul, the prince of demons (see the parallel accounts in Matt. 12:22–32; Mark 3:22–30; and Luke 11:14–23). That Satan is a demon is also implied in Luke 10:17–20, where the casting out of demons signals the defeat of Satan. Those who were demon-possessed were characterized as “oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38; cf. Luke 13:16).

The devil is, as his name indicates, engaged in opposing God and the work of Christ. He does this especially by tempting man. This is shown in the temptation of Jesus, the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30), and the sin of Judas (Luke 22:3). (See also Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:26.)

One of the primary means used by Satan is deception. Paul tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and that his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14–15). His use of deception is also mentioned in Revelation 12:9 and 20:8, 10. He has “blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). He opposes and hinders (1 Thess. 2:18) Christians in their service, even using physical ailments to that end (so, probably, 2 Cor. 12:7).

22. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 966.

For all of his power, Satan is limited. As we have already mentioned, he could do nothing to Job that God did not expressly permit. He can be successfully resisted, and will flee (James 4:7; see also Eph. 4:27). He can be put to flight, however, not by our strength, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 3:16).

#### *Activities of Demons*

As Satan’s subjects, demons carry out his work in the world. It may therefore be assumed that they engage in all the forms of temptation and deception which he employs. They inflict disease: dumbness (Mark 9:17), deafness and dumbness (Mark 9:25), blindness and deafness (Matt. 12:22), convulsions (Mark 1:26; 9:20; Luke 9:39), paralysis or lameness (Acts 8:7). And most particularly, they oppose the spiritual progress of God’s people (Eph. 6:12).

#### *Demon Possession*

Incidents of demon possession are given prominent attention in the biblical accounts. The technical expression is to “have a demon” (**δαιμόνιον ἔχω**) or to “be demonized” (**δαιμονίζομαι**). Sometimes we find expressions like “unclean spirits” (Acts 8:7) or “evil spirits” (Acts 19:12).

The manifestations of demon possession are varied. We have already noted some of the physical ailments demons inflict. The person possessed may have unusual strength (Mark 5:2–4), may act in bizarre ways such as wearing no clothes and living among the tombs rather than in a house (Luke 8:27), or may engage in self-destructive behavior (Matt. 17:15; Mark 5:5). There evidently are degrees of affliction, since Jesus spoke of the evil spirit who “goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself” (Matt. 12:45). In all of these cases is the common element that the person involved is being destroyed, whether that be physically, emotionally, or spiritually. It appears that the demons were able to speak, presumably using the vocal equipment of the person possessed (e.g., Matt. 8:29, 31; Mark 1:24, 26, 34; 5:7, 9, 10; Luke 4:41; 8:28; 30). It appears that demons can also inhabit animals (see the parallel accounts of the incident involving the swine—Matt. 8; Mark 5; Luke 8).

It is noteworthy that the biblical writers did not attribute all illness to demon possession. Luke reports that Jesus distinguished between two types of healing: “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow” (Luke 13:32). A similar distinction is made in Matthew 10:8; Mark 1:34; 6:13; Luke 4:40–41; 9:1. Nor was epilepsy mistaken for demon possession. We read in Matthew 17:15–18 that Jesus cast out a demon from an epileptic, but in Matthew 4:24 epileptics (as well as

paralytics) are distinguished from demoniacs. In the case of numerous healings no mention is made of demons. In Matthew, for example, no mention is made of demon exorcism in the case of the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5-13), the woman with the hemorrhage of twelve years' duration (9:19-20), the two blind men (9:27-30), the man with the withered hand (12:9-14), and those who touched the fringe of Jesus' garment (14:35-36). In particular, leprosy never seems to be attributed to demons.

Jesus cast out demons without pronouncing an elaborate formula. He merely commanded them to come out (Mark 1:25; 9:25). He attributed the exorcism to the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28) or the finger of God (Luke 11:20). Jesus invested his disciples with the authority to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1). But the disciples needed faith if they were to be successful (Matt. 17:19-20). Prayer is also mentioned as a requirement for exorcism (Mark 9:29). Sometimes faith on the part of a third party was a requirement (Mark 9:23-24; cf. Mark 6:5-6). At times demons were expelled from someone who had expressed no wish to be healed.

There is no reason to believe that demon possessions are restricted to the past. There are cases, especially but not exclusively in less developed cultures, which seem to be explainable only on this basis. The Christian should be alert to the possibility of demon possession occurring today. At the same time, one should not too quickly attribute aberrant physical and psychical phenomena to demon possession. Even as Jesus and the biblical writers distinguished cases of possession from other ailments, so should we, testing the spirits.

In recent years there has been a flare-up of interest in the phenomenon of demon possession. As a consequence, some Christians may come to regard this as the primary manifestation of the forces of evil. In actuality, Satan, the great deceiver, may be encouraging interest in demon possession in hopes that Christians will become careless about other more subtle forms of influence by the powers of evil.

#### *The Destiny of Satan and the Demons*

It is clear from the Bible that a serious and intense struggle is going on between, on the one side, Christ and his followers and, on the other, Satan and his forces. Evidences of the struggle include the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11), Jesus' encounters with demons, and numerous other passages (e.g., Luke 22:31-34; Gal. 5:16-17; Eph. 6:10-20). The temptation of Jesus represented a preliminary victory over Satan. Other anticipations of the final victory are found in Luke 10:18; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Romans 16:20; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 2:13; 3:8; 5:18. Revelation 12 pictures a war in heaven between, on one side, Michael and his angels

and, on the other, Satan and his angels, a war which results in Satan's being thrown down from heaven to earth, and then attacking Christ and the church. In Revelation 20 we read that Satan will be bound for a thousand years (v. 2) and then released for a time before being cast into the lake of fire and brimstone forever (v. 10). Jesus indicates that this will also be the fate of Satan's angels (Matt. 25:41).

The decisive battle in the war between good and evil was fought and won by Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection. Satan has been defeated, and although he continues to fight on desperately, his fate has been sealed. The Christian can take comfort in the realization that he need not be defeated in any of his specific encounters with Satan (1 Cor. 10:13; 1 John 4:4).

#### **The Role of the Doctrine of Angels**

Obscure and strange though this belief in good and evil angels may seem to some, it has a significant role to play in the life of the Christian. There are several benefits to be drawn from our study of this topic:

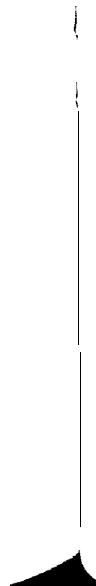
1. It is a comfort and an encouragement to us to realize that there are powerful and numerous unseen agents available to help us in our need. The eye of faith will do for the believer what the vision of the angels did for Elisha's servant (2 Kings 6:17).
2. The angels' praise and service of God give us an example of how we are to conduct ourselves now, and what our activity will be in the life beyond in God's presence.
3. It sobering us to realize that even angels who were close to God succumbed to temptation and fell. This is a reminder to us to "take heed lest [we] fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).
4. Knowledge about evil angels serves to alert us to the danger and the subtlety of temptation which can be expected to come from satanic forces, and gives insight into some of the devil's ways of working. We need to be on guard against two extremes. We should not take him too lightly, lest we disregard the dangers. Nor, on the other hand, should we have too strong an interest in him.
5. We receive confidence from the realization that powerful though Satan and his accomplices are, there are definite limits upon what they can do. We can, therefore, by the grace of God, resist him successfully. And we can know that his ultimate defeat is certain.

---

---

## PART FIVE

# Humanity

- 21. Introduction to the Doctrine of Humanity
  - 22. The Origin of Humanity
  - 23. The Image of God in the Human
  - 24. The Constitutional Nature of the Human
  - 25. The Universality of Humanity
- 

## Introduction to the Doctrine of Humanity

Importance of the Doctrine of Humanity

Images of Man

- Man as a Machine
- Man as an Animal
- Man as a Sexual Being
- Man as an Economic Being
- Man as a Pawn of the Universe
- Man as a Free Being
- Man as a Social Being

The Christian View of Man

### **Importance of the Doctrine of Humanity**

In a seminary homiletics class, the instructor was lecturing on the various parts of the sermon. When he discussed the introduction he said quite emphatically, "The introduction is the most important part of the sermon." When the main body of the sermon was his topic, he declared, "The main body is the most important part of the sermon." In introducing the topic of the conclusion, he soberly intoned, "The conclusion is the

most important part of the sermon." Finally one confused student asked the question on the minds of many members of the class, "How can all three be the most important?" Patiently the professor explained that whatever part of the sermon one is dealing with is the most important *part-at that time*.

The doctrines of Christian theology have a similar relationship to one another. In a sense every doctrine is the most important doctrine when it is the one under discussion. But the matter goes further than that. In its own way each doctrine is the most important (or at least several of them are). The doctrine of Scripture is the most important for epistemological purposes. Had God not revealed himself to us and preserved that revelation in Scripture, we would not know of our need and the solution to that need. The doctrine of God is the most important from the standpoint of ontology, since God is the ultimate reality, the source and sustainer of all that is. The doctrine of Christ is the most important doctrine in terms of our redemption, because without Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, there would be no basis of salvation for us. The doctrine of salvation is the most important existentially, for it deals with the actual alteration of our lives, our existence. The church is the most important doctrine relationally, since it treats the believer in Christian community. And eschatology is the most important doctrine in terms of history, for it tells us our eternal destiny.

There are several reasons why the doctrine of man is especially important:

1. The doctrine of man is important because of its relationship to other major Christian doctrines. Man is the highest of God's earthly creatures. Thus, the study of man brings to completion our understanding of God's work and, in a sense, of God himself, since we do learn something about the Creator by seeing what he has created. And we learn more about God from man than from any of the other creatures. For only man is said in the Bible to have been made by God in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26–27). Thus, a direct clue to the nature of God ought to emerge from a study of man. To the extent that the copy resembles the original, we will understand God more completely as a result of our study of the highest creature.

The doctrine of man sheds great light also upon our understanding of the person of Christ, since the Bible teaches that the Second Person of the Trinity took on human nature. That fact means that to understand the nature of Christ, it is necessary to understand the nature of humanity. We must, however, make certain that we distinguish essential man, or man as he came from the hand of God, from existential man, or empirical man, as we now find him in actual existence. The theological method works in both ways here. While study of the biblical teaching about man

will give us an understanding of the human nature of Jesus, study of the human nature of Jesus will give us a more complete understanding of what man was really intended to be.

Further, the doctrine of man is in many ways the gate to the study of yet other doctrines with which the connection is not so obvious.<sup>1</sup> If God had not created man, there would presumably have been no incarnation and no atonement. There would have been no one to regenerate and justify, and hence no need for regeneration and justification. There most certainly would have been no individual believers to constitute the church.

This means that extraordinary care must be taken to formulate correctly our understanding of man. The conclusions reached here will affect, if not determine, our conclusions in other areas of doctrine. What man is understood to be will color our perception of what needed to be done for him, how it was done, and what his ultimate destiny is. If our conception of human nature is presupposed in our study of other doctrines, and if presuppositions have a significant influence upon conclusions, then the effort expended here is well worth it, for here the issues are overt and thus can be dealt with openly and consciously. In the study of other doctrines, these issues are much more difficult to recognize and handle thoroughly. Extra effort expended here will therefore be especially worthwhile.

The doctrine of man has an unusual status. Here is a case where the student of theology is the object of it as well. The person doing theology or studying it is himself a human being. Consequently, the theologian is here the object of study, not as theologian, but as human. This sets anthropology apart from doctrines like theology proper and Christology (although not from doctrines like soteriology, which is, of course, concerned with the salvation of man). Our anthropology will determine how we understand ourselves and, consequently, how we do theology, or even what theology is, that is, to the degree that it is thought of as a human activity.

2. The doctrine of man is important because it is a point where the biblical revelation and human concerns converge. Theology is here treating an object that everyone (or at least virtually everyone) admits exists. Modern Westerners may not have any certainty as to whether there is a God, or whether there really was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, or whether the miracles attributed to him actually occurred. It is even possible, although not likely, that they have some question about the

1. This could of course also be said (and indeed will be said) of other doctrines, such as the atonement. But it is particularly true of the doctrine of man.

reality of other selves, but they have little or no question about their own reality. This is an existential fact with which they live day by day. And unless they have been influenced in some way by Eastern modes of thought, it is probably the one fact of which they are most certain.

This means that the subject of man is a starting point for dialogue. If one begins a discussion with a nonbeliever on the note of what the Bible says, or what God is like, the attention of the listener may be lost almost before it is gained. Many persons today determine their beliefs on the basis of an empiricist approach. They are skeptical about anything which purports to transcend sense experience. In addition, the modern mind often tends toward humanism, making humans and human standards the highest object of value and concern. This is often manifested in an antiauthoritarianism that rejects the idea of a God who claims the right to tell one what to do, or an authoritative book prescribing belief and behavior. But modern man is concerned about himself, what is happening to him, where he is going. He may not do a great amount of thinking about his understanding of humanity. He may rather passively accept his values from the general opinion of the time. But he is interested in and concerned about his welfare and place in life. Thus, while the conversation will not end with man, it is an apt place for it to begin.

We have an excellent opportunity here to utilize what Paul Tillich termed the method of correlation. Tillich believed that theology needs to be apologetic, rather than kerygmatic, in nature. By "kerygmatic" is meant a theology which presents the message from the base of its authority and declares what is to be believed and done.<sup>2</sup> Kerygmatic theology lets the authoritative ground (e.g., the Bible) set the agenda. There is no real attempt to aim the message at some point of particular sensitivity and need within the hearer. It is a "telling" rather than "asking" approach.

In Tillich's answering or apologetic theology, an analysis is made of the situation, the whole interpretation of life and reality held by a culture. This is expressed through the art, philosophy, politics, and technology of that culture.<sup>3</sup> The analysis informs us of the questions being asked by that society. Thus, in Tillich's system, before theology tells its message, it asks what is most important to the people being addressed.<sup>4</sup> Then theology expresses its message, drawing the content from the pole of the theological authority, but letting the form be governed by the pole of the situation. The message will be expressed as answers to the questions

2. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 4, 7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-22.

man is asking.<sup>5</sup> This means that it will not be seen as something foreign imposed upon him from without.<sup>6</sup> There will be pertinence and relevance. Instead of offering answers to questions that are not being asked, theology will seek to direct the message to man's questions.

The subject of man is an area in which the Christian can make significant use of the method of correlation. Because man in every culture is aware of himself, his problems, and his needs on both an individual and a collective basis, much is said and asked about man. Hence this is a fruitful place for beginning a discussion with nonbelievers. But the discussion will not end there. For the questions raised by a nonbeliever's self-understanding will lead to answers which go some distance from the starting point of the discussion. For example, the questions raised will lead to explication of man's relationship to God, which will in turn require explication of who God is and what he is like. Thus, although the discussion may eventually range far afield, it will have begun where the person's interest lies.

This suggests that our preaching might well begin with some common aspect of human experience. In particular, the introduction might focus on an issue which is uppermost in the mind of the listener. One church located in a small city broadcasts the last half of its morning service on the only local radio station. The service is so timed that, when the broadcast begins at 11:30, the congregation is singing a hymn. A special musical number follows, and then comes the sermon. There are probably persons in the radio audience who are listening, not because they wish to hear the broadcast of a worship service, but because they were listening to the preceding program and simply have not retuned their radio or turned it off. They might just leave it on during the music. But if the sermon begins with a five-minute explanation of the cultural situation in first-century Philippi, or an elucidation of the significance of the breastplate of the high priest in the Book of Exodus, there might be clicks all over the radio audience. If, on the other hand, the sermon begins with some situation of human interest, and then works back to show how the Scripture portion under consideration speaks to that situation, there is a chance of keeping those people. While we tend to think that this problem is limited to radio and television preachers, we might be surprised to find out how many persons sitting before the preacher on a Sunday morning are capable of turning off the sermon, whether their eyes are closed or wide open. The doctrine of man is one point where it is possible to get a toehold in the mind of the modern secular person. For it at least begins with topics which are on the mind of the person in the street.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-66.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.

3. The doctrine of man is particularly significant in our day because of the large amount of attention given to man by the various intellectual disciplines. The number of disciplines that make human nature or human behavior the primary object of their attention continues to grow at a rapid pace. New departments focusing on hitherto unexplored areas of behavioral science come into being regularly at universities. New cross-disciplinary studies are arising. Even business schools, which formerly concentrated upon economic and organizational problems, are increasingly addressing the human factor and finding that it is often the most important. Medical schools are becoming more conscious that doctors do not treat symptoms or illnesses or bodies, but human beings, and accordingly they must be aware of the personal dimensions of the practitioner-patient relationship. And of course the traditional behavioral sciences, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science, continue to investigate the human creature.

There is a heightened interest in human problems. Ethical issues dominate discussions, particularly among the young. Whatever their primary issue be—racial relationships in the 1950s, the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the environment in the 1970s, the nuclear-arms race in the 1980s—there is intensity of concern. And the questions raised—"What should we do?" and "What is the right?"—which are sometimes answered with rather dogmatic statements, are questions which start one on a course which may well lead to the answer of a transcendent God who is the basis for moral norms. It should be noted here that political debate, often quite vigorous in nature, deals with issues which at root are ethical. Is material prosperity more important than good education? Is economic security more to be valued than freedom of choice? These are issues which really pose the questions, "What is human nature?" and "What is the good for human beings?"

While our preceding point (viz., that the topic of man can be a highly effective springboard for discussion with nonbelievers) related primarily to the individual human being's concern regarding himself, we are thinking here more in terms of the collective self-concern of society, which is a more intellectual matter. Because of the increasing number of academic disciplines focusing upon man, Christian theology is in an opportune situation to enter into dialogue with other scholarly perspectives and methodologies. Just as in a highly personal discussion with an individual, it is also vital in academic dialogue that we have a thorough and accurate understanding of man from the standpoint of theology, as well as a familiarity with how he is viewed from perspectives other than that of theology. We must know how the human is perceived by these other approaches and how these views compare and contrast with the theological.

4. The doctrine of man is important because of the present crisis in man's self-understanding. Not only is there a great interest in the question "What is man?" There is also great confusion regarding the answer, for various recent events and developments cast doubt on many of the answers which have been given to the question.

One development is the struggle of young people to discover who they are. The quest for identity is part of the normal process of maturation, of moving away from being defined in terms of the conceptions and values of one's parents, to forming one's own outlook on life, one's own values and goals. This has always been a part of growing up.<sup>7</sup> Recently, however, it seems to have taken on larger dimensions. For one thing, many parents do not really instill values in their children, or advocate values which they themselves do not manifest in their lifestyles. The traditional sources of values, the church, the university, the state, have come to be suspect. The threat of extinction clouds the future of many young people, as nuclear capabilities proliferate and spread to additional nations. Who am I? What is life? Where is the world going? These are questions which mark the crises faced by many young people and some older ones as well.<sup>8</sup>

A second development contributing to the crisis in self-understanding is the loss of historical roots. In many cases, history has become a lost field of knowledge, regarded as impractical or irrelevant. Because of this disregard, people and even whole nations have lost touch with who they are. Traditions have been cast aside as old, boring, and stifling. But traditions can teach us a great deal about who we are. Many people have in fact made discoveries about themselves as they search out their family roots. The ultimate question, however, is, Where did the human race come from? That is the quintessential historical question. Christianity answers that question and thus gives us a sure sense of identity: we are creatures of God, made in his image and likeness and for fellowship with him. The entire human race owes its beginning and its continued existence to the will and work of God, who created because of love.

The final development leading to the crisis in man's self-understanding relates to traumatic occurrences in national life. We are sometimes brought to the point of asking, "What is our country, or our world, doing?" Since the 1960s a series of political assassinations and assassination attempts has caused some deep national soul-searching in the United States. Terrorism, wars, and the continuing specter of nuclear holocaust cause us to wonder where we are going and whether the human race as

7. See, e.g., Barbara Schoen, "Identity Crisis," *Seventeen*, February 1966, pp. 134-35.

8. "End of the Permissive Society?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 28 June 1982, pp. 45-48.

a whole has gone mad. The contradiction in man is deep and profound. On the one hand, he is capable of incredible accomplishments, including space travel and huge leaps in communication, information processing, and medicine. But while making these strides in controlling the physical world of nature, man seems unable to control himself. Morally neutral technology is employed to evil ends. Crime increases, as do class and racial tension and strife. If man on one hand seems to be almost a god, reaching for the stars, on the other hand he seems to be a devil, capable of cruelty not found in the animal kingdom. The self-understanding of the human is indeed at a crisis point calling for intensive investigation and careful reflection.

5. The doctrine of man is important because it affects how we minister. Our conception of human beings and their destiny will greatly affect how we deal with them and what we seek to do for them. If we think of humans as primarily physical beings, then the most important consideration, and perhaps virtually the only one, will be their physical comfort. The satisfaction of physical drives in the most effective fashion will be our major concern.

If we think of humans as primarily rational beings, then our ministry will appeal chiefly to their intellects. We will present carefully prepared arguments and expositions, reasoned justifications of actions and ideas. Our basic premise will be that the way to obtain desirable action from those with whom we deal is to persuade them that it is the best course to follow. If we see humans as primarily emotional beings, our appeal to them will be basically in terms of emotional considerations. If we see them as essentially sexual beings, then making sure they have achieved satisfactory sexual adjustment will take priority over everything else in our ministry to them. In terms of both the ends which we pursue and the way in which we seek to attain them, our conception of man is crucial to our work with and for him.

### Images of Man

The foregoing considerations should convince us that the doctrine of man is a particularly opportune one for us to study and utilize in our dialogue with the non-Christian world. It is an area in which contemporary culture is perpetually asking questions to which the Christian message can offer answers. If we are to identify the questions being asked, however, it will be necessary to look more closely at some of the current conceptions of man. Because so many different disciplines deal with human nature, there are many different images of man. It will be helpful

to us, in developing our Christian theological conception, to be aware of some of the more prevalent ones.

#### *Man as a Machine*

One prevalent perspective on the human is in terms of what he is able to do. The employer, for example, is interested in the human being's strength and energy, the skills or capabilities possessed. On this basis, the employer "rents" the employee for a certain number of hours a day (although some employers think that they own some of their employees, controlling almost all areas of their lives). That humans are sometimes regarded as machines is particularly evident when automation results in a worker's being displaced from a job. A robot, being more accurate and consistent, often performs the work better; moreover, it requires less attention, does not demand pay increases, and does not lose time because of illness.

The chief concern of those who have this conception of man will be to satisfy those needs of the person (machine) which will keep him functioning effectively. The health of the worker is of interest not because illness might mean personal distress, but because it might result in loss of working efficiency. If the work can be done better by a machine, or by the introduction of more-advanced techniques, there will be no hesitation to adopt such measures, for the work is the primary goal and concern. In addition, the worker is paid no more than is absolutely necessary to get the task accomplished.<sup>9</sup>

This view also creeps into the church to a degree. Persons may be valued according to what they can do. Churches may reflect this in their choice of pastors, wanting someone who can perform a given ministerial task, and do it effectively and efficiently. There may be special concern to enlist members who can get the church's work accomplished. Potential converts may be viewed primarily as "giving units" who can help finance the program of the church. One pastor referred to visitation of the elderly and shut-in members of his congregation as "junk calls," because such people cannot contribute much to the work of the church. In all of these instances, the conception of man as a machine is present—people are valued for what they can do; there is little interest in what can be done for them.

In this approach, persons are basically regarded as things, as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves. They are of value as long as they are useful. They may be moved around like chessmen, as some

9. "The Robot Invasion Begins to Worry Labor," *Business Week*, 29 March 1982, p. 46.

large corporations do with their management personnel. They are manipulated if necessary, so that they accomplish their intended function.

#### *Man as an Animal*

Another view sees man primarily as a member of the animal kingdom and as a derivation from some of its higher forms. He has come into being through the same sort of process as have all other animals, and will have a similar end. There is no qualitative difference between man and the other animals. The only difference is one of degree. Man has a somewhat different physical structure (which is not necessarily superior to that of other created beings), a larger cranial capacity, a more highly trained stimulus-response mechanism.

This view of man is perhaps most fully developed in behavioristic psychology. Here human motivation is understood primarily in terms of biological drives. Knowledge of man is gained not through introspection, but by experimentation upon animals. For example, conclusions about humans are drawn from the discovery that if water is poured into a rat's throat but prevented from running into its stomach, it will have relief from its feelings of thirst relatively quickly, but the relief will not last as long as it would if the water were allowed to run into the stomach.<sup>10</sup>

Human behavior can be affected by processes similar to those used on animals. Just as Pavlov's dog learned to salivate when a bell was rung, human beings can also be conditioned to react in certain ways. Positive reinforcement (rewards) and, less desirably, negative reinforcement (punishment) are the means of control and training.

#### *Man as a Sexual Being*

Sigmund Freud regarded sexuality as the basic framework of man. In a world in which sex was not openly discussed or even mentioned in polite circles, Freud developed a whole theory of personality around human sexuality. His model of human personality was tripartite. There is the id, an essentially amoral part, a seething cauldron of drives and desires.<sup>11</sup> Derived from the id, the ego is the conscious component of the personality, the more public part of the individual.<sup>12</sup> Here the forces from

10. On behavioristic psychology see, e.g., Paul Young, *Motivation of Behavior: The Fundamental Determinants of Human and Animal Activity* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1936). For a novel depicting an ideal society built upon the use of behavioristic conditioning, see B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

11. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1933), pp. 103-05.

12. Ibid., pp. 105-08.

the id, modified somewhat, seek gratification. The superego is a censor or control upon the drives and emotions of the person, the internalization of parental restraint and regulation (or at least direction) of the child's activities.<sup>13</sup> The great driving force or source of energy is the libido, a basically sexual force, which seeks gratification in whatever way and place it can. Basically all human behavior is to be understood as modification and direction of this plastic sexual energy. This energy may be sublimated into other types of behavior and directed toward other goals, but is still the prime determinant of human activity.<sup>14</sup>

According to Freud's view, serious maladjustment can result from the way in which this sexual energy is handled. Because the id strives for complete and unhampered gratification, a situation which would make society impossible, society imposes limitations upon this struggle for gratification and upon the aggressiveness which frequently accompanies it. These limitations may then produce frustration. Serious maladjustment also occurs when a person's sexual development is arrested at one of the early stages of the process. These theories of Freud rest upon the concept that all human behavior basically derives from sexual motivation and energy.<sup>15</sup>

While the theoretical scheme developed by Freud has not won very extensive assent, his basic supposition is widely accepted. In a rather crude fashion, the "Playboy" philosophy assumes that man is primarily a sexual being, and sex is the most significant human experience. Much of today's advertising seems to espouse this idea as well, almost as if nothing can be sold without attaching a sexual overtone to it. The preoccupation with sex suggests that (from the standpoint of behavior at least, if not from that of intellectual affirmation) the view that man is essentially a sexual being is widely held in our society.

Sometimes Christianity with its ethical codes, and particularly evangelical Christianity, is criticized for being too judgmental concerning sex. Joseph Fletcher is among those who voice this criticism.<sup>16</sup> But is Christian ethics unduly judgmental, or is it simply making a reasonable response to the excessive role of sex in our society? C. S. Lewis observed that a considerable portion of the activity within our society is based upon an inordinate preoccupation with human sexuality:

13. Ibid., pp. 108-10.

14. Ibid., pp. 132ff.; *idem*, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Washington Square, 1960), lectures 17 and 21.

15. Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 115-16; *idem*, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958).

16. Joseph Fletcher, *Moral Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 83.

You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act—that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let every one see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us?<sup>17</sup>

#### *Man as an Economic Being*

Another view is that economic forces are what really affect and motivate the human being. In a sense, this view is an extension of the view that man is primarily a member of the animal kingdom. It focuses upon the material dimension of life and its needs. Adequate food, clothing, and housing are the most significant needs of the human. When a person has the economic resources to provide these in adequate measure for himself and those dependent upon him, he is satisfied, or has attained his destiny.

The ideology which has most completely and most consistently developed this understanding of man is of course communism or, as it is more accurately labeled, dialectical materialism. This ideology sees economic forces as moving history through progressive stages. First came slavery; in this stage the masters of society owned all the wealth, which included other human beings. Then came feudalism, where the lord-serf relationship was the model. Then came capitalism, where the ruling class own the means of production and hire others to work for them. In liberal capitalism, there is still private ownership of the farms and factories, but government imposes certain limitations upon the owners, thus making the bargaining position of the laborers easier. Eventually, the time will come when there will be no private ownership of the means of production. They will be owned in their entirety by the state. The economic gap between the classes will disappear, and with it the conflict between them; in this classless society, evil will wither away. In this final stage of the dialectic, the motto of communism will be realized—"From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Material and economic forces will have driven history to its ultimate goal.<sup>18</sup>

If dialectical materialism is the most complete formulation of this philosophy, it is not the only one. On a popular level, the concept that

17. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 89-90.

18. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modern Library, 1936).

man is motivated primarily by economic forces seems to be the philosophy of a large percentage of American politicians. Presumably they reflect what their polls tell them are the real concerns of most of their constituents. These economic forces are at work influencing such matters as population trends. Consider as an example that it is not primarily climate, at least not directly, that influences where most people live. Rather, it is resources: the availability of jobs.

#### *Man as a Pawn of the Universe*

Among certain existentialists particularly, but also in a broader segment of society, we find the idea that man is at the mercy of forces in the world which control his destiny but have no real concern for him. These are seen as blind forces, forces of chance in many cases. Sometimes they are personal forces, but even then they are forces over which man has no control, and upon which he has no influence, such as political superpowers. This is basically a pessimistic view which pictures man as being crushed by a world which is either hostile or at best indifferent to his welfare and needs. The result is a sense of helplessness, of futility. Bertrand Russell expresses eloquently this feeling of "unyielding despair"

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. ...

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that enoble his little day; ... proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.<sup>19</sup>

19. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Norton, 1929), pp. 47-48, 56-57.

Among the existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre has developed this theme of absurdity and despair in several of his writings. One of these, "The Wall," tells the story of a member of a revolutionary group who has been captured. He is to be executed unless he discloses the whereabouts of the leader of the group, Gris. He knows that Gris is hiding in a cellar, but he is determined not to reveal this information. As he awaits his death he reflects upon life, his girl friend, his values. He concludes that he really does not care whether he lives or dies. Finally, as a joke, he tells the guards that Gris is hiding in the cemetery. They go off to seek him. When they return, the hero is freed, for unknown to him, Gris had left his hiding place to go to the cemetery and had been captured there. The life of the hero—a life he no longer wants—has been spared because of an ironical twist of fate.<sup>20</sup>

Albert Camus has also captured this general idea in his reworking of the classical myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus had died and gone to the nether world. He had, however, been sent back to earth. When recalled to the nether world, he refused to return, for he thoroughly enjoyed the pleasures of life. As punishment he was brought back and sentenced to push a large rock up to the top of a hill. When he got it there, however, it rolled back down. He trudged his way to the bottom of the hill and again pushed the rock to the top only to have it roll back down. He was doomed to repeat this process endlessly. For all his efforts there was no permanent result.<sup>21</sup> Whether immersed in fearful thoughts about death, the forthcoming natural extinction of the planet, or nuclear destruction, or merely in the struggle against those who control the political and economic power, all those who hold that man is basically a pawn at the mercy of the universe are gripped by a similar sense of helplessness and resignation.

#### *Man as a Free Being*

The approach which emphasizes the freedom of man, his ability to choose, sees the human will as the essence of personality. This basic approach is often evident in conservative political and social views. Here freedom from restraint is the most important issue, for it permits man to realize his essential nature. The role of government is simply to ensure a stable environment in which such freedom can be exercised. Beyond that, a laissez-faire approach is to be followed. Excessive regulation is to

20. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: World, 1956), pp. 223-40.

21. Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, pp. 312-15.

be avoided. Also to be avoided is a paternalism which provides for all of one's needs and excludes the possibility of failing. Better failure with freedom than security from want but with no real choice.<sup>22</sup>

According to those who hold this view, man's basic need is information which will enable him to choose intelligently. In terms of the three requisites for action—knowing what should be done, willingness to do what one knows should be done, and ability to do what one wills to do—the only real problem lies with the first factor. For once one has enough information to make an intelligent choice as to what should be done (which, of course, takes personal goals and abilities into account), there is nothing internal nor, provided government ensures a proper environment, external to prevent him from taking that action.

This view maintains not only that man has the ability to choose, but that he must do so. To be fully human, one must accept the responsibility of self-determination. All attempts to disavow responsibility for oneself are improper. A common excuse is genetic conditioning: "I can't control my behavior. It's in my genes. I inherited it from my father." Another is psychological conditioning: "I was raised that way. I can't help being the way I am." Or social conditioning: "As I grew up, I didn't have a chance. There was no opportunity to get an education." All of these excuses are examples of what existentialism calls "inauthentic existence," unwillingness to accept responsibility for oneself. This failure to exercise one's freedom is a denial of the fundamental dimension of human nature, and thus a denial of one's humanity. Similarly, any effort to deprive others of their free choice is wrong, whether that be through slavery, a totalitarian government, an excessively regulative democracy, or a manipulative social style.<sup>23</sup> William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus" powerfully embodies this philosophy that man is in essence a free being:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul. . . .

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

22. Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

23. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 210.

*Man as a Social Being*

Then there is the perspective that man is fundamentally a member of society. Membership in a group of persons is what really distinguishes him as human. Someone who does not interact with other social beings is less than fully human. There is a sense in which one is not truly human except when functioning within a social group, for although he may have developed social skills, unless he is actually exercising them, he is not fulfilling his end or *telos*.<sup>24</sup>

This view sometimes includes the idea that the human being does not really have a nature as such. The person is the set of relationships in which he is involved. That is to say, the essence of humanness is not in some substance or fixed definable nature, but rather in the relationships and network of connections one has with others. Through a fostering of these relationships the individual can become fully human. The church can help a person realize his destiny by providing and encouraging positive and constructive social relationships.

**The Christian View of Man**

We have seen a variety of conceptions of the nature of humanity. None of them is satisfactory as a view by which to live. Some of them, such as the view of man as an animal, may serve well enough as an abstract theory. Yet even the biologist does not think of his newborn child as simply another mammal. Other views fail because even when what from their perspective are the fundamental needs of men (e.g., economic or sexual needs) are met, there is still a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction. Some views, such as the idea of man as a machine, are depersonalizing and therefore frustrating. One can consider these to be satisfactory understandings of man only by disregarding aspects of one's own experience.<sup>25</sup> The Christian view, by contrast, is an alternative compatible with all of our experience.

The Christian view of man, which is the subject of Part Five of this book, is that man is a creature of God, made in the image of God. This means, first, that man is to be understood as having originated not through a chance process of evolution, but through a conscious, pur-

24. Thomas C. Oden, *The Intensive Group Experience* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972).

25. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 305-64.

poseful act by God. Thus there is a reason for man's existence, a reason which lies in the intention of the supreme being.

Second, the image of God is intrinsic to man. Man would not be human without it. The meaning of this concept will be explored in chapter 23. Let it be said for the moment, however, that whatever it is that sets man apart from the rest of the creation, he alone is capable of having a conscious personal relationship with the Creator and of responding to him. Man can know God and understand what the Creator desires of him. Man can love, worship, and obey his Maker. In these responses man is most completely fulfilling his Maker's intention for him, and thus being most fully human, since humanity is defined in terms of the image of God.

Man also has an eternal dimension. He had a finite point of beginning in time. But he was created by an eternal God, and he has an eternal future. Thus, when we ask what is the good for man, we must not answer only in terms of temporal welfare or physical comfort. There is another (and in many senses more important) dimension to man which must be fulfilled. Consequently, no favor is done to man if he is sheltered from thinking about the issues of eternal destiny.

Yet man, to be sure, as a part of the physical creation and the animal kingdom, has the same needs as do the other members of those groups. Our physical welfare is important. It is of concern to God, and should therefore be of concern to us as well. Man is also a unified being; thus pain or hunger can affect his ability to focus upon his spiritual life. And he is a social being, placed within society to function in relationships.

Man cannot discover his real meaning by regarding himself and his happiness as the highest of all values, nor can he find happiness, fulfillment, or satisfaction by going out in search of it. His value has been conferred upon him by a higher source, and he is fulfilled only when serving and loving that higher being. It is then that satisfaction comes, as a by-product of commitment to God. It is then that one realizes the truth of Jesus' statement, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Many of the questions being asked directly or implicitly by contemporary culture are answered by the Christian view of man. In addition, this view gives the individual a sense of identity. The image of man as a machine leads to the feeling that we are insignificant cogs, unnoticed and unimportant. The Bible, however, indicates that everyone is valuable and is known to God: every hair of our head is numbered (Matt. 10:28-31). Jesus spoke of the shepherd who, although he had ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold, went and sought the one that was missing (Luke 15:3-7). That is how each human is regarded by God.

The contention that we are advancing here is that the Christian view of man is more pertinent to him than is any competing view. This image of man accounts for the full range of human phenomena more completely and with less distortion than does any other view. And this view more than any other approach to life enables man to function in ways that are deeply satisfying to him in the long run.

The psalmist asked:

What is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?  
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honor.  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet. [Ps. 8:4-6]

What is man? Yes, that is a most important question. And it is a question to which the biblical revelation gives the best of answers.

22

## The Origin of Humanity

[The Meaning of "Origin"](#)

[The Status of Adam and Eve](#)

[Views of Human Beginning](#)

[Naturalistic Evolution](#)

[Fiat Creationism](#)

[Deistic Evolution](#)

[Theistic Evolution](#)

[Progressive Creationism](#)

[The Age of Man](#)

[Four Conservative Views](#)

[The Problem of the Neolithic Elements in Genesis 4](#)

[The Theological Meaning of Human Creation](#)

### The Meaning of "Origin"

When we speak of man's origin, we are speaking of something more than merely his beginning. For "beginning" refers simply to the fact of coming into being. Thus, to speak of the "beginning of man" is merely a scientific type of reference to the fact that man came into being, and perhaps to the way in which he came into being. "Origin," however,

carries the connotation of the purpose of man's coming into being. In terms of individual existence, the beginning of each person's life is the same: it occurs when a male's sperm combines with an ovum from a female. But, from an earthly point of view, the origin of every life is not the same. As a matter of fact, in some cases it might be considered incorrect to speak of origin. For while some births are the result of definite planning and desire by two persons to have a child, others are the undesired product of a physical union of two persons, perhaps the consequence of carelessness. Theology does not ask merely how humans came to be on the face of the earth, but why, or what purpose lies behind their presence here. When man's presence on earth is viewed merely from the perspective of beginning, there is little guidance regarding what man is or what he is to do, but in the framework of purpose, a clearer and more complete understanding of the nature of man emerges. The biblical picture of man's origin is that an all-wise, all-powerful, and good God created the human race to love and serve him, and to enjoy a relationship with him.

### The Status of Adam and Eve

Genesis contains two accounts of God's creation of man. The first, in 1:26–27, simply records (1) God's decision to make man, God's own image and likeness, and (2) God's action implementing this decision. Nothing is said about the materials or method used. The first account places more emphasis upon the purpose or reason for the creation of man; namely, man was to be fruitful and multiply (v. 28) and have dominion over the earth. The second account, Genesis 2:7, is quite different: "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Here the emphasis seems to be upon the way in which God created.

Numerous differing interpretations of the status of the first pair of humans have been formulated and promulgated. There has been sharp divergence over whether Adam and Eve are to be regarded as actual historical persons, or as merely symbolic. The traditional view has been that they were actual persons and that the events in the biblical account took place within space and time. This has been challenged by a number of theologians, however.

One of those who most emphatically rejected this view was Emil Brunner. Unlike Karl Barth, Brunner recognized that the historicity of the account of Adam and Eve is an important question. Barth had said that the really important question is not whether the serpent in Paradise

had actually spoken but what the serpent said.<sup>1</sup> Brunner, however, regarded this as merely a clever evasion of a question which should not be evaded. The question needs to be asked, and not merely for apologetic purposes but for theological purposes as well.<sup>2</sup>

According to Brunner, the story of Adam and Eve must be given up on both external and internal grounds. By external grounds he meant the empirical considerations. The evidence of natural science, such as biological evolution, of paleontology, and of history conflicts with the ecclesiastical tradition. In particular, the further back the period of time being investigated by means of empirical research, the less we find the nature of man distinctively higher than (or even as high as) what we now observe about us. While the idea of a past golden age is required by the ecclesiastical view, with its teaching that man was originally created perfect and innocent and only later fell into sin, the scientific evidence indicates an ever more primitive form of man the further back we go. This is not to say that evolution is a firmly established fact. But it is to acknowledge that our glimpse of the early history of the human race, which is at best a faint and dim picture, does not fit the biblical portrait of Adam and Eve. Thus Brunner felt that the church must abandon the belief that they were actual persons, since it has subjected the church to nothing but scorn and ridicule.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the external reasons, Brunner advanced internal reasons, which he considered actually more important. The real problem with the ecclesiastical view is that it maintains that the account of Adam and Eve is on the plane of empirical history. When so regarded, the biblical account is at odds with the scientific explanation of human beginnings. This means that someone who holds to the scientific explanation cannot hold to any of the content of the Christian or biblical account. As long as it is thought that the intent of the biblical account is to provide a factual explanation, anyone who accepts the scientific view can do nothing short of abandoning the biblical account. This holds true for those who espouse a mechanistic naturalism as well as for those who, uncomfortable with it, substitute a type of idealistic evolutionism, such as that of Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Hegelian theologians.<sup>4</sup>

Brunner held that there is no loss in abandoning the view that the account of Adam and Eve records historical events. On the contrary, abandoning this view is a necessary purification of our doctrine of man for its own sake rather than for the sake of science. As long as the biblical

1. Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 190.

2. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), p. 88, n. 1.

3. Ibid., pp. 85-86.

4. Ibid., pp. 86-87.

account is thought to be concerned with the two persons who are described there, it really has little to do with anyone else. Indeed, it has little to say to and about us. When it is freed from the traditional ecclesiastical view, however, it is possible for us to see that the biblical discussion of human origins is not about a certain man Adam who lived long ago. Rather, it is about you and me and everyone else in the world.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways Brunner's approach likens the creation account to a parable, such as that of the prodigal son. If "The Prodigal Son" is thought of as an actual historical account, then it is merely an interesting story about a young man who left home centuries ago. If, on the other hand, it is seen as Jesus intended it to be seen, that is, as a parable, then it is applicable and relevant to us today. It says something about us. Similarly, the story of Adam and Eve should not be taken as a factual record of events in the lives of two real persons. That Adam is given a name is not significant here, for *Adam* actually means "man." The Genesis account, then, is not about two persons who lived long ago. What is recorded there as having happened to Adam and Eve is actually true of each of us today.

How shall we regard this interpretation? Does it matter whether the story of Adam and Eve is taken as a historical record about an actual pair of people at the beginning of the human race, or as a representative account about all of us? The question is not simply how the writer of the account regarded it, for some might say that the perspective that Adam and Eve were historical is the form in which the writer expressed the doctrine contained in the account. This form could be changed without losing the essence of the doctrine. But is the perspective that Adam and Eve were historical figures merely the form of expression of the doctrine of the origin of man, or is it somehow of its essence?

One approach to this issue is to examine how the New Testament views Adam. It is true that the word *Adam* may be taken as a general or class term ("man") rather than a proper name. However, in two passages, Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul relates human sinfulness to Adam in a way which makes it difficult to regard "Adam" as merely a representative term. In Romans 5:12–21 Paul refers several times to the trespass of "one man." He also refers to the obedience, grace, and righteousness of "the one man Jesus Christ." Paul is drawing a parallel between the one man Adam and the one man Jesus Christ. Note that the negative side of Paul's doctrinal exposition rests on the facticity of Adam. Sin, guilt, and death are universal facts of human existence; they are essential parts of Paul's doctrine of man. Paul explains that all men die because sin came into the world through one man. Death is a manifes-

5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

tation of the condemnation which came as the consequence of one man's sin. It is difficult indeed to conclude anything other than that Paul believed that Adam was a particular person who committed a sin significant for the rest of the human race. There is no doubt that Paul believed in the historicity of this one man Adam and his sin as emphatically as he did in the one man Jesus and his atoning death.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul's position becomes even more evident. Here Paul says that death came by a man (v. 21), and then makes clear (v. 22) that he is referring to Adam. In verse 45 Paul distinctly refers to "the first man Adam." If one understands the word *Adam* always to mean "man," there is something of a redundancy here, to say the very least. It seems clear enough that Paul thought of Adam as a real, historical person.

For reasons such as those we have just cited, we conclude that not only did the New Testament writers like Paul believe that an actual Adam and Eve existed, but it was an indispensable part of their doctrine of man. But is such a view tenable? What have the scientific data established regarding the origin of the human race? Has a monogenetic beginning from Adam and Eve been precluded? While the answer hinges to a large extent upon one's definition of humanity (a topic we will briefly address later in this chapter), factors of commonality throughout the human race, for example, interfertility, do suggest a common point of origin.

### Views of Human Beginning

If we maintain that God did begin the human race with two persons, Adam and Eve, and that all of humanity have descended from that first pair, we are still faced with the question of how they came to be. Here there are a variety of explanations. The chief difference between them lies in whether they stress cataclysmic or processive elements in man's origin.

On the one hand, conservative orthodoxy has tended to emphasize instantaneity and patently supernaturalistic occurrences. It is thought that God's work is almost always characterized by immediacy and discontinuity, or sharp breaks in natural processes. It is almost as if an event must be obviously supernatural in order to be considered God's work.

Borden Parker Bowne tells a story which is apropos here. An Eastern king asked one of his counselors to give some sign of the wonderful works of God. The counselor told the king to plant four acorns. When the king looked up after planting them, he saw four full-grown trees. Believing that only a moment had elapsed, he thought a miracle had occurred. When the counselor told the king that eighty years had passed, and the king saw that he had grown old and that his garments were now

threadbare, he exclaimed angrily, "Then there is no miracle here." "Oh yes, there is," replied the counselor; "it is God's work, whether he do it in one second or in eighty years."<sup>6</sup> Fundamentalism has sometimes seemed to require immediacy of action, not merely because that is what the Bible teaches, but also because instantaneity seems inherently more supernatural in character. Leonard Verduin speaks of the "ictic."<sup>7</sup>

Liberalism, on the other hand, stresses process. God is viewed as working basically within and through nature. He initiates a process and directs it to its intended goal. He does not intervene; that is, he does not alter from without what he is doing within this process.

What is at stake in the difference between these two views is actually our understanding of God and his relationship to the world. Fundamentalism stresses that God is transcendent and works in a direct or discontinuous fashion. Liberalism, on the other hand, emphasizes that God is immanent and works through natural channels. Each view regards the other as inappropriate. Since God is both transcendent and immanent, however, both emphases should be maintained, that is, to the extent they are taught in the Bible.

#### *Naturalistic Evolution*

There is a variety of views today regarding the origin of the human species. They differ in the places they assign to the biblical and the scientific data. One of these views is naturalistic evolution. This is an attempt to account for man, as well as all other forms of life, without appealing to a supernatural explanation. Immanent processes within nature have produced man and all else that exists. There is no involvement by any divine person, either at the beginning of or during the process.

All that is needed, according to naturalistic evolution, is atoms in motion. A combination of atoms, motion, time, and chance has fashioned what we currently have. These are the givens, posited as the elements producing the result. No attempt is made to account for them—they simply are there, the basis of everything else.

Our world is the result of chance or random combinations of atoms. At the higher levels or later stages of the process, something called "natural selection" is at work. Nature is extremely prolific. It produces many more offspring of any given species than can possibly survive.

6. Borden P. Bowne, *The Immanence of God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), pp. 29-30.

7. Leonard Verduin, *Somewhat Less than God The Biblical View of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 13-19.

Because of a shortage of the necessities of life, there is competition. The best, the strongest, the most adaptive survive; the others do not. As a result, there is a gradual upgrading of the species. In addition, mutations occur. These are sudden variations, novel features which did not appear in the earlier generations of a species. Of the many mutations which occur, most are useless, even detrimental, but a few are truly helpful in the competitive struggle. At the end of a long process of natural selection and useful mutations man arrived on the scene. He is an organism of great complexity and superior abilities, not because someone planned and made him that way, but because these features enabled him to survive. He was the fittest to survive, and so he did.<sup>8</sup>

Although naturalistic evolution is not necessarily the best explanation of the scientific data, it certainly is at least compatible with them. There seems to be nothing from the realm of biology, anthropology, or paleontology that absolutely contradicts it; on the other hand, these disciplines do not offer material to support its every contention either. In such cases it becomes necessary to assume some of the generally accepted laws of nature, such as uniformitarianism. But the real difficulty arises when we try to reconcile this view with the biblical teaching. Surely, if the opening chapters of Genesis say anything at all, they affirm that a personal being was involved in the origin of man. The human race is his doing.

#### *Fiat Creationism*

At the opposite end of the spectrum is what is sometimes termed fiat creationism. This is the idea that God, by a direct act, brought into being virtually instantaneously everything that is. Note two features of this view. One is the brevity of time involved, and hence the relative recency of what occurred at creation. While there were various stages of creation, one occurring after another, no substantial amount of time elapsed from the beginning to the end of the process. Perhaps a calendar week or so was involved. Another tenet of this view is the idea of direct divine working. God produced the world and everything in it, not by the use of any indirect means or biological mechanisms, but by direct action and contact. In each case, or at each stage, God did not employ previously existing material. New species did not arise as modifications of existing species, but they were fresh starts, so to speak, specially created by God. Each species was totally distinct from the others. Specifically, God made

8. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 6th London ed. (Chicago: Thompson and Thomas, n.d.), p. 473.

man in his entirety by a unique, direct creative act; man did not come from any previously existing organism."

It should be apparent that there is no difficulty in reconciling fiat creationism with the biblical account. Indeed, this view reflects a strictly literal reading of the text, which is the way the account was understood for a long time in the history of the church. The statement that God brought forth each animal and plant after its kind has traditionally been interpreted as meaning that he created each species individually. It must be pointed out, however, that the Hebrew noun *מִנָּה* (*min*), which is rendered "kind" in most translations, is simply a general term of division. It may mean species, but there is not enough specificity about the word to conclude that it does. Therefore, we cannot claim that the Bible *requires* fiat creationism; nevertheless, it is clear that it most certainly *permits* it.

It is at the point of the scientific data that fiat creationism encounters difficulty. For when those data are taken seriously, they appear to indicate a considerable amount of development, including what seem to be transitional forms between species. There are even some forms which appear to be ancestors of the human species.

#### *Deistic Evolution*

Although the term is rarely heard, deistic evolution is perhaps the best way to describe one variety of what is generally called theistic evolution. This is the view that God began the process of evolution, producing the first matter and implanting within the creation the laws which its development has followed. Thus, he programmed the process. Then he withdrew from active involvement with the world, becoming, so to speak, Creator emeritus. The progress of the created order is free of direct influence by God. He is the Creator of everything, but only the first living form was directly created. All the rest of God's creating has been done indirectly. God is the Creator, the ultimate cause, but evolution is the means, the proximate cause. Thus, except for its view of the very beginning of matter, deistic evolution is identical to naturalistic evolution, for it denies that there is any direct activity by a personal God during the ongoing creative process.

Deistic evolution has little difficulty with the scientific data. There is a different story with respect to the biblical material, however. There is a definite conflict between deism's view of an absentee God and the biblical

9. Walter E. Lammerts, ed., *Why Not Creation?* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970); idem, *Scientific Studies in Special Creation* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971).

picture of a God who has been involved in not merely one but a whole series of creative acts. In particular, both of the Genesis accounts of the origin of man indicate that God definitely and distinctly willed and acted to bring man into existence. In addition, deistic evolution is in conflict with the scriptural doctrine of providence, according to which God is personally and intimately concerned with and involved in what is going on in the specific events within his entire creation.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Theistic Evolution*

Theistic evolution has much in common with deistic evolution, but goes beyond it in terms of God's involvement in and with his creation. God began the process by bringing the first organism to life. He then continued by working internally toward his goal for the creation. At some point, however, he also acted supernaturally, intervening to modify the process, but employing already existing materials. God created the first human being, but in doing so utilized an existing creature. God created a human soul, and infused it into one of the higher primates, transforming this creature into the first human. Thus, while God specially created the spiritual nature of Adam, man's physical nature is a product of the process of evolution.

Theistic evolution has no great difficulty with the scientific data, since it teaches that the physical dimension of man arose through evolution. Thus it can accommodate any amount of evidence of continuity within the process which resulted in man. With respect to the biblical data, theistic evolution often holds to an actual primal pair, Adam and Eve. When this is the case, there is no difficulty reconciling theistic evolution with Paul's teaching regarding the sinfulness of the race. In dealing with the opening chapters of Genesis, one of two strategies is followed. Either it is asserted that Genesis says nothing specific about the manner of man's origin, or the passage is regarded as symbolic. In the latter case, "dust" (2:7), for example, is not taken literally. Rather, it is interpreted as a symbolic reference to some already existing creature, a lower form than man. This particular interpretation will warrant further scrutiny after we have examined the final option.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Progressive Creationism*

Progressive creationism sees the creative work of God as a combination of a series of *de novo* creative acts and an immanent or processive

10. For an exposition of deistic evolution see Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1969 reprint of the 1844 edition).

11. On theistic evolution see Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 466-67.

operation. God at several points, rather widely separated in time, created *de novo* (i.e., he created afresh). On those occasions he did not make use of previously existing life, simply modifying it. While he might have brought into being something quite similar to an already existing creation, there were a number of changes and the product of his work was a completely new creature.

Between these special acts of creation, development took place through the channels of evolution. For example, it is possible that God created the first member of the horse family, and the various species of the family then developed through evolution. This is "intrakind" development (microevolution), not "interkind" development (macroevolution). For with respect to the biblical statement that God made every creature after its kind we have already observed that the Hebrew word יְמֵן is rather vague, so that it is not necessarily to be identified with biological species. It may be considerably broader than that. Moreover, considerable amounts of time are available for microevolution to have occurred, since the word יוֹם (*yom*), which is translated "day," may also be much more freely rendered.<sup>12</sup>

According to progressive creationism, when the time came for man to be brought into existence, God made him directly and completely. God did not make him out of some lower creature. Rather, both the physical and spiritual nature of man were specially created by God. The Bible tells us that God made man from the "dust" of the ground. This dust need not be actual physical soil. It may be some elementary pictorial representation which was intelligible to the first readers.

Progressive creationism agrees with fiat creationism in maintaining that the entirety of man's nature was specially created. It disagrees, however, in holding that there was a certain amount of development in creation after God's original direct act. It agrees with naturalistic evolution, deistic evolution, and theistic evolution in seeing development within the creation, but insists that there were several *de novo* acts of creation within this overall process. And although it agrees with theistic evolution that man is the result of a special act of creation by God, it goes beyond that view by insisting that this special creative act encompassed man's entire nature, both physical and spiritual.

Given the assumptions and tenets of this book, the two most viable options are theistic evolution and progressive creationism. Both have been and are held by committed Bible-believing scholars, and each can assimilate or explain both the biblical and the empirical data. The ques-

**12.** On progressive creationism see Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 236-42.

tion is, Which can do this more completely, more smoothly, with less distortion of the material being dealt with?

To answer this question, it is important to ask what type of literary material we have in Genesis 1 and 2. Are there symbolic elements in the creation account? Quite likely we are dealing with a genre in which not every object is to be understood as simply that object. Note, for example, that the tree in the Garden of Eden is not merely a tree, but "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." It is quite possible as well that the dust which was used in the formation of Adam was not merely dust, but actually the inanimate building blocks from which organic matter and hence life come. But suppose we interpret dust to symbolize, as the theistic evolutionist would have it, some previously existing living creature. What then?

One question which must be faced is whether the symbolism is consistent. The word *dust* (*my, 'aphar*) occurs not only in Genesis 2:7 but also in 3: 19, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." If we understand it in 2:7 to represent an already existing creature, we are faced with two choices: either the meaning of the term must be different in 3:19 (and in 3:14 as well), or we have the rather ludicrous situation that upon death one reverts to an animal. It should be noted that in those severe degenerative cases where a person becomes virtually subhuman, the change occurs prior to actual death. It would be better, then, to let the reference to dust in 3: 19 (the clearer) interpret that in 2:7 (the less clear).

A second problem for the theistic evolutionist is the expression "and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The words translated 'living being' are נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (*nephesh chayuh*), which is the very expression used to denote the other creatures which God had earlier made (1:20, 21, 24). As we have seen, theistic evolution claims that the physical dimension of man developed from one of those earlier creatures. It follows that, like its progenitor, the physical dimension of man (which God infused with a soul) must necessarily already have been a living being. But this tenet of theistic evolution contradicts the statement in Genesis 2:7 that man *became* a living being when God formed him and breathed into him the breath of life.

One other argument sometimes advanced against theistic evolution is that it militates against the unity of human personality. But the unity between the physical and spiritual dimensions of man does not seem to be sufficiently absolute to disprove the theory that the two dimensions originated in different ways.

Despite the weakness of the third argument, the first two considerations do seem significant enough to render theistic evolution a less viable position than progressive creationism. While the latter view is not totally without difficulties, it does a better job of explaining and integrating the

biblical and scientific data, and therefore must be considered more adequate than theistic evolution.

### The Age of Man

One additional question that needs to be asked concerns the age of man. When did man, and specifically man as he is depicted in the Bible, first appear upon the earth? Evangelical or conservative Christians have answered this question in several different ways. In part our answer will depend upon our definition of man.

#### *Four Conservative Views*

1. The issue is of no consequence. Either we cannot determine the age of man, or it would make no particular difference if we could. B. B. War-field once wrote: "The question of the antiquity of man has of itself no theological significance. It is to theology, as such, a matter of entire indifference how long man has existed on earth."<sup>13</sup> It is doubtful whether War-field would approve of the use to which this statement has sometimes been put; nevertheless, it does appear that he did not give the issue a high priority.

2. Tool-making is the mark of man. The ability to conceive, fashion, and utilize tools is what distinguishes man from subhuman creatures. If this is the criterion, then man's origin is to be dated quite early, perhaps 500,000 to 2 million years ago.<sup>14</sup>

3. The practice of burial of the dead is what sets man apart from other creatures. If this is the criterion, the first man is to be identified with Neanderthal man and dated about 50,000 years ago.<sup>15</sup>

4. Man is distinguished by the presence and use of complex symbolism or, more specifically, of language. While the making of tools and burial of the dead point to a fairly sophisticated pattern of behavior, it is language which makes possible the type of relationship with God which would be experienced by a being created in the image of God. On this basis, one can correlate the beginning of man in the full biblical sense with the evidence of a great cultural outburst about 30,000 to 40,000

13. Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Antiquity and Unity of the Human Race," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), p. 238.

14. Donald R. Wilson, "How Early Is Man?" *Christianity Today*, 14 September 1962, pp. 27-28 (1175-76).

15. Paul H. Seeley, "Adam and Anthropology: A Proposed Solution," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 22, no. 3 (September 1970): 89.

years ago. The first man is not to be identified with Neanderthal man, but somewhat later, probably with Cro-Magnon man.<sup>16</sup>

The problem of the age of man is not easily solved. One answer sometimes given to the question of where Adam fits in the paleontological record is, "Tell me what Adam looked like, and I'll tell you where he fits in that chain." Of course that semifacetious answer does not come to grips with the real problem.

The first view summarized above is untenable. It does matter when Adam was created, for there are phenomena in the description of his immediate descendants in Genesis 4 which are identifiable as Neolithic. As we correlate the biblical record of Adam and his descendants with the data of anthropology, there arise various issues which must be dealt with by the discipline of apologetics.

The second view, which regards tool-making as the distinguishing mark of man, also seems less than fully adequate. Its basic thesis has been challenged by various findings. For example, Jane Goodall observed chimpanzees breaking off twigs, stripping them of leaves, and using them to probe termite hills for food. The chimpanzees carried the twigs as far as half a mile as they went from one hill to another. Goodall concluded, "In so doing ... the chimpanzee has reached the first crude beginnings of tool-making. ... It is unlikely that this pattern of fishing for termites is an inborn behavior pattern."<sup>17</sup>

The third view theorizes that burial of the dead is a sign of the presence of the image of God in man. James Murk, however, argues that this practice evidences only a fear of the unknown, which in turn presupposes only imagination. It does not follow that a moral sense is involved, and indeed religion and ethics are treated separately in the anthropological literature, because the two often do not coincide.<sup>18</sup>

That leaves the fourth view, which seems to have the fewest difficulties. The growth in culture from about 30,000 years ago is best understood as the result of the beginning of language at that time. This has been asserted by Bertram S. Kraus: "It seems most likely that Man could not have produced, sustained, and altered culture without the ability to transmit his experiences and knowledge to his offspring other than by example."<sup>19</sup>

The biblical record appears to indicate that Adam and Eve possessed

16. James W. Murk, "Evidence for a Late Pleistocene Creation of Man," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 17, no. 2 (June 1965): 37-49.

17. Jane Goodall and Hugo van Lawick, "My Life Among Wild Chimpanzees," *National Geographic Magazine* 124 (August 1963): 307-08.

18. Murk, "Evidence," pp. 46-47.

19. Bertram S. Kraus, *The Basis of Human Evolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 282.

language from the very beginning. Communication with one another and with God presupposed possession of language. (Note that accepting this view entails denying that burial of the dead is a sign of the moral sense that is part of the image of God.)

#### *The Problem of the Neolithic Elements in Genesis 4*

If we accept the view that it is language which distinguishes man from other creatures and hence the first man appeared about 30,000 years ago, an additional problem, to which we have already alluded, still remains: the problem of the Neolithic elements in Genesis 4. If Adam was created 30,000 years ago, if Cain and Abel were his immediate descendants, if we find genuinely Neolithic practices (e.g., agriculture) in Genesis 4, and if the Neolithic period began about 10,000 to 8,000 years ago, then we have the problem of a gap of at least 20,000 years between generations, the ultimate in generation gaps. Several suggested solutions have been offered:

1. The pre-Adamite theory says that Adam was the first human in the full biblical sense, but was not the first human in the anthropological sense. There were genuine representatives of *Homo sapiens* before him.<sup>20</sup>
  2. Cain and Abel were not immediate descendants of Adam. They may have been several generations removed from him. It is even conceivable that the narrative condenses the stories of several individuals into one-Cain the son of Adam, Cain the murderer, and Cain the city builder.<sup>21</sup>
  3. In the creation account (e.g., Gen. 1:26; 2:7) the Hebrew word אָדָם ('adam), which is often used symbolically of the entire human race, refers to the first man, who is anonymous. In other passages (e.g., Gen. 4:1; 5:3) it is a proper noun pointing to a specific individual who came later.<sup>22</sup>
  4. "Perhaps Cain and Abel were not really *domesticators* of plants and animals but rather in the language of Moses, and particularly of our translations, would only *appear* to be such. Their [Cain's and Abel's] respective concerns with vegetable and animal provision might have been vastly more primitive."<sup>23</sup>
20. E. K. Victor Pearce, *Who Was Adam?* (Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1970).
21. F. K. Farr, "Cain," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1937), vol. 1, pp. 538-39.
22. Seeley, "Adam and Anthropology," p. 89.
23. James O. Buswell III, "Adam and Neolithic Man," *Eternity* 18, no. 2 (February 1967): 39.

5. The domestication of plants and animals may be much more remote in time than the Neolithic period. Thus, Adam and his descendants could have practiced agriculture 30,000 years ago.<sup>24</sup>

None of these theories seems completely satisfactory. All have some hermeneutical problems, but they appear more severe for views (1) through (3). In addition, in view (1) the pre-Adamites would seem to be fully human. But if that is the case, how are we to account for Paul's statement in Romans 5 that sin and death have come upon the entirety of the human race because of Adams sin? This seems to argue for a monogenistic origin of the human race-all humans are derived from Adam. For these reasons, I lean more toward view (4) or (5). But this is an area in which there are insufficient data to make any categorical statements; it will require much additional study.

#### **The Theological Meaning of Human Creation**

Now that we have discussed the basic content of the doctrine of human creation, we must determine its theological meaning. Several points need special attention and interpretation.

1. That man was created means that he has no independent existence. He came into being because God willed that he should exist, and acted to bring him into being. Man has received his life from God and continues to experience and enjoy life because of divine provision. There is nothing necessary about his existence. Man is a contingent being, not an indispensable part of reality. Nor does man ever come to the point where he is truly independent of God. He may declare himself to be, and may conduct himself as if he is, but that does not alter the fact that his very life and each breath that he continues to take are from God.

This should cause man to ask the reason for his existence. Why did God put him here, and what is he to do in light of that purpose? Since we would not be alive but for God, everything we have and are derives from him. If we come from God, then all the adjectives which apply to us are also ultimately dependent upon him as well. So stewardship does not mean giving God a part of what is ours, some of our time or some of our money. All of our life is rightfully his, by virtue of our origin and his continued ownership of us. It has been entrusted to us for our use, but it still belongs to God and must be used to serve and glorify him.

This means that man is not the ultimate value. Man's value is derived

24. T. C. Mitchell, "Archaeology and Genesis I-XI," *Faith and Thought* 91 (Summer 1959): 42.

from, and conferred upon him by, a higher value, God. Thus the essential question in evaluating anything is not whether it contributes to man's pleasure and comfort, but whether it contributes to God's glory and the fulfilment of his plan. Man is not at the center of the universe. He exists only because someone far greater brought him into being.

This also helps to establish man's identity. If who we are is at least partly a function of where we have come from, the key to man's identity will be found in the fact that God created him. He is not merely the offspring of human parents, nor the result of chance factors at work in the world. He came into existence as a result of an intelligent being's conscious intention and plan. Man's identity is at least partially a matter of fulfilling that divine plan.

Man is a creation of God, not an outflow from him. Man is not a part of divinity. He has the limitations of finitude. He does not know all, and is not able to do all. Although the aim of the Christian life is to be spiritually one with God, man will always be metaphysically separate from God. Thus, he should not aim at losing his individual human identity. It is good for man to be separate from God and other than God, for that is the way God made him.

2. Man is part of the creation. As different as man is from God's other created beings, he is not so sharply distinguished from the rest of them as to have no relationship with them. He is part of the sequence of creation, as are the other beings. He was brought into existence on one of the days of creation, as were the others. In fact, he was created on the same day (the sixth) as were the land animals.

As we noted earlier in this work, there is a large metaphysical gap within the span of being.<sup>25</sup> This gap, however, is not between man and the rest of the creatures. It is between God on the one hand, and all of the creatures on the other. The origin of man on one of the days of creation links him far more closely with all the other created beings than with the God who did the creating.

This means that there is a very real kinship between man and the rest of the creatures. They are not something totally alien to him. Because in a sense all creatures are man's kin, there should be a harmony between man and the rest of the creatures. In actual practice this may not be the case, but it is the human, and not the rest of the creation, that has introduced the disharmony.

When taken seriously, man's kinship with the rest of creation has a definite impact. Ecology takes on a rich meaning. The word derives from the Greek *oikos*, which means 'house.' Thus, "ecology" points up the idea that there is one great household. What man does to one part of it affects

other parts as well, a truth that is becoming painfully clear to us as we find pollution harming human lives, and the destruction of certain natural predators leaving pests a relatively unhampered opportunity.

The truth that we are kin to the rest of creation also tells us that we are to be humane. The other living creatures may be used as food for man. They are not, however, to be destroyed wastefully for the sheer pleasure of it. Those other creatures are distant relatives of ours, for they have been created by the same God. The welfare of those other creatures is important to God, and it should be to man as well. They are not merely beings, but as creatures of the almighty God they are our fellows. Just as we have a concern and engage in concrete action for the welfare of other humans, because we are one with them, so should our behavior be toward all the rest of the creation.

That we are part of creation also means that man has much in common with the other creatures. He is not a god, and so he has the same types of needs as do the animals. Because we do have much in common with them, there is some validity in behaviorism's attempt to understand man by studying animals. For just like animals man and his motivations are subject to the laws of creation.

3. Man, however, has a unique place in the creation. As we have noted, man is a creature and thus shares much with the rest of the creatures. But there is an element which makes him unique, which sets him apart from the rest of the creatures. They are all said to be made "according to their kind." He, on the other hand, is described as made in the image and likeness of God. He is placed over the rest of the creation, to have dominion over it. He cannot in every respect be likened to the whole of creation. While subject to the laws governing created beings, he transcends those other beings and their status, for there is more to humanity than just creaturehood. The details of this extra dimension will be treated more fully in the following chapter. The point here is that man cannot restrict his self-understanding to his creaturehood, or excuse his improper behavior by blaming instincts and drives. There is a higher level to his being, a level which sets him apart from the rest of the creation.

This means, too, that man is not fulfilled when all of his animal needs have been satisfied. Human life consists of much more than just the satisfaction of the needs for food, clothing, and perhaps pleasure. The transcendent element designated by the unique way in which man is described and thus distinguished from the various other creatures must be kept in mind as well.

4. There is a brotherhood among men. One of the great theological debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concerned the extent of the fatherhood of God and hence the extent of the brotherhood of men. Liberals insisted that there is a universal brotherhood

25. See p. 378.

among men, and conservatives equally emphatically maintained that only those who are in Christ are spiritual brothers. Actually, both were correct. The doctrine of creation and of the descent of the entire human race from one original pair means that we are all related to one another. In a sense, each of us is a distant cousin to everyone on this earth. We are not totally unrelated. The negative side of our common descent is that in the natural state all persons are rebellious children of the heavenly Father, and thus are estranged from him and from one another. We are all like the prodigal son.

The truth of universal brotherhood, if fully understood and acted upon, should produce a concern and empathy for our fellow men. We have a tendency to feel more strongly the needs and hurts of our close friends and relatives. The hardships of strangers do not grip us so fully. We are able to be fairly blasé about murders, fatal auto accidents, and the like as long as no one we know is involved. If, however, we discover that one of our loved ones died in the incident, we feel deep grief. But the doctrine of the brotherhood of all men tells us that all human beings are our relatives. We are not to see them primarily as our rivals but as fellow humans. We are one with them in the most basic sense—our origin. We therefore ought to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, even if they are not fellow Christians.

5. Man is not the highest object in the universe. Man's value is great, for he is, with the exception of the angels, the highest of the creatures. This status is conferred upon him, however, by the highest being, God. For all of the respect which we have for humanity, and the special recognition which we accord to humans of distinction or accomplishment, we must always remember that they, their lives, their abilities, their strengths, have been given by God. We must never elevate our respect for humans to the point of virtually worshiping them. Worship is to be given to God alone; when offered to any other person or object, it is idolatry. We must be careful to give the ultimate credit and glory to God. Similarly, we will not accept a type of adulation which God alone deserves.<sup>26</sup> Even love for fellow man must not compete with love for God, for the first commandments pertain to our relationship to God (Exod. 20:3–11), and the command to love one's God with all one's being precedes the command to love one's neighbor as one's self (Matt. 22:37–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:27–28). Indeed, love for God is part of the motivation for love for man, who is created in God's image. And just like our love for man, human accomplishments must be kept in proper perspective. As wonderful as is much that man has achieved, such achievements

26. Herod accepted the adulation of the crowd ("the voice of a god, and not of man!"). Because he failed to give God the glory, he was struck dead (Acts 12:20–23).

are possible only because of the life, intelligence, and talents that God has bestowed on his creature, man.

6. There are definite limitations upon man. Man is a creature, not God, and has the limitations that go with being finite. Only the Creator is infinite. Man does not and cannot know everything. While we ought to seek to know all that we can, and ought to admire and esteem great knowledge wherever it is possessed and displayed, our finiteness means that our knowledge will always be incomplete and subject to error. This should impart a certain sense of humility to all our judgments, as we realize that it is always possible that we might be wrong, no matter how impressive our fund of facts may seem.

Finiteness also pertains to our lives. Whether man as he was created would have died had he not sinned is a subject of debate (see pp. 61–13). We do know, however, that man was susceptible to becoming subject to death. That is, if he was immortal, it was a conditional immortality. Thus, man is not inherently immortal. And as presently constituted, he must face death (Heb. 9:27). Even in man's original state, any possibility of living forever depended on God. Only God is inherently eternal; all else dies.

Finiteness means that there are practical limitations to all of our accomplishments. While man has made great progress in such matters as physical feats, the progress is not unlimited. Man may now execute a high jump of seven feet, but it is unlikely that anyone will, within our atmosphere, ever jump a thousand feet without the aid of some sort of rocket equipment. Other areas of accomplishment, whether intellectual, physical, or whatever, have similar practical limitations upon them.

7. Limitation is not inherently bad. There is a tendency to bemoan the fact of man's finiteness. Some, indeed, maintain that this is the cause of human sin. If man were not limited, he would always know what is right, and would do it. Were man not encumbered by finiteness, he would be able to do better. But the Bible indicates that having made man with the limitations which go with creaturehood, God looked at the creation and pronounced it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The human race was limited, but pronounced good. Finiteness may well lead to sin if we fail to accept our limitation and to live accordingly, as we shall observe shortly. But the mere fact of our limitation does not inevitably produce sin. Rather, improper responses to that limitation either constitute or result in sin.

There are those who feel that the sinfulness of man is a carry-over from earlier stages of his evolution but is gradually being left behind. As our knowledge and ability increase, we will become less sinful. That, however, does not prove true. In actual practice, increases in sophistication seem instead to give man opportunity for more ingenious means of sinning. One might think that the tremendous growth in computer tech-

nology, for example, would result in solutions to many basic human problems and thus in a more righteous human being. While such technology is indeed often used for beneficial purposes, man's greed has also led to new and ingenious forms of theft both of money and information by the use of computer. Reduction of man's limitations, then, does not lead inevitably to better human beings. The conclusion is obvious: man's limitations are not evil in themselves.

8. Proper adjustment in life can be achieved only on the basis of acceptance of one's own finiteness. The fact of our finiteness is clear. We may, however, be unwilling to accept that fact and to accept our place in the scheme of things as creatures of God who are dependent upon him. Adam and Eve's fall consisted at least in part of an aspiration to become like God (Gen. 3:4-6), to know what God knows. There is indication that a similar aspiration underlay the fall of the evil angels (Jude 6). We ought to be willing to let God be God, not seeking to tell him what is right and true, but rather submitting to him and his plan for us. To pass judgment on God's deeds would require an infinite knowledge, something that we simply do not have.

This means that we need not always be right. We need not fear failing. Only God never fails or never makes a mistake. It is not necessary for us, then, to make excuses for our shortcomings or to be defensive because we are not perfect. Yet awareness of our finiteness often leads to feelings of insecurity which we attempt to overcome through our own efforts. Jesus pointed out to his disciples that such attempts to build security by our own efforts will always lead to increased insecurity. We need not be God, for there is a God. We need only to seek his kingdom and his righteousness, and all life's needs will be supplied (Matt. 6:25-34).

A proper humility will follow if we admit to ourselves our finite creatureliness and are willing to live accordingly. A college Bible department once received an application for a teaching position from a person who practiced positive thinking in the extreme. The answers to the questions on the application form dripped with self-promotion, even arrogance, which seemed particularly inappropriate for someone without teaching experience. The impression conveyed was that all problems in the department, perhaps in the entire school, would quickly disappear if the applicant were added to the teaching faculty. The department chairman asked a colleague for his reaction. "Oh," was the response, "I don't think we have a position worthy of this man. In fact," he added, "I don't think there is any position anywhere that is worthy of him. There hasn't been an opening in the Trinity for almost two thousand years."

We are not God. We cannot be God. We need not be God. God does not expect us to be God. Satisfaction and happiness lie in wait for us if we accept this fact, disappointment and frustration if we do not. We are

not beings who should be God but have failed in the attempt. We are what we were intended to be: limited human creatures.

9. Man is, nonetheless, something wonderful. Although a creature, man is the highest among them, the only one made in the image of God. The fact that he has been made by the Lord of the entire universe simply adds to the grandeur of the human by giving him a trademark as it were. Man is not simply a chance production of a blind mechanism, or a by-product or scraps thrown off in the process of making something better. He is an expressly designed product of God.

Sometimes Christians have felt it necessary to minimize the ability and accomplishments of humans in order to give greater glory to God. To be sure, we must put human achievements in their proper context relative to God. But it is not necessary to protect God against competition from his highest creature. Man's greatness can glorify God the more. We should frankly acknowledge that man has done many wondrous things. He is indeed an amazing being, both in what he is and what he can do. But how much greater must be the One who made him!

Man is great, but what makes him great is that God has created him. The name *Stradivari* speaks of quality in a violin; its maker was the best. Even as we admire the instrument, we are admiring all the more the giftedness of the maker. Of man it can be said that he has been made by the best and wisest of all beings, God. A God who could make such a wondrous creature as man is a great God indeed.

Know that the LORD is God!

It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise!  
Give thanks to him, bless his name!

For the LORD is good;  
his steadfast love endures for ever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations. [Ps. 100:3-5]

# 23

## The Image of God in the Human

The Relevant Scripture Passages

Views of the Image

- The Substantive View
- Relational Views
- The Functional View

Evaluation of the Views

Conclusions Regarding the Nature of the Image

Implications of the Doctrine

**A**s important as our answer to the question “Where did man come from?” is to understanding who and what he is, it does not tell us all we need to know. We still must ask just what it is that God brought into being when he created man.

There are various ways in which we might go about attempting to come up with a definition of man. One is to investigate what the Bible has to say about man. We might, if we did so, conclude that man is inherently evil; but we would probably also discover that man is different now from what he was at the time of creation and that something triggered the change to the present condition. Or we might investigate

existent man by various empirical means. We could use the research methods of various behavioral sciences to give us a conception of what man is. This conception would be based on current human behavior.

If we choose to investigate the Bible's depiction of man, we find that man today is actually in an abnormal condition. The real human is not what we now **find** in human society. The real human is the being that came from the hand of God, unspoiled by sin and the fall. In a very real sense, the only true human beings were Adam and Eve before the fall, **and** Jesus. All the others are twisted, distorted, corrupted samples of humanity. It therefore is necessary to look at man in his original state and at Christ if we would correctly assess what it means to be human.

A key expression used in describing the original form of humanity is that God made man in God's own image and likeness. This distinguished man from all the other creatures, for only of man is this expression used. There has been a great amount of discussion on the subject; in fact, some would say it has been discussed too much. Actually, however, the concept is critical because the image of God is what makes man **man**.<sup>1</sup> Our understanding of the image will affect how we treat our fellow humans and how we minister to them. If we understand the image as being primarily human reason, then our dealings with others will be basically of an educative and cognitive nature. If we understand it to consist in personal relationships, our ministry will emphasize "relational theology" and small-group interaction.

In this chapter we will examine the salient biblical passages separately. Then we will look at some representative interpretations of what the expression "the image of God" means. These are attempts to draw the several biblical passages together into a construct. Finally, we will attempt to formulate an understanding which is faithful to the full biblical witness, and to spell out the contemporary significance of the concept.

### The Relevant Scripture Passages

Several biblical passages speak of the image of God. The best-known is probably Genesis 1:26–27: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "*εἰκών*—The Divine Likeness in the OT," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, pp. 390–92; Walter Eichrodt, *Theology Of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), vol. 2, p. 122.

created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Verse 26 is God's statement of intention; it includes the terms *תְּלִזֵּן* (*tselem*) and *תָּמִיד* (*demuth*), which are translated, respectively, "image" and 'likeness.' The former term is repeated twice in verse 27. In Genesis 5:1 we have a recapitulation of what God had done: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God." The writer adds in verse 2: "Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created." The term used here is *תָּמִיד*. In Genesis 9:6 murder is prohibited on the grounds that man was created in God's image: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." This statement governing man's behavior in relation to his fellows was clearly made after the fall. Note that the passage does not say that man still bore the image of God, but only that God had created man in the image of God. Yet it is clear that what God had earlier done still has some bearing or effect, even at this postfall point. Beyond this we find no other explicit references in the Old Testament to the image of God in man, although there are two passages in the Apocrypha which mention it, Wisdom of Solomon 2:23 and Ecclesiasticus 17:3.

In the New Testament two passages refer to the image of God in connection with the creation of man. In 1 Corinthians 11:7 Paul says, "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." Paul does not say that woman is the image of God, but merely points out that she is the glory of man as man is the glory of God. The word for image here is *εἰκών*. And in James 3:9, on the grounds that man is made in the likeness (*όμοιωσις*) of God, the author condemns use of the tongue to curse men: "With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God." There is also something of a suggestion of the image of God in Acts 17:28, although the term is not actually used: "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'

In addition there are several passages in the New Testament which refer to the image of God in connection with what believers are becoming through the process of salvation. Romans 8:29 notes that they are being conformed to the image of the Son: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." In Ephesians 4:23–24 Paul urges, "And be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness

and holiness." Finally, Colossians 3: 10 also refers to putting on "the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."

### Views of the Image

It is necessary to come up with some sort of definition of the image of God. This process will involve not only interpreting individual references, but endeavoring to formulate an integrative understanding of the concept as it is found in the several overt statements as well as in various allusions in Scripture. There are three general ways of viewing the nature of the image. Some consider the image to consist of certain characteristics within the very nature of man, characteristics which may be physical or psychological/spiritual. This view we will call the *substantive view* of the image. Others regard the image not as something inherently or intrinsically present in man, but as the experiencing of a relationship between man and God, or between two or more humans. This is the *relational view*. Finally, some consider the image to be, not something that man is or experiences, but something that he does. This is the *functional view*.

#### *The Substantive View*

The substantive view has been dominant during most of the history of Christian theology. The common element in the several varieties of this view is that the image is identified as some definite characteristic or quality within the makeup of the human. Some have considered the image of God to be an aspect of our physical or bodily makeup. Although this form of the view has never been widespread, it has persisted even to this day. It may be based upon a literal reading of the word **תְּלֵם** (*tselem*), which in its most concrete sense means "statue" or "form."<sup>2</sup> Given this reading, Genesis 1:26 would actually mean something like, "Let us make men who look like us." The Mormons are probably the most prominent current advocates of the position that the image of God is physical. This position does not present them with any real problems, since they hold that God has a body. That is to say, there is no problem for their doctrine of man, but there are certain consequences for their doctrine of God.<sup>3</sup>

2. Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Man* (London: Epworth, 1956), pp. 29-30, 94-95.

3. Le Grand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1958), pp. 16-17.

One might expect that with the emphasis in many circles upon man as a psychosomatic unity, there would be renewed interest in the idea that the image of God is a physical factor in man. This would probably be the case were it not for the fact that most of those who stress the psychosomatic unity of man also tend to neglect the metaphysical. We should also note that there are some who see the image as being a physical feature with metaphorical import. That man walks upright, for example, is taken as a symbol of the moral uprightness or righteousness of God, or of man's relatedness to God.<sup>4</sup>

More-common substantive views of the image of God isolate it in terms of some psychological or spiritual quality in human nature. Here the favorite candidate has been reason. There has been a long history of regarding reason as the unique feature which distinguishes man from the other creatures. Indeed, man is classified biologically as ***Homo sapiens***, the thinking being.

There have been differing degrees of emphasis upon reason. During periods when rationality is highly stressed in society in general, as in the Enlightenment, it is also stressed in theological thinking.<sup>5</sup> During more subjectively oriented times, reason receives less attention. In a period such as the latter part of the twentieth century with its strongly voluntaristic and visceral emphases, reason plays a lesser role. There are also different ways of understanding reason. Under the influence of Platonism, especially from about the fourth through the thirteenth centuries, reason was thought of as abstract contemplation. With the adoption of Aristotelianism by Thomas Aquinas and others, reason came to be thought of as more empirical and scientific in nature.<sup>6</sup> Although the definition of reason may differ, all the views being considered here regard the ability to think, reflect, and deduce as the distinguishing characteristic of mankind. It is in his cognitive, cerebral aspect that man is most like God; therefore, it is to be emphasized and developed.

It is not surprising that reason has been singled out by theologians as the most significant aspect of human nature, for theologians are the segment of the church charged with intellectualizing or reflecting on their faith. Note that in so doing, however, not only have they isolated but one aspect of human nature for consideration, but they have also concentrated their attention upon but one facet of God's nature. This may result in a misapprehension. To be sure, omniscience and wisdom consti-

4. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), p. 388.

5. David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), pp. 58-69.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 1, question 93.

tute a significant dimension of the nature of God, but they are by no means the very essence of divinity!

On the basis of the two terms in Genesis 1:26–27 there gradually developed a tendency to understand “image” and “likeness” as two aspects or dimensions of the image of God. At times there were naturalistic overtones: man was created in God’s image only, but gradually evolved into God’s likeness as well. More commonly, however, the presence of God’s likeness in man was attributed to a spiritual or supernatural cause. Origen, for example, saw the image as something given immediately at the creation, with the likeness to be conferred by God at a later time. It was Irenaeus, however, who gave the distinction between image and likeness a direction which theologians followed for some time. While his statements vary greatly and are not completely consistent, we do occasionally find in them a clear distinction between image and likeness. By the former he meant that Adam had reason and free will; by the latter Irenaeus pointed to some sort of supernatural endowment which Adam possessed through the action of the Spirit. Unlike some later theologians Irenaeus was not thinking of an original righteousness. For in his view Adam was actually somewhat like a child, innocent and undeveloped. Through a long process of making choices, using the free will with which he had been created, he was to grow into what God intended for him, into a fully developed righteousness. As a childlike being, Adam’s likeness to God was present only in germ form, only as a potential of what he was to become. When, however, Adam fell into sin, he lost the likeness, although the image persisted at least to some degree.<sup>7</sup>

In medieval scholastic theologizing, Irenaeus’s distinction was expanded and developed further. Now the difference was clarified and the effects of the fall isolated. The image was man’s natural resemblance to God, the powers of reason and will. The likeness was a *donum superadditum-a divine gift added to basic human nature*. This likeness consisted of the moral qualities of God, whereas the image involved the natural attributes of God. When man fell, he lost the likeness, but the image remained fully intact. Man as man was still complete, but man as a good and holy being was spoiled. The supernatural or superhuman qualities were lost, but not the essence of human nature.

This perspective of course involves a conception of the nature of sin and the fall, but it also involves a definite idea of the nature of man. One’s human nature is unitary and relatively immune to the damaging effects of the fall. Even non-Christians and marginal believers are as fully human as are sanctified believers. All men possess the ability to evaluate evidence, to recognize the truth, to choose on the basis of knowledge of the

7. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5. 6. 1.

truth. This leaves open the possibility of a rational or natural theology—even without special revelation all persons are able to gain some true knowledge of God. It also leaves open the possibility of a natural ethic. Being free, man is capable of doing some good works apart from grace. On the seemingly innocent distinction that while the likeness of God was lost, the image was not, leaving open the possibility of a natural theology and a natural ethic, the whole system of Catholic theology was built.<sup>8</sup>

→ Martin Luther reacted against this feature of Catholic theology, as against much else within it. As a professor of biblical studies, Luther was skilled in exegesis. He saw that the difference in terminology which led to the conclusion that the image of God remained intact in man (only the likeness was lost) is not really a difference at all. “Image” and “likeness” in Genesis 1:26 do not have separate referents. Rather, this is simply an instance of the common Hebrew practice of parallelism. The phrases “in our image” and “after our likeness” are saying the same thing; the only difference is in the terminology. Consequently, there is no distinction between image and likeness either before or after the fall.<sup>9</sup>

Luther propounded a unitary view of the image of God. All aspects of the image of God in man have been corrupted; what is left is a relic or remnant of the image. This relic does not consist of certain qualities or powers which remained intact in distinction from others which were completely lost. Fragments, as it were, of all of what constituted the likeness to God remain, but they are only a small portion of the original. The one text which presented some difficulty for Luther was Genesis 9:6. That text seems to imply, although it does not explicitly state, that man, even after the fall, still possesses or remains in the image of God. Luther’s response was that the uncorrupted image still exists as God’s intention for man, but is not actually present in man.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin adopted a view similar in many ways to that of Luther, rejecting the dualistic scholastic view and instead maintaining that a relic of the image remained in man after the fall. Because a relic remained, knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God are interrelated. In knowing ourselves we come to know God, since he has made us in his image.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, we come to know ourselves by measuring ourselves against his holiness. While all things, in a sense, display the image of God, man particularly does so, most notably in his ability to reason.<sup>12</sup>

8. Cairns, *Image of God*, pp. 114-20.

9. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), vol. 1, pp. 60ff.

10. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 141.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapter 1.

12. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), vol. 1, p. 32 (John 1:4).

All of the substantive views we have mentioned, with their widely differing conceptions of the nature of the image of God, agree in one particular: the locus of the image. It is located within man; it is a quality or capacity resident in his nature. Although it is God who conferred the image upon man, it resides in man whether or not he recognizes God's existence or his work.

#### *Relational Views*

Many modern theologians do not conceive of the image of God as something resident within man's nature. Indeed, they do not ordinarily ask what man is, or what sort of a nature he may have. Rather, they think of the image of God as the experiencing of a relationship. Man is said to be in the image or to display the image when he stands in a particular relationship. In fact, that relationship is the image.

One who has given a great deal of attention to this matter is Emil Brunner. He notes how complex a phenomenon man is. It is necessary to find a key if we are to unlock this manifold. Various suggestions have been made, each resulting in a different view of man. When natural causation is regarded as the principle which will best explain the universe, a naturalistic view of man results.<sup>13</sup> When the idea of spirit is regarded as the fundamental principle, a more idealistic view of man emerges.<sup>14</sup> Brunner suggests instead the Word of God as the key, not just epistemologically, but ontologically. That is to say, it is not only that we know from the Word of God what the image of God is; the Word of God actually constitutes man the image of God! Not only is our understanding of man to be shaped by what the Old Testament and New Testament say of him, but it is only when we have faith in Jesus Christ that we fully possess the image of God and thus can truly understand our own nature. By such a statement Brunner is not denying that each of the various sciences has an authoritative word to say in its own domain. Rather, he is suggesting that the closer the various secular disciplines of knowledge come to trying to deal with the question of man's nature, the greater the possibility of their making statements which conflict with authoritative statements of Christian theology.<sup>15</sup>

Brunner distinguishes between two senses of the image of God: the formal and the material. The formal image is the *humanum*, that which makes a person human, distinguishing the human from the animal. The formal image is man's constitution as a rational being, responsible and

13. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, pp. 40-41.

14. Ibid., p. 43.

15. Ibid., pp. 57-63.

free. Man as sinner has not lost this aspect of the image of God. In fact, it is presupposed in the ability to sin. This is what is meant by the Old Testament description of man as being in the image and likeness of God. While man's freedom is limited as compared with God's freedom, it is genuine. The image in this formal sense has not been touched in the least, says Brunner.<sup>16</sup>

The material sense of the image is of greater interest to Brunner, however. Brunner points out that God created all of the other creatures in their final or finished state. They were created what they were meant to be and that they have remained. Man, on the other hand, remains within God's workshop, within his hands. God did not make man in a finished state.<sup>17</sup> Rather, God is producing in man the "material realization" of the freedom, responsibility, and answerability which man has received from God. It is the act of response, the relationship with God, that constitutes the material image. God in effect says to man, "Thou art mine." Man's having been endowed with the capability of being spoken to, and the freedom to respond, is the formal image. When he does indeed respond by saying, "Yes, I am thine," then the material image is also present.<sup>18</sup>

We should not draw the inference that the image is substantive or, as Brunner puts it, structural. He points out that even the formal aspect is not structural; it is relational.<sup>19</sup> Being in the formal image of God means that man stands responsible and answerable before God; hence the image is relational. Even when man turns his back on God, thus losing the image in the material sense, he still stands "before God."<sup>20</sup> He still has responsibility; he is still a human being. Being in the material image of God means "being-in-the-Word" of God. This is the New Testament use of the term "image of God." It hardly needs to be pointed out that the material sense of the image is dynamic and relational, not static and substantive.<sup>21</sup>

Brunner uses the analogy of a mirror to clarify the distinction between the formal and material aspects of the image of God. When we bear the image of God in the material sense, we are in positive and responsive relationship to him. Brunner likens this aspect of the image to the reflection in a mirror. Keep in mind that the reflection is not permanently imprinted upon the surface, for we are speaking of a mirror, not a

16. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), pp. 55-57.

17. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 97.

18. Ibid., p. 98.

19. Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, p. 59.

20. Ibid., p. 60.

21. Ibid., p. 58.

photograph. When turned toward a light, a mirror reflects that light; the mirror is not the source of the light nor does it possess the light. Similarly, when we are turned toward God, we reflect his image fully. But when the mirror is not turned toward the light so as to reflect it, the mirror is still in relation to the light. It is turned away from the light, but still stands before it. In similar fashion man retains the formal aspect of the image of God. He still stands before God. Even though a sinner who rebels and rejects God, man is still responsible to God. Man is still a human being.<sup>22</sup>

Brunner does not restrict his discussion to man's relationship to God. While the first command of God, with which is given the ability to fulfil it, is that we love God, there is a second command—that we love man. Our "responsibility-in-love" begins to be met as we relate to our fellow man. Man cannot be man by himself. It is not the brilliance of one's intellectual endeavors, but loving one's fellow man that constitutes genuine humanity.<sup>23</sup>

Nor does Brunner restrict the image of God to man's spiritual nature. Even in man's body there are signs of this image, for man in his psycho-physical totality is the image. He walks upright, holding his head high. He has a wide variety of physical skills and intellectual interests appropriate in a being created for relationship with God. Whether man has a blood relationship with the ape is uncertain. What is significant is the obvious and striking difference, even in appearance, between man and all the other creatures.<sup>24</sup>

Karl Barth also held a relational view of the image of God. When we speak of Barth's theological view on any matter, it is necessary to distinguish between the different periods of his theological development. In his early period he did not use the expression "the image of God," but he did speak of a unity between God and man which was something like the unity between mother and fetus. This unity has been lost since the fall. It is, however, somewhat misleading to speak of this unity as having been lost since the fall, for the fall was not a temporal occurrence at some point in the history of mankind.<sup>25</sup>

The second period in Barth's thought and writing was the period of controversy with Emil Brunner over such matters as the image of God. Here we find a violent reaction against Brunner's position. Barth vigorously denied any point of connection between God and man, any human capacity to receive the Word of God.<sup>26</sup>

22. Ibid., p. 60.

23. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, pp. 105-06.

24. Ibid., p. 388.

25. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University, 1968), pp. 168-69.

26. Karl Barth, "No!" in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946), pp. 87-90.

The third stage of Barth's thinking on the image is in many ways the most interesting, for it is the most novel. In this stage Barth speaks of the image as still present within the human, inasmuch as he still is man. The nature of man remains unchanged regardless of his sin. Sin does not and cannot re-create man, making bad a being who was originally good. Rather, it conceals his true nature from himself and his fellows, but not from God.<sup>27</sup>

Barth sees the image of God as consisting not only in the vertical relationship between man and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between men. It is not advisable to ask in which of man's peculiar attributes or attitudes the image of God is to be found. Such a question assumes that the image of God is some quality in man, an assumption Barth emphatically denies.<sup>28</sup> The image is not something man is or does. Rather, the image is related to the fact that God willed into existence a being that, like himself, can be a partner. In that man is capable of relationship, he is a "repetition" or "duplication" of the divine being.

Evidence that there is some sort of relationship within the Godhead is to be found in the very form of the decision to create: "Let *us* make man." Barth maintains that within the very being of God there is a counterpart; thus God experiences a genuine but harmonious self-encounter and self-discovery. Man reflects this aspect of God's nature on two levels—man experiences relationship with God and with man.<sup>29</sup> The similarity between God and man, then, is that both experience I-Thou confrontation. It is, Barth maintains, peculiar that the writer of the creation account makes no mention of man's particular intellectual and moral talents and possibilities, his exercise of reason, if these characteristics do indeed constitute the image of God in man.<sup>30</sup>

Barth insists that we must inquire further what this image of God consists of. Barth notes that in both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 the statement that man was made in the image of God is coupled with the words "male and female he created them." The image of God in man, then, is found in man's being created male and female.<sup>31</sup> Both within God and within man an "I" and a "Thou" confront each other. Man does not exist as a solitary individual, but as two persons confronting each other.

The image of God is rooted in what is common to man and the beasts: the differentiation into male and female.<sup>32</sup> What distinguishes man from

27. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), vol. 3, part 1, pp. 197-98.

28. Ibid., p. 184.

29. Ibid., p. 185.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 184.

32. Ibid., p. 185.

the beasts is that, in the case of man, the only differentiation mentioned in Genesis 1 is that of sex.<sup>33</sup> The other creatures are also differentiated “according to their kinds.” Man is man, and that is all. He is one, as is God. Only one type of differentiation applies to man, and that constitutes the *humanum*. Barth says of the male-female relationship that “as the only real principle of differentiation and relationship, as the original form not only of man’s confrontation of God and also of all intercourse between man and man, it is the true *humanum* and therefore the true creaturely image of God.”<sup>34</sup>

One other point needs to be made here. It was Barth’s position that we learn about man by studying Christ, not man: ‘As the man Jesus is Himself the revealing Word of God, He is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God.’<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that we can equate human nature as we know it in ourselves with the human nature of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> There are significant differences, for his was human nature as it was intended to be. Only from revelation can we know man as he was created, and Jesus is the fullest form of that revelation.<sup>37</sup> We cannot determine on some independent grounds what human nature is, and thus know what Jesus was like.<sup>38</sup> Rather, in him we know what pure human nature is like.

What is it that is distinctive about Jesus’ humanity? He is “for other men.”<sup>39</sup> Now if Jesus is “for other men,” there must be something in common between them.<sup>40</sup> There cannot be a total difference between Jesus and other men. There is a humanity common to all men which makes it possible for them to enter into the covenant relationship with God, not on their own ability, to be sure, but by God’s grace.<sup>41</sup> The man Jesus possesses this humanity in pure form. He is the full image of God.<sup>42</sup> The presence of the image of God in us, which is what makes us human, entails four points:

1. We see our neighbor as our fellow man.<sup>43</sup>
2. We speak to and hear one another.<sup>44</sup>

33. Ibid., p. 186.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid. (1960), vol. 3, part 2, p. 41.

36. Ibid., pp. 47,222.

37. Ibid., pp. 88-89.

38. Ibid., p. 208.

39. Ibid., p. 59.

40. Ibid., p. 223.

41. Ibid., p. 224.

42. Ibid., p. 225.

43. Ibid., p. 250.

44. Ibid., p. 252.

3. We render assistance to one another.<sup>45</sup>
4. We do these things gladly.<sup>46</sup>

To sum up Barth’s doctrine of the image of God: We know from Genesis 1:26-27 that the image consists in man’s reflecting the internal communion and encounter present within God. The internal encounter within man rests in the fact that the human race has been created male and female. Thus there is an I-Thou confrontation within man just as there is in man’s relation with God. We also know, from looking at Jesus for the full meaning of humanity, that the image of God consists in being for others. From this perspective as well, then, standing in relationship with others is what constitutes the image.

Although there was at one point a sharp disagreement between Barth and Brunner, an accord between the views of the two men gradually developed.<sup>47</sup> These two representatives of the relational approach came to share several basic tenets:

1. The image of God and human nature are best understood through a study of the person of Jesus, not of human nature per se.
2. We obtain our understanding of the image from the divine revelation.
- 3. The image of God is not to be understood in terms of any structural qualities within man; it is not something man is or possesses. Rather, the image is a matter of one’s relationship to God; it is something man experiences. Thus, it is dynamic rather than static.
4. The relationship of man to God, which constitutes the image of God, is paralleled by the relationship of man to fellow man. Barth makes much more of the male-female relationship; Brunner tends to emphasize the larger circle of human relationships, that is, society.
5. The image of God is universal; it is found in all humans at all times and places. Therefore, it is present in sinful man. Even in turning away from God, man cannot negate the fact that he is related to God in a way in which no other creature is or can be. There is always a relationship, either positive or negative.
6. No conclusion can or need be drawn as to what there might be in man’s nature that would constitute him able to have such a relationship. Brunner and Barth never ask what if anything is required

45. Ibid., p. 260.

46. Ibid., p. 265.

47. Emil Brunner, “The New Barth,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (June 1951): 124-25.

structurally for the image of God to be present in man. Even the formal image of which Brunner speaks is relational, not structural.

Because existentialism is the philosophy underlying the relational view of the image of God, it is important to review some of its characteristics. One of these is de-emphasis of essences or substances. The important question is, "Is it?" ("Does it exist?"), not "What is it?" There is a suspicion of any reification of qualities into some sort of permanent structural reality. Rather, with the emphasis upon will and consequent action, what is important about any individual person or thing is, according to existentialism, what he or it does. Reality is more than an entity which is simply there and which one accepts; rather, reality is something one creates. All of this is consistent with Brunner and Barth's view of revelation, according to which the Bible is not inherently the Word of God, but becomes the Word of God when God meets man through it or in it. In a similar fashion existentialism underlies their view of the image of God. The image of God is not an entity which man possesses so much as the experience which is present when a relationship is active. (We will inquire at a later point regarding the consistency of maintaining that the image of God is both universal and almost exclusively relational.)

#### *The Functional View*

We come now to a third type of view of the image, which has had quite a long history and has recently enjoyed an increase in popularity. This is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of man, nor is it the experiencing of relationship with God or with fellow man. Rather, the image consists in something man does. It is a function which man performs, the most frequently mentioned being the exercise of dominion over the creation.

In the relational view little attention is given to the content of the image of God, that is, to the content of man's relationships. Yet this is a matter of importance, and indeed there have been attempts to determine from the biblical text itself the content of the image.<sup>48</sup> In Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," is followed immediately by "and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea. . ." A close connection between these two concepts is found not only in this verse, where God expresses his intention to create, but also in verses 27-28, where we read that God did in fact create man in the image of God and

48. G. C. Berkouwer, **Man: The Image of God** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 70.

issue to man a command to have dominion.<sup>49</sup> Some regard the juxtaposition of these two concepts as more than coincidental. The exercise of dominion is considered to be the content of the image of God. This was propounded by the Socinians and included in their Racovian Catechism. As God is the Lord over all of creation, man reflects the image of God by exercising dominion over the rest of the creation. The image of God is actually an image of God as Lord.<sup>50</sup>

A second passage in which a close connection is seen between the image of God in man and man's exercise of dominion is Psalm 8:5-6: "Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." "Commentators generally are satisfied that Psalm 8 is largely dependent on Genesis 1."<sup>51</sup> One of their proofs is the catalog of creatures in Psalm 8:7-8: beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea.<sup>52</sup> The conclusion is then drawn that verse 5 is equivalent to the statements in Genesis 1 that man was created in God's image. Sigmund Mowinckel says that "the 'godlikeness' of man in Ps. 8 consists above all in his sovereignty and power over all other things, in his godlike honour and glory' compared to them."<sup>53</sup> Norman Snaith observes that many orthodox theologians lift the expression "image of God" right out of its context and make it say whatever they want it to. They tend to follow Plato rather than the Bible and, as a result, conceive of God in terms of man's image rather than the other way around. However, Snaith asserts, 'biblically speaking, the phrase 'image of God has nothing to do with morals or any sort of ideals; it refers only to man's dominion of the world and everything that is in it. It says nothing about the nature of God, but everything concerning the function of man.'<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most extensive recent interpretation of the image of God as man's exercise of dominion is Leonard Verduin's *Somewhat Less than God*, which makes the point quite strongly: "Again the idea of dominion-having stands out as the central feature. That man is a creature meant for dominion-having and that as such he is in the image of his Maker—

49. Leonard Verduin, **Somewhat Less than God: The Biblical View of Man** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 27.

50. **Racovian Catechism**, trans. Thomas S. Rees (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818; Lexington, Ky.: American Theological Library Association, 1962), section 2, chapter 1.

51. Norman Snaith, "The Image of God," **Expository Times** 86, no. 1 (October 1974): 24.

52. Ibid.

53. Sigmund O. P. Mowinckel, **The Psalms in Israel's Worship** (New York: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 1, p. 57.

54. Snaith, "Image of God," p. 24.

this is the burden of the creation account given in the book of Genesis, the Book of Origins. It is the central point the writer of this account wanted to make.”<sup>55</sup>

In Genesis 1:26, 28, the Hebrew terms קָבַשׁ (*kavash*) and רְדֹה (*radah*) carry the meaning that man was to exercise a rule over the whole of creation similar to the rule which in later times the Hebrew kings were expected to exercise over their people. The kings were not to rule for their own sakes, but for the welfare of their subjects.<sup>56</sup> When Israel desired a king (1 Sam. 8:10–18), God warned them that a king would exploit them. It is clear that for one person to dominate others is contrary to God’s will. It was God’s will, then, that man tend and rule the creation in such a way that it would come to realize its full potential; man was not to exploit it for his own purposes.

The perspective that the exercise of dominion is the very essence of the image of God has given rise to a strong emphasis upon what is sometimes called in Reformed circles the cultural mandate. Just as Jesus sent his apostles forth into the world and commissioned them to make disciples of all persons, so God here sent his highest creature, man, out into creation, and commissioned him to rule over it. In this commission it is implied that man is to make full use of his ability to learn about the whole creation. For by coming to understand the creation, man will be able to predict and control its actions. These activities are not optional, but are part of the responsibility that goes with being God’s highest creature.

#### Evaluation of the Views

We need now to do some evaluating of the three general views of the image of God. We will begin with the less traditional views, the conceptions of the image as relationship and as a function.

The relational view has correctly seized upon the truth that man alone, of all of the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God. The portrayals of man in the Garden of Eden suggest that God and man customarily communed together. It is apparent that man was not created merely to be a work of art, a statue displaying God’s creativity and wisdom. Man was brought into being to fulfil God’s special intention for him. It is significant that both in the Old Testament law (the Ten Commandments in Exod. 20) and in Jesus’ statement of the two great commandments (Matt. 22:36–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:26–27), the thrust

of God’s will for man (which presumably embodies or expresses his intention for man) concerns relationship to God and to man.

There are certain problems, however, with the view that the image of God is totally a relational matter. One of them is the universality of the image. In what sense can it be said that those who are living in total indifference to God, or even in hostile rebellion against him, are (or are in) the image of God? Brunner has attempted to answer this by indicating that there is always a relationship, that one is always “before God.” But this seems to carry little meaning. Brunner’s distinction between the material and formal elements of the image, together with his insistence that even the formal element is relational rather than structural, seems lacking in biblical basis and rather forced.

Another problem surfaces when we ask what it is about man that enables him to have this relationship which no other creature is able to have. Although Barth and Brunner resist posing the question, it must be asked. Certainly there are some prerequisite factors if relationship is to occur. In criticism of Brunner’s position John Baillie noted that there is no form without content.<sup>57</sup> It may be contended that Brunner in effect answered this criticism when he stated that the current content is different from the original content.<sup>58</sup> In Brunner’s view, then, there is content (although it has changed), and therefore there can also be form. This seems not to avert the difficulty, however, for Baillie is asking what makes the formal image possible, while Brunner’s statement that there is a change in content is actually a reference to the realization of the material sense of the image.

We must conclude that Barth and Brunner were led astray by their wholeheartedly antisubstantialist presuppositions, which we have suggested stemmed from existentialism. This leads to the position that man’s uniqueness must be formal rather than substantive. But the exact basis of man’s formal constitution as a being capable of relationship is never delineated.

When we turn to the functional view, we again see an insightful seizing upon one of the major elements in the biblical picture of the image of God, namely, that God’s act creating man is immediately followed by the command to have dominion. There certainly is, at the very least, a very close connection between the image and the exercise of dominion. There is also, to be sure, a parallel between Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 (i.e., in the description of the domain over which man is to have dominion). Yet there are difficulties with this view as well.

One difficulty concerns the connection between Psalm 8 and Genesis 1.

55. Verduin, *Somewhat Less than God*, p. 27.

56. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 92.

57. John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Scribner, 1939), p. 30.

58. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 229.

It is notable that the terms *image* and *likeness* do not appear in Psalm 8. If the psalm is indeed dependent upon Genesis 1, where we do find specific reference to the image, and if exercising dominion over the creatures mentioned in verses 7-8 of the psalm does indeed constitute the image of God, then one would expect in this passage as well some specific reference to the image.

Further, in Genesis 1 there is no clear equation of the image of God with the exercise of dominion. On the contrary, there are some indications that they are distinguishable. God is said to create man in his own image; then God gives the command to have dominion. In other words, man is spoken of as being in God's image before man is ordered to practice dominion. In verse 26 the use of two hortative expressions—"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," and 'let them have dominion' - seems to distinguish the two concepts. Walter Eichrodt points out that a blessing is given when man is created, but that a second blessing is necessary before dominion over the creatures can be exercised.<sup>59</sup> It appears, then, that the functional view may have taken a consequence of the image and equated it with the image itself.

We must now look carefully at the substantive or structural view. It is significant that the text of Scripture itself never identifies what qualities within man might be the image. The criticism that, in misguided attempts to identify such qualities, a number of advocates of the structural view have actually suggested nonbiblical concepts (e.g., the ancient Greek notion of reason) is justified.<sup>60</sup> Further, the structural view often is narrowed to one aspect of man's nature and, particularly, to the intellectual dimension of man. This in turn implies that the image of God varies with different human beings. The more intellectual a person is, the greater the extent to which the image of God is present. And then there is the additional problem of determining just what happened when man fell into sinfulness. It does not seem to be the case that the fall affected intelligence or reason in general. Moreover, some unbelievers are more intelligent and perceptive than are some highly sanctified Christians.

### Conclusions Regarding the Nature of the Image

Having noted that there are difficulties with each of the general views, we must now attempt to form some conclusions as to just what the image of God is. The existence of a wide diversity of interpretations is an indication that there are no direct statements in Scripture to resolve the

59. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 127.

60. Cairns, *Image of God*, p. 57.

issue. Our conclusions, then, must necessarily be reasonable inferences drawn from what little the Bible does have to say on the subject:

1. The image of God is universal within the human race. We will go into more detail in chapter 25, but at this point we note that the first and universal man, Adam, not merely a portion of the human race, was made in the image of God. Note also that the prohibitions of murder (Gen. 9:6) and cursing (James 3:9-10) apply to the treatment of all humans. There is no limitation placed upon these prohibitions which are based on the fact that man was created in God's image.

2. The image of God has not been lost as a result of sin or specifically the fall. The prohibitions against murder and cursing apply to the treatment of sinful humans as well as godly believers. The presence of the image and likeness in the non-Christian is assumed. If this is the case, the image of God is not something accidental or external to human nature. It is something inseparably connected with humanity.

3. There is no indication that the image is present in one person to a greater degree than in another. Superior natural endowments, such as high intelligence, are not evidence of the presence or degree of the image.

4. The image is not correlated with any variable. For example, there is no direct statement correlating the image with development of relationships, nor making it dependent upon the exercise of dominion. The statements in Genesis 1 simply say that God resolved to make man in his own image and then did so. This seems to antedate any human activity. There are no statements limiting the image to certain conditions or activities or situations. While this is essentially a negative argument, it does point up a flaw in the relational and functional views.

5. In light of the foregoing considerations, the image should be thought of as primarily substantive or structural. The image is something in the very nature of man, in the way in which he was made. It refers to something man *is* rather than something he *has* or *does*. By virtue of his being man, he is in the image of God; it is not dependent upon the presence of anything else. By contrast the focus of the relational and functional views is actually on consequences or applications of the image rather than on the image itself. Although very closely linked to the image of God, experiencing relationships and exercising dominion are not themselves that image.

6. The image refers to the elements in the makeup of man which enable the fulfillment of his destiny. The image is the powers of personality which make man, like God, a being capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely.

God's creation was for definite purposes. Man was intended to know, love, and obey God. He was to live in harmony with his fellow man, as the story of Cain and Abel indicates. And he was certainly placed here

upon earth to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. But these relationships and this function presuppose something else. Man is most fully man when he is active in these relationships and performs this function, for he is then fulfilling his *telos*, God's purpose for him. But these are the consequences or the applications of the image. The image itself is that set of qualities that are required for these relationships and this function to take place. They are those qualities of God which, reflected in man, make worship, personal interaction, and work possible. If we think of God as a being with qualities, we will have no problem accepting the fact that man has such qualities as well. The attributes of God sometimes referred to as communicable attributes<sup>61</sup> constitute the image of God, this is not limited to any one attribute. Man qua man has a nature that includes the whole of what constitutes personality or selfhood: intelligence, will, emotions. This is the image in which man was created, enabling him to have the divinely intended relationship to God and to fellow man, and to exercise dominion.

Beyond this matter of what the image of God consists of, we must ask why man is made in God's image. What in actual application does it mean for man to be in the image of God? What is God's intention for him within life? It is here that the other views of the image are of special help to us, for they concentrate upon consequences or manifestations of the image. The character and actions of Jesus will be a particularly helpful guide in this matter, since he was the perfect example of what human nature is intended to be:

1. Jesus had perfect fellowship with the Father. While on earth he communed with and frequently spoke to the Father. Their fellowship is most clearly seen in the high-priestly prayer in John 17. Jesus spoke of how he and the Father are one (w. 21-22). He had glorified and would glorify the Father (w. 1, 4), and the Father had glorified and would glorify him (vv. 1, 5, 22, 24).

2. Jesus obeyed the Father's will perfectly. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). Indeed, throughout his ministry his own will was subordinate: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34); "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30); "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).

3. Jesus always displayed a strong love for humans. Note, for example, his concern for the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 9:36; 10:6), his compassion

61. Communicable attributes are those qualities of God for which at least a partial counterpart can be found in his human creations.

for the sick (Mark 1:41) and the sorrowing (Luke 7:13), his patience with and forgiveness for those who failed.

It is God's intention that a similar sense of fellowship, obedience, and love characterize man's relationship to God, and that humans be bound together with one another in love. We are completely human only when manifesting these characteristics.

### Implications of the Doctrine

1. We belong to God. While the fact that we are in the image of God means that some of his attributes belong also to us (at least to a limited degree), it is even more a reminder that we belong to him. Dorothy Sayers has noted and David Cairns has argued that although the expression "image of God" does not appear, it is crucial to a full understanding of Mark 12: 13-17.<sup>62</sup> The issue was whether to pay taxes to Caesar. Having been brought a coin, Jesus asked whose image (*eikōn*) appeared on it. When the Pharisees and Herodians correctly answered, "Caesar's," Jesus responded, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" What are "the things that are God's"? Presumably, whatever bears the image of God. Jesus then was saying, "Give your money to Caesar; it has his image on it, and thus it belongs to him. But give yourselves to God. You bear his image, and you belong to him." Commitment, devotion, love, loyalty, service to God-all of these are proper responses for those who bear the image of God.

2. We should pattern ourselves after Jesus, who is the complete revelation of what the image of God is. He is the full image of God, and he is the one person whose humanity was never spoiled by sinning (Heb. 4:15). If we wish to know the outworking of the image of God, we can see it in Jesus. The dedication of him who said, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39), is to characterize us. The determination of him who said, "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (John 9:4), is to be our model. And we are to emulate the love manifested in the life and death of him who said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). This is the image of God in its purest sense, the forming of the likeness of Christ in us (Rom. 8:29).

3. We experience full humanity only when we are properly related to God. No matter how cultured and genteel, no one is fully human unless

62. Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (New York: Harper, 1943), p. 225; Cairns, *Image of God*, p. 30.

a redeemed disciple of God. This is man's *telos*, that for which he was created. There is room, then, in our theology for humanism, that is, a Christian and biblical humanism which is concerned to bring others into proper relationship with God. The New Testament makes clear that God will restore the damaged image, and perhaps even build upon and go beyond it (2 Cor. 3: 18).

4. There is goodness in learning and work. The exercise of dominion is a consequence of the image of God. Man is to gain an understanding and control of the creation, developing it to its ultimate potential for its own good and for God. This also means exercising dominion over our own personalities and abilities. Note that the exercise of dominion was part of God's original intention for man; it preceded the fall. Work, then, is not a curse. It is part of God's good plan. The basis for the work ethic is to be found in the very nature of what God created us to be.

5. The human is valuable. The sacredness of human life is an extremely important principle in God's scheme of things. Even after the fall, murder was prohibited; the reason given was that man was made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). While the passage in question does not explicitly say that man was still in the image of God, but only that God had so created him, it is clear that man, even as a sinner, still possessed it. For if he had not, God would not have cited the image as the grounds of his prohibition of murder.

6. The image is universal in mankind. It was to Adam, man, that the image was given. Whether one regards him as the first human being or as a representative or symbolic being, "Adam" was the whole human race, and "Eve" was the mother of all living (Gen. 3:20). Both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1–2 make it clear that the image was borne by both male and female.

The universality of the image means that there is a dignity to being human. Cairns suggests that Calvin urged the reverencing of persons.<sup>63</sup> While this terminology is too strong a characterization of what Calvin actually said,<sup>64</sup> the general concept is valid. We should not be disdainful of any human being. They are all something beautiful, even though they are distortions of what God originally intended mankind to be. The potential of likeness to the Creator is there. There are good acts done by non-Christians. These acts are not meritorious in terms of procuring divine favor for salvation, but they are pleasing to God in that they contribute to his overall purpose.

The universality of the image also means that all persons have points

of sensitivity to spiritual things. Although at times these points may be deeply buried and difficult to identify, everyone possesses the potential for fellowship with God and will be incomplete unless it is realized. We should look for areas of responsiveness or at least openness in everyone.

Because all are in the image of God, nothing should be done which would encroach upon another's legitimate exercise of dominion. Freedom must not be taken from a human who has not forfeited this right by abusing it (the list of those who have abused their freedom would include murderers, thieves, etc.). This means, most obviously, that slavery is improper. Beyond that, however, it means that depriving someone of freedom through illegal means, manipulation, or intimidation is improper. Everyone has a right to exercise dominion, a right which ends only at the point of encroaching upon another's right to exercise dominion.

Every human being is God's creature made in God's own image. God endowed each of us with the powers of personality that make possible worship and service of our Creator. When we are using those powers to those ends, we are most fully what God intended us to be. It is then that we are most completely human.

63. Cairns, *Image of God*, p. 133.

64. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), vol. 1, pp. 294–96 (Gen. 9:5–7).

# 24

## The Constitutional Nature of the Human

### Basic Views of the Human Constitution

Trichotomism

Dichotomism

Monism

### Biblical Considerations

### Philosophical Considerations

### An Alternative Model: Conditional Unity

### Implications of Conditional Unity

**W**hen we ask what man is, we are asking several different questions. One, which we have already addressed, is the question of where he came from-how did he come into being? We are also asking what man's function or purpose is-what is he intended to do? That might lead us to the question of where man is going-what is his ultimate destiny? Man's makeup is yet another issue raised by the question of what man is. Is he a unitary whole, or is he made up of two or more components? And if he is made up of multiple components, what are they?

How we view man's makeup is of considerable importance. If man is regarded as a dualistic being, there develops a tendency to think of

certain aspects of his nature as being isolated from others. For example, one might consider the spiritual aspect of life to be quite independent of one's physical condition. On the other hand, if we regard man as a unitary, singular being, there is the question of what that one "substance" which makes up man's nature is. Is it a body, a soul, or what? Once we have answered this question to our satisfaction, there will be a tendency to regard man as nothing but that substance. At this point most people will embrace one of the various views of man sketched in chapter 2.<sup>1</sup>

In considering the makeup of man, we must be particularly careful to examine the presuppositions we bring to our study. Because there are nonbiblical disciplines which also are concerned about man, the possibility that some of their conceptions might affect our theological construction looms large. Whether it be an ancient Greek dualism, or a modern behavioristic monism, we need to be on guard against reading a nonbiblical presupposition into our understanding of Scripture.

### Basic Views of the Human Constitution

#### *Trichotomism*

A view rather popular in conservative Protestant circles has been termed the "trichotomist" view. Man is composed of three elements. The first element is the physical body. A physical nature is something man has in common with animals and plants. There is no difference in kind between man's body and that of animals and plants. The difference is one of degree, as man has a more complex physical structure. The second part of man is the soul. This is the psychological element, the basis of reason, of emotion, of social inter-relatedness and the like. Animals are thought to have a rudimentary soul. Possession of a soul is what distinguishes man and animals from the plants. While the soul of man is much more involved and capable than that of the animals, their souls are similar in kind. What really distinguishes man from the animals is not that he has a more complex and advanced soul, but that he possesses a third element, namely, a spirit. This religious element enables the human to perceive spiritual matters and respond to spiritual stimuli. It is the seat of the spiritual qualities of the individual, whereas the personality traits reside in the soul.<sup>2</sup>

A goodly portion of trichotomism is indebted to ancient Greek metaphysics. Except for an occasional explicit reference, however, the influ-

1. Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), pp. 116-17.

ence of the Greek philosophers is not readily apparent. Actually the major foundation of trichotomism is certain Scripture passages which either enumerate three components of human nature or distinguish between the soul and the spirit. A primary text is 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Hebrews 4: 12 describes the word of God as 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' Beyond that, a threefold division seems to be implied in 1 Corinthians 2: 14-3:4, where Paul classifies human persons as "of the flesh" (*σαρκικός*), "unspiritual" (*ψυχικός*—literally, "of the soul"), or "spiritual" (*πνευματικός*). These terms seem to refer to different functions or orientations, if not to different components of man. First Corinthians 15:44 also distinguishes between the natural (*ψυχικόν*) body and the spiritual (*πνευματικόν*) body.

Some Greek philosophers taught that the body is the material aspect of man, the soul is the immaterial aspect, and the spirit brings the two into relationship with one another. A parallel was often drawn between the way in which the body and soul are brought into relationship and the way in which God and his created world are brought into relationship. Just as God enters into relationship with the world through some third (or intermediary) substance, so the soul and the body are related through the spirit.<sup>3</sup> The soul was thought of, on the one hand, as immaterial, and, on the other, as related to the body. To the extent that it is related to the body, it was regarded as carnal and mortal; but insofar as it appropriates the spirit, it was regarded as immortal.

Trichotomism became particularly popular among the Alexandrian fathers of the early centuries of the church. Although the form varies somewhat, trichotomism is found in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It fell into a certain amount of disrepute after Apollinaris made use of it in constructing his Christology, which the church determined to be heretical. Although some of the Eastern fathers continued to hold it, it suffered a general decline in popularity until it was revived in the nineteenth century by English and German theologians.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Dichotomism*

Probably the most widely held view through most of the history of Christian thought has been the view that man is composed of two

2. Ibid., pp. 106-07; cf. "Psychology," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 7, pp. 1-2.

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 191-92.

elements, a material aspect, the body, and an immaterial component, the soul or spirit. Dichotomism was commonly held from the earliest period of Christian thought. Following the Council of Constantinople in 381, however, it grew in popularity to the point where it was virtually the universal belief of the church.

Recent forms of dichotomism maintain that the Old Testament presents a unitary view of man. In the New Testament, however, this unitary view is replaced by a dualism: man is composed of body and soul. The body is the physical part of man. It is the part of man which dies. It undergoes disintegration at death and returns to the ground. The soul, on the other hand, is the immaterial part of man, the part of man which survives death. It is this immortal nature which sets man apart from all other creatures.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the arguments for dichotomism are, in essence, arguments against the trichotomist conception. The dichotomist objects to trichotomism on the grounds that if one follows the principle that each of the separate references in verses like 1 Thessalonians 5:23 represents a distinct entity, difficulties arise with some other texts. For example, in Luke 10:27 Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." Here we have not three but four entities, and these four hardly match the three in 1 Thessalonians. Indeed, only one of them is the same, namely, the soul. Further "spirit" as well as "soul" is used of the brute creation. For example, Ecclesiastes 3:21 refers to the spirit of the beast (the word here is the Hebrew *רֹאשׁ* [ruach]). The terms *spirit* and *soul* often seem to be used interchangeably. Note, for example, Luke 1:46–47, which is in all likelihood an example of parallelism: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Here the two terms seem virtually equivalent. There are many other instances. The basic components of man are designated body and soul in Matthew 6:25 (*ψυχή*, "life") and 10:28, but body and spirit in Ecclesiastes 12:7 and 1 Corinthians 5:3, 5. Death is described as giving up the soul (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21; Acts 15:26 [*ψυχὰς*, "lives"] ) and as giving up the spirit (Ps. 31:5; Luke 23:46). At times the word *soul* is used in such a way as to be synonymous with one's self or life: "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life [*ψυχὴν*]?" (Matt. 16:26). There are references to being troubled in spirit (Gen. 41:8; John 13:21) and to being troubled of soul (Ps. 42:6; John 12:27).

Liberal theology quite clearly distinguished the soul and the body as virtually two different substances. The person was identified with the soul or spirit, not the body. One clear example of such thinking is William

4. Ibid., pp. 192-95.

Newton Clarke's *Outline of Christian Theology*. He speaks of a twofold division of man into body and spirit (soul and spirit are used as interchangeable terms for the same entity). "The person, the self-conscious moral agent, is not the body; rather does it inhabit and rule the body."<sup>5</sup> The spirit of man is to be conceived of as "incorporeal and immaterial, inhabiting and acting through the body."<sup>6</sup> The body is the seat and means of our present life, but it is not a necessary part of personality. Rather, it is the organ through which personality gathers sensations and expresses itself. Personality might exist without the body. Personality could conceivably learn of the external world by some means other than sensation and express itself by some means other than through the body, and yet "be as real as it is at present."<sup>7</sup> The body, then, is not an essential part of human nature. The person can function quite well without it. This is a full and true dualism. Death is the death of the body, and the spirit lives on quite successfully. It 'leaves the material body, but lives on, and enters new scenes of action.'<sup>8</sup>

Less clear-cut but exhibiting the same basic position is the thought of L. Harold DeWolf. He notes that any view which denies that there is a real difference of identity between the soul and body of man is contrary to the indications of Christian experience.<sup>9</sup> DeWolf concedes that the Bible assumes that the life of the soul is dependent on a living body; but, he counters, "this assumption may well be attributed to old habits of thought and speech, to the difficulties of representing reality without the imagery of sense and to the indubitable necessity that the consciousness of man have a context of communication provided through some medium."<sup>10</sup>

DeWolf calls attention to numerous passages which suggest a body-soul dualism.<sup>11</sup> At his death Jesus gave up his spirit with the cry, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Matt. 27:50; John 19:30; Luke 23:46). Other salient references are Luke 12:4; 1 Corinthians 15:50; 2 Corinthians 4:11; 5:8, 10. The body has a high place in God's plan. It is used as an instrument to express and accomplish the person's intentions. But the soul must rule the body.<sup>12</sup>

5. William Newton Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1901), pp. 182-83.

6. Ibid., p. 186.

7. Ibid., p. 188.

8. Ibid., p. 449.

9. L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 150-51.

10. Ibid., p. 151.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 155.

The dualism of Clarke and DeWolf, while holding that the soul can exist apart from the body, did not lead them to deny resurrection of the body. In their view the separate existence of the soul after death is a temporary situation. Some liberals, however, substituted immortality of the soul for the traditional doctrine of resurrection of the body. One of them, Harry Emerson Fosdick, regarded the New Testament idea of resurrection as a product of its time. Given the Jewish conception of Sheol, a place where the dead abide in meaningless existence, immortality could hardly be understood apart from the idea of resurrection.<sup>13</sup> And then, during the exile, Judaism came under the influence of Zoroastrianism, and the idea of resurrection became increasingly attached to the expectation of immortality.<sup>14</sup> Fosdick, however, like those who had been working from the perspective of Greek metaphysics, saw no need to identify the idea of immortality with resurrection. He preferred the idea of "persistence of personality through death" to that of resurrection of the flesh. Fosdick's doctrine of the immortality of the soul preserves the basic abiding experience, while it replaces the New Testament form of the expectation of future life.<sup>15</sup>

Conservatives have not taken the dualistic view this far. While believing that the soul is capable of surviving death, living on in a disembodied state, they also look forward to a future resurrection. It is not resurrection of the body versus survival of the soul.<sup>16</sup> Rather, it is both of them as separate stages in man's future.

#### *Monism*

The points of agreement between the trichotomist and the dichotomist views exceed their differences. They both agree that man is complex or compound, that he is made up of separable parts. In contrast are various forms of the view that man is indivisible. Monism insists that man is not to be thought of as in any sense composed of parts or separate entities, but rather as a radical unity. In the monistic understanding, the Bible does not view man as body, soul, and spirit, but simply as a self. The terms sometimes used to distinguish parts of man are actually to be taken as basically synonymous. Man is never treated in the Bible as a dualistic being.

13. Harry E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 99-100.

14. Ibid., pp. 100-01.

15. Ibid., p. 98.

16. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 998-1003, 1015-23.

According to monism, to be human is to be or have a body. The idea that a human can somehow exist apart from a body is unthinkable. Consequently, there is no possibility of postdeath existence in a disembodied state. Immortality of the soul is quite untenable. Not only, then, is there no possibility of a future life apart from bodily resurrection, but any sort of intermediate state between death and resurrection is ruled out as well.

Monism, which arose in part as a reaction against the liberal idea of immortality of the soul, was popular in neoorthodoxy and in the biblical-theology movement. Their approach was largely through a word-study method. One prominent example is *The Body*, John A. T. Robinson's study in Pauline theology. He contends that the concept of the body forms the keystone of Paul's theology, and that Paul is the only New Testament writer for whom the word *σῶμα* has any doctrinal significance.<sup>17</sup>

According to Robinson, it is a remarkable fact that there really is no Hebrew word for body, no Old Testament equivalent of the key Greek word *σῶμα*. There are several Hebrew words translated by *σῶμα* in the Septuagint, of which the most important and the only one of theological significance is the word *בָּשָׂר* (*basar*). Yet it means essentially "flesh" rather than "body," and in the great majority of cases in the Septuagint is translated by *σάρξ*. Thus, the two most decisive words in Paul's anthropology, "flesh" (*σάρξ*) and "body" (*σῶμα*), represent a common Hebrew original. It is Robinson's contention that Paul's anthropology is to be understood in the light of the Hebraic assumptions about man.<sup>18</sup> Since the Old Testament presents a unitary view of man, making no distinction between flesh and body, it is to be concluded that the terms *flesh* and *body*, wherever they appear in Paul's writings, are not to be differentiated. Both refer to the whole man. Those who assert that *σάρξ* and *σῶμα* have different referents are mistaken.

How does Robinson account for the fact that Greek has two different words for what to the Hebrews was a single concept? He explains that the Hebrews never posed certain questions which the Greeks asked. Various issues which arose in Greek thought eventuated in the distinction between flesh and body:

1. The opposition between *form* and *matter*. The body is the form imposed upon and giving definition to the matter or substance out of which it is made.
2. The contrast between the *one* and the *many*, the whole and its parts. The body stands over against its component parts or organs.

17. John A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 9.

18. Ibid., p. 12.

3. The antithesis between *body* and soul. In Greek thought the body is nonessential to the personality. It is something man possesses rather than what man is.
4. The principle of individuation. The body, in contrast to nonindividuating "flesh," marks off and isolates one human being from another.<sup>19</sup>

Robinson sees these as issues which the Greeks raised but which were foreign to Hebrew thought. It is enlightening to note that he does not give as documentation even one source in Greek thought for what he is propounding as the Greek view.

Robinson concedes that Paul does, of course, use the two terms *σάρξ* and *σῶμα*. But by *σάρξ*, Robinson claims, Paul does not mean flesh as the substance or the stuff out of which the body is formed. Rather, flesh refers to the whole person, and particularly the person considered in terms of his external, physical existence. Thus, for example, it is used to point to the outward circumcision in contrast to the inward circumcision of the heart.<sup>20</sup> The word flesh is also used to designate man in contrast to God. It denotes weakness and mortality.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in Paul's letters the word body does not refer to something a man has, something external to a man himself. Rather, it is a synonym for the person.<sup>\*\*</sup> Robinson asserts that the words *ψυχή* and *πνεῦμα* also represent the whole man, but under different aspects, the latter term referring to that in man by virtue of which he is open to and transmits the life of God.<sup>23</sup>

In all of this, John A. T. Robinson is following the thinking of H. Wheeler Robinson, who discussed the Old Testament terminology for man and his nature. The expression 'body and soul' is not to be understood as drawing a distinction between the two, or dividing man into components. Rather, it should be considered an exhaustive description of human personality. In the Old Testament conception, man is a psycho-physical unity, flesh animated by soul. As a now classic sentence of H. Wheeler Robinson has it, "The Hebrew idea of personality is an animated body, and not an incarnated soul."<sup>24</sup> He declares that the answer to the old question, "What is man?" is, "Man is a unity, and [this] unity is the body as a complex of parts, drawing their life and activity from a breath soul, which has no existence apart from the body." There-

19. Ibid., pp. 13-16.

20. Ibid., p. 18.

21. Ibid., p. 19.

22. Ibid., pp. 26-33.

23. Ibid., pp. 13n, 19.

24. H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in *The People and the Book*, ed. Arthur S. Peake (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), p. 362.

fore, Hebrew has no explicit word for the body: "it never needed one so long as the body was the man."<sup>25</sup>

To summarize the modern monistic argument: the biblical data picture man as a unitary being. Hebrew thought knows no distinction within human personality. Body and soul are not contrasting terms, but interchangeable synonyms.

### Biblical Considerations

We must now evaluate monism in the light of the whole of the biblical data. As we take a closer look, we will find that the absolute monistic view of man has overlooked or obscured some of the significant data. For there are some issues, especially in the area of eschatology, that the totally monistic view has difficulty dealing with.

Certain passages seem to indicate an intermediate state between death and resurrection, a state in which the individual lives on in conscious personal existence. One of these passages is Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Another is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31). Some have thought that this is not a parable but the record of an actual event, since it would be unique among parables in naming one of the characters within the story. We are told that a rich man and a poor man died. The rich man went to Hades, where he was in great torment in the flame, while the poor man, Lazarus, was taken to Abraham's bosom. Both were in a state of consciousness. A third consideration pointing to an intermediate state is Paul's reference to being away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). The apostle expresses a dread of this state of nakedness (v. 3-4), desiring rather to be reclothed (v. 4). Finally, there are some references in the Scripture where the distinction between body and soul is difficult to dismiss. A prominent instance is Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:28: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

While the radically unitary view has difficulty dealing with these eschatological considerations, there are also problems with the positive case made for this view. The treatise by John A. T. Robinson has been cogently criticized by James Barr in his significant and influential volume *Semantics of Biblical Language*. Barr recalls Robinson's argument that the Greeks asked questions which forced them to differentiate the 'body' from the "flesh," while the Hebrews made no such distinction. Barr insists

25. Ibid., p. 366.

that Robinson's statement "could not have been written except in a total neglect of linguistic semantics."<sup>26</sup> It rests upon the assumption that a difference in conceptions requires multiple terms.<sup>27</sup> Yet an examination of linguistics shows that this is not true. While some languages have two words for "man" (Latin *vir* and *homo*, German *Mann* and *Mensch*, Greek ἄντρος and ἄνθρωπος), others have only one (French *homme*, English *man*). Similarly French, German, and Greek have more than one word for "know," whereas English and Hebrew have only one. Yet in each case the conceptual distinction exists in the culture; this is true even where there is a lack of separate terms representing each of the concepts.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the fact that the language does not differentiate between 'body' and "flesh" does not mean that the Hebrews were unaware of the distinction. When taken beyond the isolated example which Robinson adduces, his procedure is seen to be perverse, and even quite comical.<sup>29</sup>

Barr further criticizes Robinson for neglecting historical or diachronic semantics.<sup>30</sup> Robinson claims that there was a need for the two terms σῶμα and σάρξ because of the contrast between form and matter, which he believes was basic to Greek thought. Yet, although the two terms were well established in the time of Homer, Aristotle maintains that the distinction between form and matter was unknown to the earliest Greek philosophers.<sup>31</sup> There is a real question, then, whether the Greeks did indeed think of σῶμα and σάρξ in terms of form and matter. Robinson fails to give any documentation at all from Greek thought.

In addition to Barr's criticism, we need to note some other problems with Robinson's position. One is that he seems to see "the Greek view" as a monolithic mentality. Yet anyone who has studied early Greek philosophy knows its great variety. Once again the lack of documentation by Robinson weakens his argument.

Further, as is common in the biblical-theology movement, Robinson assumes a sharp distinction between Greek and Hebrew thought. This assumption had earlier been asserted by H. Wheeler Robinson, Johannes Pedersen, and Thorleif Boman, but has now, as Brevard Childs observes, been dismissed: "But even among those Biblical theologians who remained unconvinced [by Barr's critique], there was agreement that the emphasis of the Biblical Theology Movement on a distinctive mentality

26. James Barr, *Semantics Of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University, 1961), p. 35.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p. 36.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 37.

could never be carried on without a major revision."<sup>32</sup> The difference between Greek and Hebrew thought has come to be seen as much less radical than Robinson would maintain.

The assessment of the relative value of the two mentalities must be questioned as well. Robinson assumes that the Hebrew way of thinking is automatically the more biblical. Childs sums up this supposition of the biblical-theology movement: "Hebrew thought was something essentially good in contrast to Greek which was considered bad."<sup>33</sup> This assumption was never really vindicated, however. It now appears to be an expression of biblical theology's uncomfortableness with more ontological and objective thinking. And this in turn may reflect the influence of one or more of the contemporary philosophical schools which we have described in chapter 2 of this work: pragmatism, existentialism, analytical philosophy, and process philosophy. It also appears to preclude any possibility of progressive revelation, which may well involve linguistic and conceptual forms as well as content. To insist rather upon canonizing, as it were, the Hebrew mentality risks what Henry Cadbury called "The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves."<sup>34</sup>

Let us review for a moment Robinson's argument:

1. The Hebrews had a unitary view of human nature. They had no terminology distinguishing "flesh" from "body" because they did not differentiate between the whole person and the physical aspect.
2. Paul adopted the Hebrew conception or framework.
3. Although he used differing terms—a&p& σῶμα, ψυχή, πνεῦμα—he did not have different entities in mind. They are all synonyms for the whole person.
4. Therefore, neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament teaches a dualistic view of human nature. A body-soul dualism is not biblical.

Not only is Robinson's case not established, but it appears clear, on the basis of the work of professional linguists, that the absence of a multiplicity of terms is quite consistent with complexity. Robert Longacre has pointed out, for example, that in Mexican Spanish one word, *llave*, serves to designate what in English we use three words for: *key*, **wrench**, and **faucet**. Does this indicate that the Mexican does not see in these objects the distinctions we see? Longacre thinks not. Because the word appears

32. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 72.

33. Ibid.

34. Henry J. Cadbury, "The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves," *Interpretation* 3 (1949): 331-37.

in various contexts, we know that the Mexican is as capable of clearly distinguishing the objects represented by this single term as is the English-speaking person.<sup>35</sup>

It appears, from the foregoing considerations, that it is by no means necessary to conclude that the biblical teaching on the nature of man rules out the possibility of some type of compound character, or at least some sort of divisibility, within the human makeup. This is not to say that the use of the terms *σῶμα, ψυχή, and πνεῦμα* is proof of complexity within man's nature, but that the possibility is not precluded on lexical grounds. It may be taught in some other fashion in the Bible. And, indeed, we have already noted the scriptural passages which argue for a disembodied existence after death. There remain, however, a number of philosophical objections.

### Philosophical Considerations

The major objections to a compound human nature are philosophical. They are basically contentions to the effect that dualism is simply untenable. A variety of arguments have been advanced. They may, for our purposes, be classified into five groups.

1. To refer to a "person" exclusive of his or her body is odd language; it is quite different from what is meant by "person" in ordinary language. Antony Flew points out that words such as "you," "I," "person," "people," "woman," and "man," are all used to refer to objects which can be seen, pointed at, touched, heard, and talked to.<sup>36</sup> To use the word *person*, or any of these other words, in a sense other than "embodied person" is to change the meaning. To use these words to denote a human being surviving dissolution of the body is to change them to such an extent that the crucial implications are lost.<sup>37</sup>

Bruce Reichenbach observes that to regard man as a compound of body and soul drastically changes our idea of death as well. If we believe in the immortality of the soul, we will have to rephrase the statement, "My uncle died at age eighty," for his soul lives on. We will have to say instead, "My uncle's heart, lungs, and brain ceased functioning at the age of eighty, but he (as a person) lives on." But this will mean determining death (i.e., the cessation of life) by a criterion quite different from what

35. Robert E. Longacre, review of four articles on metalinguistics by Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language* 32, no. 2 (1956): 302.

36. Antony Flew, *A New Approach to Psychical Research* (London: Watts, 1955), pp. 75-76.

37. Ibid., pp. 77-78.

is usually employed, for termination of the functioning of the heart, lungs, and brain is the commonly accepted criterion of death.<sup>38</sup> In fact, technically, this will make the term *death* inapplicable to humans.

There are special problems here for the Christian dualist, for Scripture speaks of man dying: "It is appointed for men to die once" (Heb. 9:27); "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord" (Rom. 14:8); "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). These verses speak of the individual, the person, as dying; they do not say that the body dies and the person somehow lives on. The resurrection is never spoken of as a resurrection of the body alone, but rather of the person. Consider also the atoning death of Jesus. Scripture says plainly, "Christ died for our sins"; it does not say merely that his bodily functions ceased.<sup>39</sup>

2. Human consciousness depends upon the physical organism and specifically the brain. Reichenbach lists several other evidences that there is a radical inter-relatedness between the psychical and the physical: the inheritance of mental abilities; the effect of brain damage upon consciousness, memory, and conceptual ability; physical causes of feeble-mindedness, which is a condition of the intellect; the centering of certain sensory states in specific areas of the brain. All of these argue against any sort of separable psychical part of man.<sup>40</sup>

3. Personal identity is ultimately dependent upon the body. This argument has been advanced in several ways. One of the most cogent presentations is that of Terence Penelhum: Our only criteria of personal identity are the physical body and memory. The former, however, is already ruled out if we are talking about a disembodied soul. And the latter is not an independent function, but is dependent upon a body. Thus there is no principle of identity for a disembodied soul or spirit, and the concept is ultimately meaningless.<sup>41</sup>

Penelhum goes to great lengths in objecting to the idea that remembrance of an event is an adequate criterion of personal identity. He presents the hypothetical case of a disembodied person who has experience *E*<sub>2</sub> as well as the memory of experience *E*<sub>1</sub>. Now if *E*<sub>2</sub> and the memory of *E*<sub>1</sub> are successive events, there is the question of whether the

38. Bruce Reichenbach, "Life After Death: Possible or Impossible?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 3, no. 3 (1973): 235.

39. Ibid., p. 236.

40. Ibid.

41. Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House, 1971); *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (New York: Humanities, 1970)—summarized in Richard L. Purtill, "The Intelligibility of Disembodied Survival," *Christian Scholar? Review* 5, no. 1 (1975): 16.

same subject had these two experiences.<sup>42</sup> This cannot be established apart from the continuity of a physical body, and so identity has not been proved. If, on the other hand, E<sub>2</sub> and the memory of E<sub>1</sub> are simultaneous events, there is still no way of telling whether they are experienced by two different persons or by the same person, for either claim presupposes "an understanding of what individuates one person from another, which is absent in the disembodied case."<sup>43</sup>

4. Probably the most emphatic objection to dualism is that the concept is simply meaningless. This appraisal is an application of logical positivism's verifiability principle: a proposition is meaningful only if one can specify a set of sense data that would verify (or falsify) it. On this basis, A. J. Ayer concluded that the idea of a man surviving the annihilation of his body is self-contradictory: "For that which is supposed to survive ... is not the empirical self (which is inconceivable apart from the body) but a metaphysical entity—the soul. And this metaphysical entity, concerning which no genuine hypothesis can be formulated, has no logical connection whatsoever with the self."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Ludwig Wittgenstein asserted that the ideas of disembodied existence and of death as separation of the soul from the body are meaningless because we cannot specify a set of empirical data that would follow from either of them.<sup>45</sup>

5. Another objection to the view that man is a body-soul dualism comes from behavioristic psychology. Behaviorism, the impetus of which was the work of John Watson, is in a sense to psychology what logical positivism with its principles is to philosophy. The behaviorists are determined to make psychology a science rather than the introspective, subjective matter that it once was. Thus they restrict its data to the observable behavior of human beings and the results of experiments, most of which are conducted on animals. There is an old joke about two behaviorists who meet on the street. One carefully observes the other and then remarks, "You're feeling fine. How am I feeling?"

Given the restriction of data to observable behavior and results of experiments, not only thoughts and feelings but also entities such as the soul are excluded from consideration by psychology. Thinking and feeling are not regarded as activities of a mind or soul. They are behavioral activities. They represent physical reactions, primarily of the muscular,

42. Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, pp. 68-78.

43. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

44. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), p. 198.

45. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 65-69

visceral, or glandular systems. This is clearly a monistic view, and a rather materialistic one at that.

A somewhat modified version of this approach is termed the central-state materialist theory of the mind. This theory takes mental states and sensations more seriously than does behaviorism. They are regarded as actual conditions of the brain or processes within the central nervous system. Mental states and sensations play a genuine causal role in the life of the individual. They are not merely psychical in nature, however, for they are the same processes which a neurologist would report. Each mental event can be characterized in (at least) two ways. An illustration frequently used is a lightning flash. The physicist reports a concentrated electrical discharge at a given time and place; the lay observer sees a jagged flash of light. Both are referring to the same event, yet their accounts are not identical. So also the neurologist reports electrochemical charges in the brain, whereas the subject would report a particular thought that he had at the moment. Mental occurrences are granted, but they ultimately are explained in terms of physiological factors.<sup>46</sup>

Are these philosophical problems and objections insuperable? We will reply to each of them individually.

1. It is true that it is peculiar to think of a human being apart from a body and to use the word *person*, or some similar term, to refer to an immaterial aspect of man. But we must keep in mind that, if measured by customary usage, language which deals with religious matters is necessarily rather odd. As we have already noted in chapter 6 of this work, religious language has a special nature. There are two perspectives, two levels of meaning. There is need of a special discernment to get beyond the empirical referent to the meaning which is not so apparent. In some cases logically odd qualifiers are employed to help us discern that deeper meaning.<sup>47</sup>

"Death" is one of those terms which, in a religious context, are equivocal. There is the empirical referent and a deeper meaning requiring special discernment. Thus, we must distinguish between death D<sub>1</sub> and death D<sub>2</sub>. The former refers to the termination of physical life, or cessation of the functioning of the physical organism. The latter refers to termination of the total existence of the entity involved. The point at issue here is whether there is any sense in which some part of the person can survive physical death. And also, is there any type of death other than physical death? The answer is no if we assume that human existence is

46. Bruce Reichenbach, *Is Man the Phoenix?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 82-84.

47. See pp. 141-49, especially p. 148.

equivalent to the existence of the body. But the Bible uses the word *death* in different senses; it recognizes more than one type of death. Jesus said: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). And in Revelation 20:6 John speaks of a "second death," thereby evidently distinguishing it from the first death (the normal understanding of death).

2. It is to be granted that the physical organism and specifically the brain are closely interrelated with human consciousness. This is virtually too obvious to deserve mention. But does it necessarily follow that there is no possibility whatsoever of a separable immaterial aspect of human nature? Anyone who has ever towed a trailer knows that its presence affects the performance of the car in many ways, but when the trailer is unhitched, the car functions normally again. Moreover, the fact that mental abilities are physically inherited speaks only of the means of their transmission, not of their nature.

3. Paul Helm has replied to Penelhum's criticism that personal identity is ultimately dependent upon the body. While Helm's argument that memory in itself is an adequate criterion of personal identity is much too complex to deal with exhaustively here, some of the salient points may be mentioned. Facing the question of whether  $E_2$  and the memory of  $E_1$ , if occurring successively, are experiences of one subject, Helm notes that the answer may depend upon what type of experiences they are. If they are parts of a chain of reasoning, it is logical to assume that they are the experiences of the same person. If this were not the case, conclusions could not be reached, since they depend upon earlier premises.<sup>48</sup> If, on the other hand, we were to say that a second individual experienced  $E_2$ , someone who came into being with the experiences and memories of the person who went through  $E_1$ , would we not be propounding a meaningless statement, and one which is unnecessarily more complicated than the proposition that only one person is involved?

Helm takes his reply to Penelhum a step further. If  $E_2$  and the memory of  $E_1$  are simultaneous, it is to be noted that what would distinguish one disembodied person from another is the same principle which distinguishes any two items from one another-either their properties differ or they have two distinct individual essences. To argue that there may be two individuals who have the same properties and the same essence would again tend to make language almost meaningless.<sup>49</sup> What Penelhum seems to be requiring is an independent confirmation, an outside

48. Paul Helm, "A Theory of Disembodied Survival and Re-embodied Existence," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 1 (March 1978): 19.

49. Ibid., p. 17.

observer to say that the same individual is involved in both events. But will not the problem of the inadequacy of memory as a criterion of personal identity apply to the observer as well? There is no assurance that the person who observed  $E_1$  is the same person who observes  $E_2$ . And in addition, there is the possibility of mistaken perception on the part of the observer.<sup>50</sup> Helm argues instead that the concept of a "minimal person," that is, a person who no longer possesses a body but remembers things about his past, is intelligible and reasonable.<sup>51</sup>

4. Objections which stem from the verifiability principle are subject to the same difficulties which attach to the principle itself. Those difficulties are well known and have already been reviewed in chapter 6. Ayer says that the idea of a man surviving the annihilation of his body is self-contradictory, since the metaphysical entity, the soul, which is supposed to survive death, has no logical connection with the self. This line of reasoning, however, makes the unwarranted assumption that the self is identical with the body. Wittgenstein asserts that we cannot point to a set of empirical consequences which would follow from disembodied existence or separation of the soul from the body. Hence those ideas are meaningless. But he, too, is assuming that narrow standard of meaningfulness (i.e., a statement is meaningful only if verifiable by sense data) which we have shown to be inadequate. Indeed, we have offered models in the light of which religious concepts such as disembodied existence, though not amenable to scientific analysis, can nonetheless be viewed as cognitively meaningful.

5. The behavioristic conception of man must be criticized for its failure to depict man as we find him. Its disregard of the introspective element in man and restriction of valid knowledge to observable behavior truncate our experience of ourselves and of life. In this view man is little more than a highly developed animal. But what behaviorist at the birth of his or her first child considers this event merely the birth of a mammal, or cuts off his or her internal feelings on that occasion on the grounds that they are not part of the essential self?

The modification of this approach, the central-state materialist theory, avoids these more obvious difficulties, allowing that subjective experiences are real, but maintaining that they can also be described in neurological terms as electrochemical charges in the brain. There is no inherent problem in characterizing an event in both ways. But if one assumes that the neurological account is the only or final word on the matter, he is guilty of a genetic fallacy. Further, we have no assurance that all subjective experiences can be described in neurological terms.

50. Ibid., pp. 22-23.

51. Ibid., pp. 15-16, 25-26.

This may very well be the case, but it cannot be proved by any method known today and quite likely never will be.

### An Alternative Model: Conditional Unity

We have examined the philosophical objections to the view that in the human person there is some kind of complexity which makes possible a disembodied existence, and seen that none of them are persuasive. It is noteworthy that those who reject the notion of complexity, arguing instead for the absolute unity of the human person, seldom address the question of the nature of this sole component of humanness. Is it material or immaterial (i.e., spiritual)? Or is it perhaps a mixture or compound of the two? Much of the literature on the subject is at least incipiently materialistic, and the underlying assumptions even in some Christian theological writing often seem to be those of behaviorism. If personhood is in fact inseparably tied to bodily existence, the implications need to be thought through carefully.

We should note here that there have been efforts to find an intermediate point between dualism and absolute (materialistic) monism. A prime example is Henri Bergson's view of creative evolution. In addition to matter there is within man what Bergson terms an *élan vital*, an inner spiritual force of a purposive, creative character.<sup>52</sup> But this opens up areas which are beyond the scope of our present study.

We must now attempt to draw together some conclusions and form a workable model. We have noted that in the Old Testament, man is regarded as a unity. In the New Testament the body-soul terminology appears, but it cannot be precisely correlated with the idea of embodied and disembodied existence. While body and soul are sometimes contrasted (as in Jesus' statement in Matt. 10:28), they are not always so clearly distinguished. Furthermore, the pictures of man in Scripture seem to regard him for the most part as a unitary being. Seldom is his spiritual nature addressed independently of or apart from the body.

Having said this, however, we must also recall those passages cited earlier in this chapter which point to an immaterial aspect of man which is separable from his material existence. Scripture indicates that there is an intermediate state involving personal conscious existence between death and resurrection. This concept of an intermediate state is not inconsistent with the doctrine of resurrection. For the intermediate (i.e., immaterial or disembodied) state is clearly incomplete or abnormal

(2 Cor. 5:2–4). In the coming resurrection (1 Cor. 15) the person will receive a new or perfected body.

The full range of the biblical data can best be accommodated by the view which we will term "conditional unity." According to this view, the normal state of man is as a materialized unitary being. In Scripture man is so addressed and regarded. He is not urged to flee or escape from the body, as if it were somehow inherently evil. This monistic condition can, however, be broken down, and at death it is, so that the immaterial aspect of man lives on even as the material decomposes. At the resurrection, however, there will be a return to a material or bodily condition. The person will assume a body which has some points of continuity with the old body, but is also a new or reconstituted or spiritual body. The solution to the variety of data in the biblical witness is not, then, to follow neo-orthodoxy's course of abandoning the idea of a composite nature of man, and thus eliminating any possibility of some aspect of man persisting through death. Nor is it a matter of so sharply distinguishing the components of man, as did some varieties of liberalism, as to result in the teaching that the immortal soul survives and consequently there is no need for a future resurrection. It is not the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body. In keeping with what has been the orthodox tradition within the church, it is *both/and*.

What sort of analogy can we employ to help us understand this idea or complex of ideas? One that is sometimes used is the chemical compound as contrasted with a mixture of elements. In a mixture, the atoms of each element retain their distinctive characteristics because they retain their separate identities. If the nature of man were a mixture, then the spiritual and physical qualities would somehow be distinguishable, and the person could act as either a spiritual or a physical being. On the other hand, in a compound, the atoms of all the elements involved enter into new combinations to form molecules. These molecules have characteristics or qualities which are unlike those of any of the elements of which they are composed. In the case of simple table salt (the compound sodium chloride), for example, one cannot detect the qualities of either sodium or chlorine. It is possible, however, to break up the compound, whereupon one again has the original elements with their distinctive characteristics. These characteristics would include the poisonous nature of chlorine, whereas the compound product is nonpoisonous.

We might think of man as a unitary compound of a material and an immaterial element. The spiritual and the physical elements are not always distinguishable, for man is a unitary subject; there is no struggle between his material and immaterial nature. The compound is dissolvable, however; dissolution takes place at death. At the resurrection a

52. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 1913), pp. 236ff.

compound will again be formed, with the soul (if we choose to call it that) once more becoming inseparably attached to a body.

Another analogy has been proposed by Bruce Reichenbach. Suggesting that the body be thought of as an extremely complex computer, he observes that it is possible to construct two identical computers, program them identically, and feed them the same data. At the resurrection the body will be physically re-created and the brain programmed with the same data that one had while living on earth.<sup>53</sup> This analogy, however, fails to account for the biblical pictures of the intermediate state—a program and data without a computer do not constitute a functioning entity. Thus, intriguing as the suggestion is, it is faulty at a rather major point.

An alternative analogy, which comes from the world of physics, involves the concept of states of being. Whereas we once thought of matter and energy as two different types of reality, from the work of Albert Einstein we now know, that they are interconvertible. They are simply two different states of the same entity. A nuclear explosion, with its tremendous release of energy, is a dramatic illustration of Einstein's formula  $E = mc^2$ . Now man can similarly be thought of as capable of existing in two states, a materialized and an immaterialized state. The normal state of man is the materialized, in which the self is reified in physical, perceptible form. However, a change of state to an immaterialized condition can take place. This change of state takes place at death. Death is not so much the separation of two parts as the assumption of a different condition by the self. There can be and will be a final shift back to a materialized state. At the time of resurrection, the bodily condition will be reconstituted.

There are, unfortunately, several problems with this analogy. First, it does not fit perfectly, for Einstein's energy is still physical energy. Second, the analogy might lead to an understanding of God as pure energy, which would not be acceptable. Third, what about the cadaver? In an alteration of state, one would expect something roughly equivalent to vaporization. Perhaps the corpse is simply a discard or residue from the transfer of state. Or perhaps as the original vehicle or organ or locus of the embodied state it will again be used in the future in the rematerializing of the person. Finally, the primary emphasis of the analogy is on the whole self or the subject rather than on the parts of human nature.

### Implications of Conditional Unity

What are the implications of contingent monism, that is, the view that human nature is a conditional unity?

<sup>53</sup> Reichenbach, "Life After Death," p. 240.

1. Man is to be treated as a unity. His spiritual condition cannot be dealt with independently of his physical and psychological condition, and vice versa. Psychosomatic medicine is proper. So also is psychosomatic ministry (or should we term it pneumopsychosomatic ministry?). The Christian who desires to be spiritually healthy will give attention to such matters as diet, rest, and exercise. Any attempt to deal with man's spiritual condition apart from his physical condition and mental and emotional state will be less than completely successful, as will any attempt to deal with man's emotions apart from his relationship to God.

2. Man is a complex being. His nature is not reducible to a single principle.

3. The different aspects of man's nature are all to be attended to and respected. There is to be no depreciating of man's body, emotions, or intellect. The gospel is an appeal to the whole man. It is significant that Jesus in his incarnation became fully man, for he came to redeem the whole of what we are.

4. Religious development or maturity does not consist in subjugating one part of human nature to another. There is no part of man that is evil per se. Total depravity means that sin infects all of what a human is, not merely the body or his mind or emotions. Thus, the Christian should not aim at bringing the body (which many erroneously regard as the only evil part of man) under the control of the soul. Similarly, sanctification is not to be thought of as involving only one part of human nature, for no one part of man is the exclusive seat of good or of righteousness. God is at work renewing the whole of what we are. Consequently, asceticism, in the sense of denying one's natural bodily needs simply for its own sake, is not to be practiced.

5. Human nature is not inconsistent with the scriptural teaching of a personal conscious existence between death and resurrection. We will examine this doctrine at greater length in our treatment of eschatology.

## The Universality of Humanity

All Races  
Both Sexes  
People of All Economic Statuses  
The Aged  
The Unborn  
The Unmarried

We have seen that man's purpose or destiny is to know, love, and serve God. God made man able to know him and respond to him. This is the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of man, the one essential feature shared by all humanity. All other characteristics of the human race are incidental and have no bearing on one's humanity.

Nevertheless, there are some incidental variations among humans which do sometimes affect, at least in practice, society's regard of their humanity. While the fact that people who differ in some way are, nevertheless, fully human may not be rejected in theory, society tends to treat them as being somewhat less than others. It will be our aim in this chapter to examine what the Bible and the theology which derives from

it have to say about several categories of people. It will be observed that the special status which God accorded to man by making him, in distinction from the animals, in God's own image, is extended to all members of the human race.

### All Races

The first point to be noted is that all races are included in God's human family, and thus are objects of his love. Yet the phenomenon of racial prejudice seems to be found everywhere. Widely differing groups have been singled out as targets of prejudice, which has sometimes led to outright slavery, and at other times to less extreme forms of discrimination. On occasion it has actually been supported by theological contentions regarding the status of certain racial groups in the sight of God. In *Is God a White Racist?* William Jones has written about one form of this phenomenon, which he terms "divine racism? Divine racism divides the human race into two categories: "we" and "they." It is assumed that God has so divided the race, and shows special interest in and favor toward the in group. According to this view, God does not value all persons equally. He treats some more kindly than he does others. There is an intentional imbalance of suffering, with more being apportioned to the out group than to the in group. God has willed this imbalance, his favor or disfavor being correlated with racial or ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup>

Jones does not suggest that divine racism is restricted to any one religion. Indeed, his initial example is from Hinduism. Christianity has not been without examples, however. Perhaps the most extreme form has been the arguments of some white racists who actually went so far as to deny the humanity of blacks or, to put it differently, denied that blacks have souls.<sup>3</sup> This was an attempt to justify the inequality of slaves and slaveholders. One of the most common pseudotheological arguments advanced was that the traits of Noah's three sons will characterize their descendants until the end of time.<sup>4</sup> It was contended that Ham was born black; hence his descendants are the black race. A curse was placed upon Ham because of his wickedness; this curse involved the servitude of Ham's son Canaan to the descendants of Shem and Japheth. Thus all

1. William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973).

2. Ibid., pp. 3-5.

3. Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: Origin, Fortunes and History of the Negro Race*, 5th ed. (Glasgow, Ky.: W. S. Brown, 1852), p. 33.

4. Thor-ton Stringfellow, *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History Considered in the Light of Bible Teaching, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom* (New York: J. F. Trow, 1861), p. 35.

blacks are to be understood as under the curse of God, and slavery is justified because God intended it. Another variety of this argument was the contention that Cain, who was cursed for murdering his brother Abel, was placed in servitude and turned black (the mark set upon Cain—Gen. 4: 13-15). Ham supposedly married a descendant of Cain, so that Ham's son Canaan was doubly cursed.<sup>5</sup> Yet another contention was that the black is actually not part of Adam's race. The usual form of this contention was that the black is human, but constitutes another species of man; Adam is the father of only the white race.<sup>6</sup>

An additional argument was that blacks are to be understood as two-footed beasts. Since blacks are present with us today, they must have been in the ark. There were only eight souls saved in the ark, however, and they are fully accounted for by Noah's family. As one of the beasts in the ark, the black has no soul to be saved.<sup>7</sup> Here we have the ultimate justification for racial discrimination and even slavery: blacks are not humans; consequently, they do not have the rights which humans have.

Less extreme forms of prejudice have been directed at various groups. All have the tendency to attribute a lesser human status to the out group. Our response will consist of two approaches: refuting the case that is made for such positions, and advancing the positive biblical evidence that God's conferral of humanness extends to all races.

There is no biblical support for the position that blacks (or any other race) are less than fully human or inferior humans. There is, for example, no evidence to suggest that Ham was black. The same is true of the contention that the mark of Cain was blackness. Further, the contention that blacks are not humans contradicts anthropological evidence such as the interfertility of all races with one another.<sup>8</sup>

Of greater significance for us is the positive biblical evidence of the way in which God regards all races and nationalities. This theme is developed in Scripture especially in terms of Jewish and Gentile relationships. One might conclude from Israel's status as the chosen nation that God's concern for and interest in humanity are limited to the Jewish people. Yet it is apparent that the Jews were chosen not to be exclusive recipients of the blessing of God, but rather to be recipients and transmitters of that blessing. Even within the Old Testament era, there was room for outsiders to become proselytes to the faith of Israel. Rahab and

5. W. S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1935), p. 119.

6. Ibid., p. 272.

7. Ariel (Buckner H. Payne), *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status?* 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, 1867), pp. 45-46.

8. Francis E. Johnston and Henry A. Selby, *Anthropology: The Biocultural View* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1978), pp. 58-60.

Ruth the Moabitess are prominent instances and are even found in Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:5).

Within Jesus' ministry, we find an openness to those who were not of the house of Israel. His concern for the Samaritan woman (John 4) and his offer of the living water to her indicate that salvation is not restricted to Jews alone. The Syrophoenician woman's request for the deliverance of her daughter from demon possession was granted (Mark 7:24–30). Perhaps the most remarkable incident is that of the Roman centurion who came requesting healing for his paralyzed servant (Matt. 8:5–13). Jesus marveled at the faith of this man, which exceeded anything he had found in Israel (v. 10). Jesus granted the man's request, but before he did, he made a remarkable prediction: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (w. 1 **I-I 2**). Here is certainly anticipation of a time of extending the grace of God to countless people regardless of their race.

When we come to the Book of Acts, the universality of God's grace is most apparent. Peter's vision (Acts 10:9–16), in which he was commanded to eat not only clean but also unclean animals, was the sign for him to extend the message of salvation to Gentiles, first of all to the centurion Cornelius (w. 17–33). Peter gave expression to the new understanding: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (w. 34–35). When he preached the gospel to the group gathered at Cornelius's house, the Holy Spirit fell upon them in the same fashion as he had previously fallen upon the Jews (w. 44–48). This event gave impetus to the ministry to the Gentiles, which was implemented particularly by Paul and his associates.

The ministry of Paul included many incidents which are instructive for us in regard to the status of non-Jews. One of the most significant is his encounter with the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17. The basic thrust of his message to them is universalistic in nature. God made the earth and everything in it (v. 24). He has given life and breath and everything to all men (v. 25). Paul particularly stresses the unity of the human race when he states, "And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation" (v. 26). His declaring to the Athenians that the "unknown god" whom they worship is actually the God whom he preaches (v. 23) is based upon the assumption that all men are part of the human race that God created and has provided with the means of salvation.

There is to be no division between Jew and Gentile within the church.

In Ephesians 2:14 Paul asserts that Christ has broken down the wall of partition between them. Not only is salvation for all, but there is to be no discrimination upon the basis of nationality. This lesson was not always quickly understood and learned, and so when Peter compromised the Gentiles' standing by withdrawing from them when certain Judaizers came, Paul found it necessary to oppose him to his face (Gal. 2:11). In Galatians 3:6–9 Paul argues that all who have the faith of Abraham are heirs of Abraham, regardless of nationality. In Revelation 5:9 the Lamb is said to have redeemed persons from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

The passages cited do not, of course, mention every specific race and nationality. It appears, however, that the grounds on which they rest are broad: all humans have been created in order to have fellowship with God, and the offer of salvation is open to all. Just as there is no distinction of sex in the sight of God with respect to justification, so there is no distinction of race (Gal. 3:28).

### Both Sexes

Women have at times been regarded as, at best, second-class members of the human race. They have not been allowed to vote or to exercise other rights enjoyed by men, and wives have in some cases been regarded as virtually the property of their husbands.<sup>9</sup> The biblical world was one in which women had few rights, or at least far fewer than men. To some extent, the Old Testament did not overturn this situation but accommodated to it. Yet from the beginning there were indications that in God's sight women have equal status. These indications increased as time went on and the special revelation moved progressively to higher levels.

Already in the creation account we find indication of woman's status. In Genesis 1:26–27 there is a special emphasis, seemingly to ensure our understanding that woman possesses the image of God, just as does man. Although Karl Barth<sup>10</sup> and Paul Jewett<sup>11</sup> contend that we have triadic parallelism in 1:27 and thus man's being created male and female is the image of God, that is not at all obvious. It is evident, however, that

9. J. A. MacCulloch, "Adultery," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1955), vol. 1, p. 122.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), vol. 3, part 1, pp. 194–97.

11. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 35–48.

the first two strophes, “So God created man in his own image” and “in the image of God he created him,” are equivalent, for they repeat the parallelism of verse 26, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” On the other hand, the third strophe, “male and female he created them,” is unique to verse 27, and is not obviously equivalent to the other two. Instead of repeating the idea of the first two strophes, it seems to supplement them. It bears the same relationship to those two strophes that “and let them have dominion. . .” bears to the two elements in the first part of verse 26. In each case there is an addition to the thought. In the latter instance the addition makes it clear that the “man” who was created in the divine image is both male and female. Both bear the image of the Maker.

The same emphasis is found in Genesis 5:1–2 as well: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.” The statement about man’s being created male and female occurs between two statements about God’s creation of man, the first one of which declares that God made man in Gods likeness. There seems to be an emphasis upon the fact that both the male and the female of the species were made in the image of God.

A second noteworthy feature of the creation account is the relationship of the woman to the man, from whom she is taken. Sometimes much is made of the fact that she is described as a “helper” to him, as if this term implies some sort of inferiority or at least subordination of the woman to the man. A closer examination of Genesis 2: 18 belies this conception, however. The expression *helpmeet*, used in some older versions, actually translates two Hebrew words. The second, *neged*, means “corresponding to” or “equal to” him.<sup>12</sup> The word rendered ‘help,’ *ezer*, is used of God in several places in the Old Testament: Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:29; Psalm 33:20; 70:5; 115:9, 10, 11. This would suggest that the helper envisioned in Genesis 2: 18 is not inferior in essence to the one helped. Rather the helper is to be thought of as a coworker or enabler.

This is the situation of woman from the beginning of creation. What of the fall and the resulting curse, however? Of particular significance here is Genesis 3:16, where the curse is pronounced on the woman: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” The word translated “rule over” is *mashal*. Although this word is most frequently translated “rule,” that is not its exclusive

12. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 617.

meaning. It can also be rendered “to be like,” “to be similar to.”<sup>13</sup> One rendering of this passage, which seems to make sense in the context, notes the parallel between the curse upon the man, which involves toil, and the curse upon the woman, which involves pain in childbirth. In the Hebrew original the same word is used for both woman’s pain and man’s toil. The basic meaning is “sorrow” or “anguish.” This suggests that “[he] will be similar [to you]” would be an appropriate translation of *ba’al* in Genesis 3: 16. That is, not only will the woman experience anguish, but her husband will experience similar anguish.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the Hebrew word *ba’al*, meaning ‘lord’ or “master,” is frequently used for husband. It should be observed, however, that the feminine of that word also appears. In Genesis 20:3, for example, it is used to describe Sarah’s relationship to Abraham. Thus, whatever the nature of the rule in the marital relationship, it is not unilateral.

The picture of woman which is given in the Scripture is not one of insignificance or abject subservience. In Proverbs 3 1, for example, the virtuous woman is extolled. She is ever eager to promote the welfare of her family, but does not remain constantly within the confines of her home. She is engaged in trading and business affairs (w. 18, 24).

We should also note that not only is woman created in God’s image, but God is sometimes spoken of in feminine terms or imagery. God is depicted as the mother of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:18: “You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” The terminology Moses uses emphasizes the pangs of the birth process, making clear that it is the mothers role that is in view here. Jesus also uses feminine imagery to depict God. For example, he tells three parables picturing God’s concern and search for lost persons: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15). In the first and third, the figure representing God the Father is masculine, but in the parable of the lost coin, it is a woman who is the main character. Moreover, Jesus chooses to single out a widow as an example of generosity in giving (Luke 2 l:1-4).

The attitude of Jesus toward women, and his treatment of them, are also instructive to us. Although a Jew ordinarily had no dealings with Samaritans, and particularly not with the blatant sinners among them, Jesus engaged the adulterous Samaritan woman in conversation because he cared about her spiritual condition (John 4). The woman with a hemorrhage who touched the edge of Jesus’ cloak he commended for her faith (Matt. 9:20-22). Mary and Martha were among Jesus’ closest

13. Ibid., p. 605.

14. Elizabeth Wilkenson, “The Bible and the Liberation of Women,” *Foundations* 24 (July-September 1981): 198.

friends. The woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany (Matt. 26:6–13) was to be remembered for her act of devotion whenever and wherever the gospel was preached (w. 10–13). Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom Jesus appeared following his resurrection, and he instructed (commissioned) her to tell his disciples that he was risen (John 20: 14–18). Indeed, women played a significant role from the very beginning of Jesus' life and ministry. It was Mary, not Joseph, who gave expression of praise to God in connection with the announcement of the coming birth of Jesus (Luke 1:46–55). Elizabeth also praised and blessed the Lord (Luke 1:4 l–45). Anna was probably the first woman disciple of Jesus (Luke 2:36–38). Donald Shaner has summarized well Jesus' relationships to women: "It is striking that Jesus did not treat women as women but as persons. He took them seriously, asked them questions, encouraged their potential, and lifted them up to the dignity that they deserved."<sup>15</sup>

Probably the most direct declaration that women stand on the same footing as men in the sight of God, as far as salvation is concerned, is the classic text in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This verse is sometimes taken out of context and used to address issues that Paul is not talking about. He is not discussing equality in terms of employment nor the role of women in places of service within the church, for example, as ordained ministers.<sup>16</sup> Rather, he is treating the important issue of justification by faith, the individuals status before God in terms of personal righteousness. Paul is saying that, with respect to personal salvation, there is no difference in God's treatment of male and female. All who have been baptized in Christ Jesus have put on Christ (v. 27).

We should also note, finally, the important role women have played in the work of the kingdom of God. Although in a minority, at all times of biblical history there have been women who occupy positions of leadership and influence. Miriam assisted Moses and led the Israelite women in singing and dancing after the escape from Egypt (Exod. 15:20–21). Deborah was a judge of Israel, and Jael slew Sisera (Judg. 4: 17–22). Esther saved the Jewish people from being destroyed by Haman. We have already observed something of the role of selected women in the New Testament. The faithfulness of the women around Jesus in the time of crisis is striking. We see them at the cross (Luke 23:49); they sought to anoint Jesus' body (Luke 23:55–56); they discovered the empty tomb,

15. Donald W. Shaner, "Women in the Church," *Foundations* 23 (July-September 1980): 221.

16. This is not to say that there are no biblical principles which apply to these issues, but that these issues are not *directly* dealt with here.

heard the message of the two angels, and told the news to the apostles (Luke 24:1–11).<sup>17</sup>

Even Paul, who is sometimes accused of being rigidly opposed to the involvement of women in the work of the church, speaks positively of women in positions of leadership. He writes of Phoebe, "She has been a helper of many and of myself as well" (Rom. 16:2). Priscilla and Aquila are spoken of as "fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life" (Rom. 16:3–4). Although we know no details about Mary (v. 6) and Persis (v. 12), we do know that they "worked hard in the Lord." Paul also greets Tryphaena and Tryphosa, "those workers in the Lord" (v. 12), Rufus's "mother and mine" (v. 13), Julia, and Nereus and his sister (v. 15). Paul allows women to prophesy in the assembly, at least under some conditions (1 Cor. 11:5). These indications of Paul's conception of the usefulness of women in ministering modify those passages where he seems to restrict their activities. The restrictive passages, then, should be seen as relating to particular local situations (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:33–36).

### People of All Economic Statuses

The Bible has a great deal to say about the poor. There is indication in the Old Testament that God has a special concern for the poor. This concern is evident in his deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage and poverty which they experienced in Egypt. It is embodied in God's warnings regarding mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. An example of these commands is Deuteronomy 15:9: "Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and it be sin in you."

A whole series of provisions was made for the welfare of the poor. Every third year a tithe was to be given to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut. 14:28–29). A promise was attached to faithful observance of this command: "that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." The sabbatical year (every seventh year) was particularly significant: the landowners were not to sow in their fields, and the poor were to be allowed to gather for themselves what simply grew of itself (Exod. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:3–6); Hebrew slaves were to be turned free after six years of service (Exod. 21:2). There was also a sabbath of sabbaths, the year of jubilee, the fiftieth year, when land reverted to the original owner (Lev. 25:8–17). At all times part of the produce of the fields and vineyards was to be left for the poor to glean

17. Shaner, "Women in the Church," p. 222.

(Lev. 19:9–10), and a hungry person was allowed to eat fruit and ripe grain in a field, but not to carry any away (Deut. 23:24–25). Those who had means were to lend to the poor, and no interest was to be charged (Exod. 22:25). No poor Hebrew who sold himself was to be made a slave; rather, he was to be considered a hired servant (Lev. 25:39–40) and not to be treated harshly (v. 43). No one was to take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge, since life virtually depended upon them (Deut. 24:6).

In particular, great care was to be taken that justice was done with respect to the poor: “You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his suit” (Exod. 23:6). Amos preached against those who disobeyed this command: “For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate” (Amos 5:12). The psalmist also denounced the persecutors of the poor: “In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes which they have devised. . . [The wicked man] lurks in secret like a lion in his covert; he lurks that he may seize the poor. he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net” (Ps. 10:2, 9).

Jesus himself was one of the poor. This is made clear in the account of his being brought as an infant to Jerusalem for the ritual of purification. The law prescribed that a lamb and a turtledove or pigeon were to be sacrificed. However, “if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Lev. 12:6–8). The fact that Jesus’ family offered “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24), rather than a lamb is an indication of their poverty. While Jesus in his ministry apparently did not suffer actual hardship and deprivation, he certainly did not have abundance, and evidently depended often upon the hospitality of others, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He referred to his lack of means when he said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20).

Jesus’ teachings include a great deal about the poor and poverty. By quoting Isaiah 6:1:1–2 he indicated that he had come to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18, 21). Concern for the poor lay at the very core of his ministry. He spoke of the blessedness of the poor (Luke 6:20). Among the wonders which he wanted reported to John was the fact that the poor had the gospel preached to them (Luke 7:22). Jesus also pointed out repeatedly the danger of wealth: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). In the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, the rich man after death is in the place of torment, but Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. Abraham says to the rich man, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish” (Luke

16:25). It should be noted that wealth per se is no more of a cause for discrimination than is poverty. It is preoccupation with riches (Mark 10:17–31; Luke 8:14; cf. 1 Tim. 6:10) or the abuse of wealth that is the target of Jesus’ warnings and condemnation.

James also had some rather sharp things to say about mistreating the poor within the congregation. He describes a situation in which a rich man comes finely dressed into the assembly. A great fuss is made over him and he is offered a good seat. On the other hand, when a poor man enters, he is told to sit in a more lowly place. The drawing of distinctions in favor of the wealthy comes in for severe criticism: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:4–5).

Many other parts of the Bible emphasize that the poor and the rich are equal before God and that the righteous poor are superior to the ungodly rich. We read in the Book of Proverbs: “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all” (Prov. 22:1–2). Earlier in the same book we find: “Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a man who is perverse in speech, and is a fool. . . . What is desired in a man is loyalty, and a poor man is better than a liar” (Prov. 19:1, 22). It is apparent that in the sight of God it does not matter whether one has great wealth or little. It is God who has given the wealth and decided where it is distributed; he is the cause of individual differences of circumstance. The church should adopt God’s perspective on wealth and poverty and regard the rich and the poor alike.

### The Aged

The Bible also makes clear that all ages, including the very old, are fully human and valuable to God. In our day, especially in Western cultures, old persons are sometimes looked down upon. In part this is due to the cult of youth; youth is exalted as the fullest expression of humanity. With respect to physical capabilities this is true, for we reach our physical peak in the twenties. Then a general decline and deterioration begin, but in other respects maturation does not take place until later. In part the discrimination against the elderly is based upon a utilitarian or pragmatic approach to the assessment of individual worth. The elderly are regarded as being of little value since they are not able to contribute much to society, and may actually impose something of a hardship upon it.

The biblical attitude toward old age is much different. In common with Orientals generally, the Hebrews held old age in honor. Respect for the aged was required: "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:32). A sign of Israel's degradation at the time of Jeremiah was its disregard of the elders—"no respect is shown to the elders" (Lam. 5:12).

When it was properly understood, old age was not feared or despised in the Old Testament era. Rather, it was greatly desired as a sign of divine blessing. The Book of Proverbs favorably contrasts the assets of old age with those of the young man: "The glory of young men is their strength, but the beauty of old men is their gray hair" (Prov. 20:29). Old age was considered a gift from God, additional opportunity to serve him: "With long life I will satisfy him" (Ps. 91: 16). The believer was given the assurance of God's presence with him to old age: "Even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you" (Isa. 46:4). The promise of longevity to those who honor their parents is found in both the Old Testament (Exod. 20: 12) and the New (Eph. 6: 1-3).

One reason for the high status accorded persons of old age was the belief that age carries with it wisdom. This belief is reflected in Job 12:20: "[God] deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of the elders." Because the elderly were thought to have attained wisdom, positions of authority were given to them. Note the use of the term elder for the leaders of Israel, a term which was carried over and applied to the leaders of the local Christian assemblies or congregations. The decline in the physical strength that had made men valuable to their community was compensated for by an increase in wisdom that contributed another type of value. For this reason Peter advises, "Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders" (1 Peter 5:5).

But in all likelihood the major impetus for the esteem of older people came from a set of religious values-individuals were not assessed simply in terms of what they could do for someone else. God does not love us simply for the sake of what we can do for him, but for the sake of what he can do for us as well, the care he can provide for us. And because God has had such a relationship with older persons for a long time, he in a sense values them all the more. In a genuinely Christian setting, while there will of course be concern for young people and their potential, the elderly will not be disregarded or discarded. Their contribution will be welcomed, and their welfare will be highly prized.<sup>18</sup>

18. For suggestions on the role of the church in relationship to older persons, see such works as Robert M. Gray and David O. Moberg, *The Church and the Older Person* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Paul B. Maves and J. Lennart Cedar-leaf, *Older People and the Church* (New York Abingdon, 1949); *Spiritual Well-Being of the Elderly*, ed. James A.

### The Unborn

One other issue which has far-reaching implications, particularly for ethics, concerns the status of the unborn or, more specifically, of the fetus still in the mother's uterus. Is the fetus to be regarded as human, or merely as a mass of tissue within the mother's body? If the former, abortion is indeed the taking of a human life and has serious moral consequences. If the latter, abortion is simply a surgical procedure involving the removal of an unwanted growth like a cyst or a tumor.

There are two types of arguments advanced by those who contend that the fetus is indeed human: biological and biblical. Frequently, they are utilized together. The biological argument employs various scientific studies of the development of the fetus during the period of gestation. The data are examined in an effort to determine the point of differentiation, the moment at which the individual identity of the fetus is positively established. It is generally observed that there is a gradual and continuous development of the fetus from conception to birth; therefore, no specific moment or event can be identified as the instant of the emergence of humanity or infusion of the soul. On this basis, it is necessary to regard the fetus as human at every point of the developmental process.<sup>19</sup> This argument, of course, is based in natural theology; it employs the data of general revelation only. As significant as this endeavor is, we will not make it our chief authority.

Those who present the biblical argument have examined the Scriptures for indications of the status of an unborn fetus. A considerable number of passages are cited as bearing upon the question of whether God regards the fetus as human.

A passage frequently mentioned is David's great penitential outcry, Psalm 51, which contains the expression, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (v. 5). Although David uses personal pronouns here, it is not at all clear from this verse that he thought of himself as being a person during the prebirth period. He comes closer to expressing this idea in Psalm 139: 13-15: "For thou didst

---

Thorson and Thomas C. Cook, Jr. (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1980); Robert W. McClellan, *Claiming a Frontier: Ministry and Older People* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1977).

19. John M. Langone, "Abortion: The Medical Evidence Against," *The Cambridge Fish* 2, no. 1, pp. 2, 9—reprinted in Clifford E. Bajema, *Abortion and the Meaning of Personhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 25-28. The doctors presenting the brief stated, "This review of the current medical status of the unborn serves several purposes. First it shows conclusively the humanity of the fetus by showing that human life is a continuum which commences in the womb. There is no magic in birth. The child is as much a child in those several days before birth as he is those several days after."

form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth." Here David speaks as if God had some sort of personal relationship with him when he was still in his mother's womb.

A New Testament passage thought by some to bear upon this issue is Luke 1:41–44. Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, is greeted by her kinswoman Mary, who is bringing the news that she, Mary, is to give birth to the Messiah. Luke reports: "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ... 'Behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy.'" If Elizabeth's words are taken literally, we would have here an instance of prenatal faith. Yet it is hard to know just what interpretation to attach to this event. We are not certain as to precisely what is meant by Elizabeth's being "filled with the Holy Spirit." Were she and therefore her words actually "inspired" in the technical sense of that term? Nor is it clear whether she meant for her assertion interpreting the action of her unborn child (he leaped *for joy*) to be taken literally.

Another New Testament passage sometimes cited in connection with the issue of the status of the fetus is Hebrews 7:9–10. This is the account of Abraham's meeting and paying a tithe to Melchizedek. The writer concludes by commenting, "One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him." Taken at face value, this comment would argue for the humanity not only of an unborn fetus, but even of persons who have not yet been conceived, since Levi was a great-grandson of Abraham. It is more significant, however, to take this passage as evidence for traducianism, the view that the entirety of a person's human nature, both material and immaterial (or body and soul), is received by transmission directly from the parents; that is to say, the soul is not at some later time (e.g., birth) infused into the body, which was physically generated at conception. If Hebrews 7 does indeed support traducianism (and it appears to do so), this passage would in turn argue for the humanity of the fetus, since it would not then be possible to think of the fetus apart from a soul or a spiritual nature.

The passage most discussed in connection with the issue of the humanity of the fetus is probably Exodus 2:1:22–25, which appears in a long list of precepts and injunctions following the Ten Commandments. It reads, "When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and

he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." This is an application of the *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation spelled out in Leviticus 24:17–20 ("as he has done it shall be done to him"). One common interpretation of Exodus 21:22–25 is that in the case of a miscarriage caused by a struggle between men, the *lex talionis* is applied only if the mother is harmed. On this basis it is concluded that the fetus was not considered a soul or a person, and thus is not to be thought of as fully human.<sup>20</sup>

An alternative interpretation, which, while less popular has had a rather long history, has recently been revived in the midst of the modern controversy over abortion. Jack Cottrell has presented one of the clearest and most complete statements of this alternative.<sup>21</sup> According to Cottrell, the clause translated "so that there is a miscarriage" should be literally rendered "so that her children come out." The noun here is יְלֵד (yeled), which is a common word for child or offspring. The only thing unusual about the noun in Exodus 2:1:22 is that it is in the plural. The verb here is יָצַא (yatsa'), which usually means "to go out, to go forth, to come forth." It is often used to refer to the ordinary birth of children, as coming forth either from the loins of the father or from the womb of the mother. Examples of the former usage are found in Genesis 15:4; 46:26; 1 Kings 8:19; and Isaiah 39:7. Instances of the latter are found in Genesis 25:25–26; 38:28–29; Job 1:21; 3:11; Ecclesiastes 5:15; and Jeremiah 1:5; 20:18. In each of these cases יָצַא refers to the ordinary birth of a normal child; in no case is the word used of a miscarriage. In Numbers 12:12 it refers to the birth of a stillborn child; it should be noted that this is a stillbirth, not a miscarriage. The concept of stillbirth is communicated through the specific description of the child ("one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb"), not through the verb יָצַא. There is a Hebrew word—שָׁחַק (shakhhol)—which specifically refers to a miscarriage; it is used in Exodus 23:26 and Hosea 9:14. Cottrell concludes, "Thus there seems to be no warrant for interpreting Exodus 21:22 to mean 'the destruction of a fetus.'"<sup>22</sup>

According to Cottrell, the situation in view in Exodus 2:1:22–25 is simply this: if there is no harm done in the case of a child born prematurely because its mother was hurt by men struggling against one another,

**20.** See, e.g., Bruce Waltke, "Old Testament Texts Bearing on the Problem of the Control of Human Reproduction," in *Birth Control and the Christian: A Protestant Symposium on the Control of Human Reproduction*, ed. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1969), pp. 10–11.

**21.** Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," *Christianity Today*, 16 March 1973, pp. 6–9.

**22.** Ibid., p. 8.

there is no penalty other than a fine. If, however, there is harm, the principle of a life for a life and an eye for an eye is to be enforced. Note that there is no specification as to who must be harmed for the *lex talionis* to come into effect. Whether the mother or the child, the principle applies. Interpreted in this way, Exodus 21:22–25 supports the contention that the Bible regards the unborn child as a person. The interpretation of Cottrell, Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch,<sup>23</sup> and others is more in keeping with the data of the passage than is the commonly held or traditional rendering. At the very least, then, the idea that the passage does not treat the fetus as fully human has been rendered highly questionable. Yet we cannot say that the passage conclusively establishes the humanity of the unborn.

Indeed, none of the passages we have examined demonstrates conclusively that the fetus is a human in God's sight. Nevertheless, when taken as a whole, they do give us enough evidence to render that conclusion very likely. And where one is dealing with an issue as momentous as the possible destruction of a human life, prudence dictates that a conservative course be followed. If one is hunting and sees a moving object which may be either a deer or another hunter, or if one is driving and sees what may be either a pile of rags or a child lying in the street, one will assume that it is a human. And a conscientious Christian will treat a fetus as human, since it is highly likely that God regards a fetus as a **person** capable of (at least potentially) that fellowship with God for which man was created.

### The Unmarried

Our final category concerns marital status. There has been a tendency in American society to regard marriage as the normal state of the human being. In fact, the model household is often thought of as a married couple with two children, preferably a boy and a girl. While there has been a decline in the popularity of marriage, with more and more persons choosing not to marry or postponing marriage, our culture still regards the marital state as more desirable and more natural. And within the church, the unmarried person often does not fit. Church programs frequently are designed for families. The single person may be left out or at least feel left out. The idea that a person is truly fulfilled only within marriage may well be present, either overtly or tacitly. Sometimes the idea is carried still further. The command of God to the first human pair

<sup>23</sup> Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), vol. 2, pp. 134–35.

to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28) is taken to mean that persons are truly human only when they have reproduced themselves, and that presupposes marriage.

The Bible, however, does not look upon singleness as a second-class condition. Indeed, the single life is honored and commended through both personal example and teaching. Our Lord never married, although some have attempted to offer reconstructions of history to establish that he did. Further, we have the personal example and direct teaching of Paul commanding the unmarried state. He wishes that all were as he is (1 Cor. 7:7). He advises the unmarried and the widows to remain single as he does (v. 8). While acknowledging that he has no command of the Lord regarding this matter, he nonetheless maintains that he is giving his “opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy” (v. 25). Some have interpreted this statement as an admission by Paul that what he is recommending here is merely a **human opinion**; it is not God's inspired word. It appears likelier, however, that Paul is stating that the Lord is indeed speaking (or writing) through him even though the tradition has not preserved any words which the Lord himself spoke on this matter during his earthly ministry. This is the explication of “one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.”

Paul urges upon his readers that in view of the impending (or present) distress they remain as they are (v. 26). Those who are married should remain married; the single should remain unmarried (v. 27). While it is certainly permissible for a widow to remarry, in Paul's judgment it is better to remain unmarried (w. 3940). Paul's advice is based upon certain practical considerations. The married person must be concerned about pleasing his or her spouse as well as the Lord, whereas single people can devote themselves totally to pleasing the Lord (w. 32–35).

It may well be that the recommendation of Paul to remain single was related to a definite cultural situation of his time. The reference to “the impending distress” lends support to this hypothesis. If Paul did have a specific situation in mind, the preferability of the unmarried state cannot be generalized to all situations. It should be observed, however, that at least in this one situation, there was nothing wrong with being single. Thus the single state cannot be *inherently* inferior to the married state. The church would do well to keep this in mind in its ministry to the never married and the previously married.

A consideration sometimes raised against the single state is Paul's prescription that bishops (1 Tim. 3:2), elders (Titus 1:6), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:12) be “husbands of one wife.” This is thought by some to exclude unmarried persons from these offices. However, the Greek phrase (*μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα*) should not be seen as prescribing that a church officeholder be a married man, but that he be what we would

call a “one woman” type of man. That is, Paul is not prescribing a minimum of one wife, but a maximum. Accordingly, some translations have the reading “married only once,” or something similar. Thus no one should be excluded from these offices merely because of being unmarried.

We have noted that the distinguishing mark of man, which is designated by the expression “the image of God,” is far-reaching, extending to all humans. In the sight of God, all humans are equal. The distinctions of race, social status, and sex are of no significance to him (Gal. 3:28). Salvation, eternal life, and fellowship with God are available to all persons. And because this is the case, those who are believers should show the same impartial interest in and concern for all humans, regardless of the incidentals of their lives (James 2:9).

---

---

**PART SIX**

## Sin

- 26. The Nature of Sin
- 27. The Source of Sin
- 28. The Results of Sin
- 29. The Magnitude of Sin
- 30. The Social Dimension of Sin

# 26

## The Nature of Sin

The Interrelationship Between the Doctrine of Sin and Other Doctrines

The Difficulty of Discussing Sin

Methods of Studying Sin

Terms for Sin

Terms Emphasizing Causes of Sin

Ignorance

Error

Inattention

Terms Emphasizing the Character of the Sin

Missing the Mark

K-religion

Transgression

Iniquity or Lack of Integrity

Rebellion

Treachery

Perversion

Abomination

Terms Emphasizing Results of Sin

Agitation or Restlessness

Evil or Badness

Guilt

Trouble

The Essential Nature of Sin

Sensuality

Selfishness

Displacement of God

## The Interrelationship Between the Doctrine of Sin and Other Doctrines

The doctrine of sin is both extremely important and much disputed. It is important because it affects and is also affected by many other areas of doctrine. Our view of the nature of God influences our understanding of sin. If God is a very high, pure, and exacting being who expects all humans to be as he is, then the slightest deviation from his lofty standard is sin, and man's condition is very serious. If, on the other hand, God is himself rather imperfect, or if he is an indulgent, grandfatherly type of being and perhaps a bit senile so that he is unaware of much that is going on, then man's condition is not so serious. Thus, in a real sense our doctrine of sin will be a reflection of our doctrine of God.

Our understanding of man also bears on our understanding of sin. If intended to reflect the nature of God, man is to be judged not by how he compares with other humans, but how he measures up to the divine standard. Any failure to meet that standard is sin. If man is a free being, that is, if he is not simply determined by forces of nature, then he is responsible for his actions, and his shortcomings will be graded more severely than if some determining force controls or severely limits what he is capable of choosing and doing.

Our doctrine of salvation will be strongly influenced by our understanding of sin. For if man is basically good and his intellectual and moral capabilities are essentially intact, then whatever problems he encounters with respect to his standing before God will be relatively minor. Any difficulty he experiences may be merely a matter of ignorance, a lack of knowledge as to what he ought to do or how to do it. In that event, education will solve the problem; a good model or example may be all that is needed. On the other hand, if man is corrupt or rebellious, and thus either unable or unwilling to do what he sees is right, a more radical cure will be needed. There will have to be actual transformation of the person. Thus, the more radical our conception of sin, the more supernatural the salvation we will deem needed.

One's understanding of sin is also important because it has a marked effect upon one's view of the nature of ministry and the style in which one will conduct it. If one assumes that man is basically good and inclined to do what God desires and intends for him, the message and thrust of ministry will be positive and affirmative, encouraging persons to do their best. The supposition here is that in a sense most people are already basically Christian, and simply need to continue in their present direction. If, on the other hand, persons are viewed as radically sinful, then the message will be that they should repent and be born again. In the former case, appeals to fairness, kindness, and generosity will be

thought to be sufficient; in the latter case, anyone who has not been converted will be regarded as basically selfish and even dishonest.

Our approach to the problems of society will also be governed by our view of sin. On the one hand, if we feel that man is basically good or, at worst, morally neutral, we will view the problems of society as stemming from an unwholesome environment. Alter the environment, and changes in individual humans and their behavior will follow. If, on the other hand, the problems of society are rooted in the radically perverted mind and will of individual human beings, then the nature of those individuals will need to be altered, or they will continue to infect the whole.

## The Difficulty of Discussing Sin

As important as the doctrine of sin is, it is not an easy topic to discuss in our day. There are several reasons for this. One is that sin, like death, is not a very pleasant or enjoyable subject. It depresses us. We do not like to think of ourselves as bad or evil persons. Yet the doctrine of sin teaches us that this is what we are by nature. Not only do individuals react against this negative teaching, but there is abroad in our society an emphasis on having a positive mental attitude. There is an insistence on accentuating only positive ideas and considerations. The possibilities of man, the bright moments in the history of the human race, the outstanding accomplishments of mankind deserve attention. To speak of man as a sinner is almost like screaming out a profanity or obscenity at a very formal, dignified, genteel meeting, or even in church. It is forbidden. This general attitude is almost a new type of legalism, the major prohibition of which is, "Thou shalt not speak anything negative."<sup>1</sup>

Another reason it is difficult to discuss sin is that to many people it is a foreign concept. Not only, as we have seen, are the problems of society blamed on an unwholesome environment rather than on sinful humans, but there has been a corresponding loss of a sense of guilt. We have in mind here the fact that a sense of objective guilt has become relatively uncommon in certain circles. In part through the influence of Freudianism, guilt is understood as an irrational feeling that one ought not to have. Without a transcendent, theistic reference point, there is no one other than oneself and other human beings to whom one is responsible or accountable. Thus, if no one is harmed by our actions, there is no reason to feel guilt.<sup>2</sup>

1. Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem The New Reformation* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982).

2. On the loss of a sense of guilt, see, e.g., Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1973).

Further, many people are unable to grasp the concept of sin. The idea of **sin** as an inner force, an inherent condition, a controlling power, is largely unknown. People today think more in terms of **sins**, that is, individual wrong acts. Sins are something external and concrete; they are logically separable from the person. On this basis, if one has not done anything wrong (generally conceived of as an external act), he considers himself good; there is no thought of sin.

### Methods of Studying Sin

The topic of sin can be approached and studied in a number of ways. One is the empirical or inductive approach. One can either observe the actions of contemporary human beings or examine the deeds of biblical persons, and then draw some conclusions regarding their behavior and the nature of sin. In this case the general characteristics of sin are inferred from a number of specific examples.

A second approach is the paradigm method. We could select one type of sin (or one term for sin) and set it up as our basic model of what sin is. We would then analyze other types of sin (or terms for sin) with reference to this basic model, regarding them as varieties or elucidations of our paradigm.

A third approach begins by noting all of the biblical terminology for sin. A wide variety of concepts will emerge. These concepts are then examined in order to discover the essential element of sin. This basic factor may then be used as our focal point as we endeavor to study and understand the nature of specific instances of sin. To a considerable extent, this will be the approach followed in this chapter.

### Terms for Sin

#### Terms Emphasizing Causes of Sin

The Bible uses many terms to denote sin. Some of them focus on its causes, others on its nature, and still others on its consequences. Although these categories may not always be clear-cut, we will make use of them in an effort to bring some order and systemization to our study of the biblical terminology. We begin with those terms which emphasize causes of sin, predisposing factors which give rise to sin.

##### **I. Ignorance**

One of the New Testament words stressing a cause of sin is *ἀγνοία*. A combination of a Greek verb meaning “to know” (*γινώσκω*, from *γνώω*)

and the alpha privative, it is related to the English word **agnostic**. Together with its cognates it is used in the Septuagint to render the verbs *שׁגַּה* (*shagah*) and *שׁגָּג* (*shagag*), which basically mean “to err.” Its immediate derivation is from *ἀγνοέω* (“to be ignorant”). This word is often used in settings where it means innocent ignorance (Rom. 1:13; 2 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 1:22). Some things done in ignorance were apparently innocent in the sight of God, or at least he overlooked them so that no serious consequences resulted (Acts 17:30). Yet at other points ignorant actions seem to be culpable. Ephesians 4:18 says of the Gentiles: “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.” In two passages, Acts 3:17 and 1 Peter 1:14, it is questionable whether the ignorance is culpable or innocent. In the former, however, Peter’s immediate appeal to his hearers to repent would suggest responsibility. The one instance of *ἀγνόημα* is in Hebrews 9:7. Here the writer refers to the annual visit of the high priest into the Holy of Holies in order to offer sacrifice both for himself and “for the errors of the people.” These errors or ignorances apparently were such that the people were liable to punishment for them. It may well be, then, that the reference here is to willful ignorance—the people could have known the right course to follow, but chose not to know it.

##### **2. Error**

More abundant are references to sin as error, that is, the human tendency to go astray, to make mistakes. The primary terms in the Old Testament are *שׁגַּה* (*shagah*) and *שׁגָּג* (*shagag*) together with their derivatives and related words. *שׁגַּה* is used both literally and figuratively. In its literal sense it is used of sheep that stray from the flock (Ezek. 34:6) and of drunken persons stumbling and reeling (Isa. 28:7). Although the related noun *מִשְׁגֵּה* (*mishgeh*) is used of an accidental mistake in Genesis 43:12, the verb generally refers to an error in moral conduct. The context indicates that the person committing the error is liable for his action. A particularly clear example is found in 1 Samuel 26:2. Saul sought to kill David, but David has spared Saul’s life. Saul says, “I have done wrong; return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day; behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.”

The verb *שׁגַּה* and the related noun *שׁגָּגָה* (*shagagah*) occur primarily in ritualistic passages. Among the nonritualistic instances Genesis 6:3 seems to refer to the weakness of man and his propensity to error. The Lord says: “My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” In two other cases, Psalm 119:67 and Ecclesiastes 10:5, the error appears to be culpable. The latter passage

reads, "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler." Job 12: 16 may also have reference to culpable error. The ritualistic passages in many cases have to do with the discovery that a law of the Lord has been unwittingly broken through ignorance or a mistake in judgment (e.g., Lev. 4:2-3, 22-24, 27-28; Num. 15:22-29). In Leviticus 22: 14 we have the case of someone's mistakenly eating food which was supposed to be eaten only by the priests. Although it was done in error, the fact that a small fine was levied is an indication that the offending party should have been more careful. This sense of responsibility for one's errors carries over to other instances as well.

In the New Testament, the term that most frequently denotes sin as error is *πλανῶμαι*, the passive form of *πλανάω*. It emphasizes the cause of one's going astray, namely, being deceived. Yet going astray as a result of being deceived is often an avoidable error, as statements like "Take heed that no one leads you astray" and "Do not be deceived" indicate (Mark 13:5-6; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 6:7; 2 Thess. 2:9-12; 1 John 3:7; 2 John 7). The source of this leading astray may be evil spirits (1 Tim. 4:1; 1 John 4:6; Rev. 12:9; 20:3), other men (Eph. 4: 14; 2 Tim. 3: 13), or oneself (1 John 1:8). Regardless of the source, those who fall into error know or ought to know that they are being led astray. Jesus likened sinners to straying sheep (Luke 15:1-7), and also observed that the Sadducees' error is that they know neither the Scripture nor the power of God (Mark 12:24-27). The sin against nature is termed error in Romans 1:27, and in Titus 3:3. Paul describes life without Christ as "foolish, disobedient, led astray." In Hebrews the people in the wilderness are characterized as going astray in their hearts (3:10). The high priest dealt gently with the sins of the ignorant and wayward, since he also was subject to such weaknesses; nevertheless, sacrifices had to be offered for those sins (5:2-3).

From the foregoing, it appears that both the Old and New Testament recognized various errors as sin, although there were clearly innocent errors, acts committed in ignorance, for which no penalty (or perhaps a small fine) was assessed. Evidence of this is seen in the provision of cities of refuge for those who had unwittingly killed someone (Num. 35:9-15, 22-28; Josh. 20). Of course, acts like involuntary manslaughter are more

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Sin and of the Ways of God with Sinners* (London: Epworth, 1953), p. 20.

in the nature of accidents than the result of willful ignorance. In most cases, however, what the Bible terms errors simply ought not to have occurred: the person should have known better, and was responsible to so inform himself. While these sins are less heinous than the deliberate and rebellious type of wrongdoing, the individual is still responsible for them, and therefore penalty attaches to them.

3. Inattention

Another scriptural designation for sin is inattention. In classical Greek the word *παρακοή* has the meaning “to hear amiss or incorrectly.”<sup>4</sup> In several New Testament passages it refers to disobedience as a result of inattention (Rom. 5: 19; 2 Cor. 10:6). The clearest case is Hebrews 2:2-3, where the context indicates the meaning that we are suggesting: “For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience [*παρακοή*] received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” Similarly, the verb *παρακούω* means “to take no heed” (Matt. 18: 17) or “to hear without heeding” (Mark 5:36). Thus the sin of *παρακοή* is either the failure to listen and heed when God is speaking, or the disobedience which follows upon failure to hear aright.

### *Terms Emphasizing the Character of the Sir*

In the preceding section we examined terms emphasizing causes of sin, factors predisposing us to sin, rather than the character or nature of the sin, although something of the latter is also contained within those terms. In many cases, the sins we examined involve relatively minor consequences. We now come to a group of sins, however, which are so serious in character that it makes little difference why they occur, what prompts the individual to commit them. The nature of the deed is the crucial matter.

### *1. Missing the Mar-*

Probably the most common of those concepts which stress the nature of the sin is the idea of missing the mark. It is found in the Hebrew verb **חַטָּא** (*chata'*) and in the Greek verb **ἀμαρτάνω**. The Hebrew verb and its cognates appear about six hundred times and are translated in the Septuagint by thirty-two different Greek words, the most common rendering by far being **ἀμαρτάνω** and its cognates.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937), p. 341.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Doctrine of Sin*, p. 69.

A literal usage of κατ. can be found in Judges 20: 16. Seven hundred crack marksmen, all of them left-handed (or ambidextrous) and from the tribe of Benjamin, “could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss.” Another literal usage is in Proverbs 19:2: “he who makes haste with his feet misses his way.” Such literal usages are rare, however.

The phrase “missing the mark” usually suggests to us a mistake rather than a willful, consciously chosen sin. But in the Bible the word κατ. suggests not merely failure, but a decision to fail.<sup>6</sup> “Missing the mark” is a voluntary and culpable mistake. Ryder Smith puts it very strongly: “The hundreds of examples of the word’s **moral use** require that the wicked man ‘misses the right mark **because he chooses** to aim at a wrong one’ and ‘misses the right path **because he deliberately follows a wrong** one’—that is, there is no question of an innocent mistake or of the merely negative idea of ‘failure.’<sup>7</sup>

The word κατ. is used to refer to one’s actions in relationship both to man and to God, although the latter is much more common than the former. In ritualistic passages there are a few instances where the noun form seems to refer to an unwitting sin. There it is often found in conjunction with the noun ἀνόητος (“unwittingly,” i.e., through ignorance); it is translated “sin” or “sin offering” (e.g., Lev. 4-5). These two concepts of the sin committed and the offering made for the sin seem to be bridged in the idea of “bearing sin,” which is found, for example, in Leviticus 24: 15 and Isaiah 53: 12. This is in keeping with the observation of Gerhard von Rad that “in Hebrew the act and the evil consequences following it which Israel will ‘meet with,’ that is, which will react upon Israel, are one and the same.”<sup>8</sup> The idea is that sin is a heavy burden which must be borne.

When we come to the New Testament, the most common term, and the one most nearly equivalent to κατ., is ἀμαρτάνω and its two noun forms, ἀμαρτία and ἀμάρτημα. This conclusion is based upon two considerations. One is that, as we pointed out earlier, ἀμαρτάνω is the word most frequently used in the Septuagint to render κατ.. The other consideration is that the basic meaning of the two words is the same. The verb ἀμαρτάνω originally meant “to miss, miss the mark, lose, not share in something, be mistaken.”<sup>9</sup> The noun ἀμαρτία denotes the act itself, the failure to reach a goal, and ἀμάρτημα denotes the result of this act.

6. Ibid., p. 16.

7. Ibid., p. 17.

8. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), vol. 1, p. 266.

9. Walther Giinther, “Sin,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), vol. 3, p. 577.

This word family constitutes the most prominent of all New Testament terms for sin. It is used far more frequently (there are almost three hundred occurrences) than any of the other terms. Just as in the Septuagint, the meaning in the New Testament is to miss the mark because one aims at the wrong target. The emphasis is on what actually occurs rather than on one’s motivation for aiming wrong.

This sin is always sin against God, since it is failure to hit the mark which he has set, his standard. This mark that is missed is perfect love of God and perfect obedience to him. We miss this mark and sin against God when, for example, we fail to love our brother, since love of brother would inevitably follow if we truly loved God. Similarly, sinning against one’s own body is mistreatment of God’s temple (1 Cor. 3: 16-1 7) and therefore a sin against God.

Before we end our brief discussion of missing the mark, some additional observations need to be made. One is that the idea of blameworthiness is clearly attached to missing the mark. Whatever antecedents may have led to the act of sin, it is culpable behavior. The fact that κατ. is often found in confessions indicates that the sinner senses responsibility. A further point is the teleological association of the concept. One has a goal or purpose which he has failed to achieve. Despite the protestations of some that this is a Greek way of thinking, it is nevertheless found in both Testaments.

Further, we should note that there was a development and refinement of the concept between the Old Testament and New Testament periods. Greek has not only the noun ἀμαρτία, the actual act of sinning, but also the noun ἀμάρτημα, the end result of the sin. There is no equivalent distinction in Hebrew; perhaps this reflects the phenomenon pointed out earlier that the act and the result were thought of as inseparable and even identical.

## 2. Irreligion

Sin is also designated irreligion, particularly in the New Testament. One prominent word is the verb ἀσεβέω, along with its noun form ἀσεβεία and its adjectival form ἀσεβής. This is the negative of σεβώ, which means “to worship” or “to reverence” and is always found in the middle voice in the New Testament. Ἀσεβέω is the contrary of the term εὐσεβέω and its cognates, which are especially common in the Pastoral Epistles. The verb εὐσεβέω and its cognates together with the term θεοσεβής are used of the piety of the devout. Thus the cluster of terms around ἀσεβέω means not so much ungodliness as irreverence. They are found particularly in Romans, 2 Peter, and Jude. “Impiety” and its cognates may be the best English rendering.

The words ἀδικέω, ἀδικία, and ἀδικος also denote irreligion. They

indicate the absence of righteousness. In classical Greek *ἀδικία* is not very clearly defined and hence takes on various nuances of meaning.<sup>10</sup> The adjective *ἀδικός* can mean “wrong, useless, not of a right nature.” The words in this family often occur in legal contexts, where they signify neglect of one’s duties toward the gods. In the Septuagint they are used to translate a variety of Hebrew words; *ἀδικέω* is used for no fewer than twenty-four words. The noun form is most frequently found in the singular, which some have seen as an indication that there had already been advancement from the idea of individual sins to the more encompassing idea of *sin*.

The *δίκη* or righteousness to which *ἀδικία* is contrasted was originally the justice of the law court.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the New Testament *ἀδικία* is injustice or, more broadly, any unrighteous conduct. It is failure to measure up to the standard of righteousness. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul asks, “Do you not know that the unrighteous [*ἀδικοι*] will not inherit the kingdom of God?” And in Colossians 3:25 he says, “For the wrongdoer [*ἀδικῶν*] will be paid back for the wrong he has done [*ἡδίκησε*], and there is no partiality.” From these and other texts we conclude that in the New Testament *ἀδικία* is behavior contrary to the standard of righteousness. Although that standard may not be concretely identified as the law, nonetheless, it is clear that *ἀδικία* is definitely an act of sinfulness.

One additional term in this grouping is the noun *ἀνομία* together with the adjective *ἄνομος* and the adverb *ἀνόμως*. These are not very common in the New Testament. They are obviously, in one way or another, the negation of *νόμος* (“law”). There are two basic senses. Paul uses the adjective and adverb to refer to persons who did not have the Jewish law, that is, Gentiles (Rom. 2: 12; 1 Cor. 9:21), and Peter is probably using the adjective in a similar way in Acts 2:23. More often, however, these words have reference to lawbreakers in general, both Jew and Gentile. Peter says of Lot that ‘he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds’ (2 Peter 2:8; see also 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 Tim. 1:9). The Gentiles, although they did not have the Jewish law, nonetheless did possess a divine law, which they constantly broke. The word *ἀνομία* never refers to a breaking of the law in the narrow sense of the Mosaic regulations, but always to a breaking of the law of God in the broader sense. The only usages of *ἀνομία* in the Synoptic Gospels are four instances in Matthew (7:23; 13:41; 23:28; and 24:12). In each case it is Jesus who uses the term; in each case a breach of the universal law known to everyone is in view; and in each case the context alludes to the judgment that will occur at the second coming of Christ. There are

several other passages in the New Testament which speak of the violation of God’s law in the broader sense and occur in contexts which make reference to Christ’s second coming and the judgment (e.g., 2 Thess. 2: 1-2; 1 John 3:2, 4). Ryder Smith summarizes: “Whenever *anomia* is used, the concepts of law and judgment are present, and, in the characteristic and more numerous instances, the reference is not to the Jewish Law, but to anything and everything that any man knows that God has commanded.”<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that when Paul refers to a violation of the law of the Jews, he uses another word, *παρανομέω* (Acts 23:3).

### 3. Transgression

The Hebrew word פָּרָשׁ (*avar*) appears approximately six hundred times in the Old Testament. It means, literally, “to cross over” or “to pass by”; nearly all of the occurrences are in the literal sense. There are, however, a number of passages in which the word involves the idea of transgressing a command or going beyond a limit that has been set. In Esther 3:3 it is used of an earthly king’s command. In most of the parallel cases, however, it is used of transgressing the commands of the Lord. There is a concrete example in Numbers 14:41–42. The people of Israel want to go up to the place which the Lord had promised, but Moses says, “Why now are you transgressing the command of the **LORD**, for that will not succeed? Do not go up lest you be struck down before your enemies, for the **LORD** is not among you.” The people of Israel were not to transgress God’s covenant (Deut. 17:2) or his commandment (Deut. 26:13). Other examples include Jeremiah 34:18; Daniel 9:11; and Hosea 6:7; 8:1.

While a number of Greek words are used in the Septuagint to translate פָּרָשׁ, the one which is closest in meaning is *παραβαίνω* and its noun form *παράβασις*. The verb appears in Matthew 15:2–3. The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus: “‘Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.’ He answered them, ‘And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’” Sometimes these terms refer to the transgression of a particular commandment, for example, Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit (Rom. 5: 14; 1 Tit-n. 2: 14).<sup>13</sup> They always carry the implication that some law has been transgressed. Consequently, Paul can say, “Where there is no law there is no transgression” (Rom. 4: 15). The reference is usually to Jewish law (Rom. 2:23, 25, 27; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2; 9: 15). Even where something wider is suggested (Gal. 2: 18; James 2:9, 11), there is a direct reference to the Jewish law. This is in keeping with the distinction noted earlier between *ἀνομία* and *παρανομέω*.

10. Ibid., p. 573.

11. Smith, *Doctrine of Sin*, p. 143.

12. Ibid., p. 145.

13. Ibid.

#### 4. Iniquity or Lack of Integrity

**Sin** is also characterized as iniquity. The primary word here is בַּוֹל ('awal) and its derivatives. The basic concept seems to be deviation from a right course. Thus, the word can carry the idea of injustice, failure to fulfil the standard of righteousness, or lack of integrity. The idea of injustice is evident in Leviticus 19: 15: ‘**You** shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.’ In Ezekiel 18:24 God speaks of a righteous man who turns from that righteousness which has been his pattern, contradicting what seems to be his nature: ‘But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live?’ In the former case, lack of integrity is seen in failure to fulfil or maintain the just law of God. In the latter case, lack of integrity is seen in the disunity in the individual—there is a discrepancy between present and past behavior or character.

#### 5. Rebellion

There are a number of Old Testament words which depict sin as rebellion, a rather prominent idea in Hebrew thought. The most common of these is עבָד (pasha') together with its noun עבָדָה (pesha'). The verb is often translated ‘transgress,’ but the root meaning is ‘to rebel.’ It is sometimes used of rebellion against a human king (e.g., 1 Kings 12:19), but more frequently the reference is to rebellion against God. One of the most vivid of these latter usages is Isaiah 1:2, ‘Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.’

Among other words which convey the idea of rebellion is מְרַאֵה (mar-ah). Usually translated ‘to rebel,’ it denotes ‘refractoriness.’<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 1:20 reads, ‘If you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the **Lord** has spoken.’ Another word depicting sin as rebellion is מְרַד (marad). God says to Ezekiel: ‘Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me; they and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day’ (Ezek. 2:3). We should also mention סָרָר (sarar). It conveys the idea of stubbornness as well as rebellion (Deut. 21:18; Ps. 78:8). It is apparent that the Hebrews had an extensive vocabulary for rebellion, evidence that this was an all too common practice among them. The prophets in particular spoke out against this type of behavior, for by their time the temptation to throw off the rule of the Lord had become severe.

The New Testament also characterizes sin as rebelliousness and dis-

14. Ibid., p. 20.

obedience. The most common terms are the noun ἀπειθεῖα and the related verb ἀπειθέω and adjective ἀπειθής. In all, these terms appear twenty-nine times. In two cases, Romans 1:30 and 2 Timothy 3:2, they refer to disobedience to parents, but in the vast majority of cases they refer to disobedience to God. The Jews in the time of Moses failed to enter into the Promised Land because of their disobedience (Heb. 3:18; 4:6). John the Baptist was sent to turn the disobedient Jews of his time to wisdom (Luke 1:17). It is also said of ancient Gentiles (Heb. 11:31; 1 Peter 3:20) that they were disobedient, as were the contemporary Gentiles (Rom. 1:30). Gentiles were responsible since they apparently had the law of God written on their hearts. Paul even uses the expression ‘sons of disobedience’ in Ephesians 2:2 and 5:6, and perhaps in Colossians 3:6 (depending on the textual reading). It is not merely believers who disobey, but in numerous passages outsiders are referred to as disobedient (e.g., John 3:36; Acts 14:2; 19:9; 1 Peter 2:8; 3:1; 4:17). Rejecting the gospel is referred to as ‘disobeying,’ since it is assumed that those who accept the gospel will obey.

Two other New Testament terms which more concretely convey the idea of rebellion are ἀφίστημι and ἀποστασία. The former is used in 1 Timothy 4:1 and Hebrews 3: 12 of Christians who fall away from the faith. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul speaks of a final apostasy, and in Acts 2:1:21 the Jerusalem brothers inform him that he is rumored to have taught the Jews to forsake Moses (his teachings). The verb πικραίνω and its derivatives, which are frequently used in the Septuagint (particularly in the form παραπικραίνω) to translate the Hebrew terms for rebellion, are usually used in the New Testament to speak of provoking men rather than God. The one major exception is in Hebrews 3:8–16.

To summarize: All persons are assumed to be in contact with the truth of God. This includes even the Gentiles, who do not have his special revelation. Failure to believe the message, particularly when openly and specially presented, is disobedience or rebellion. Anyone who disobeys a king is considered an enemy.<sup>15</sup> Likewise the multitudes who disobey God's Word.

#### 6. Treachery

Closely related to the concept of sin as rebellion is the idea of sin as breach of trust or treachery. The most common Hebrew word in this connection is בַּזָּבֵב (ma'al), which in the majority of instances denotes treachery against God. It is used in Numbers 5: 12, 27, of a woman's unfaithfulness to her husband. The sin of Achan in taking devoted things is spoken of as ‘breaking faith’ (Josh. 7:1; 22:20). An excellent example of

15. Ibid.

the use of this term to denote treachery against God is found in Leviticus 26:40: "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery which they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me. . ." In Ezekiel 14: 13 and 15:8 God affirms that any land that acts faithlessly against him will be made desolate and unbearing. One other Hebrew word, *רָגַד* (*bagad*), is occasionally used to refer to treachery against God (Ps. 78:57; Jer. 3: 10; Mal. 2: 11).

There are New Testament references to sin as treachery as well. Among the words used in the Septuagint to translate *רָגַד* are *παραπίπτω* and *παράπτωμα*, both of which mean "to fall away." The one instance of *παραπίπτω* in the New Testament is in Hebrews 6:6, referring to a deliberate turning from what one has been exposed to and has partaken of. Of twenty-one occurrences of *παράπτωμα*, Ryder Smith says that "it is likely that, in the New Testament as in LXX, the idea of a traitor's desertion is never wholly lost."<sup>16</sup>

In both Testaments, there is a focus upon the bond or covenant which exists between God and his people. The people in the covenant enjoy a special relationship with God or have at least been introduced to the things of God. God has entrusted them with an exceptional gift. The sin of betrayal of or infidelity to that trust is appropriately labeled treachery. It is especially reprehensible because of what has been violated.

#### 7. Perversion

The basic meaning of the word *תְּבִזֵּב* ('awah) is "to bend or twist." It means, as well, "to be bent or bowed down."<sup>17</sup> This literal meaning is seen in Isaiah 21:3 ("I am bowed down so that I cannot hear, I am dismayed so that I cannot see") and 24:1 ("Behold, the Lord will lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants"). In Proverbs 12:8 the idea is transferred from the physical to the mental realm, from a twisted body (as in Isa. 21:3) to a twisted mind: "A man is commended according to his good sense, but one of perverse mind is despised." The noun forms derived from *תְּבִזֵּב* speak of the destruction of cities (Ps. 79: 1; Isa. 17: 1; Jer. 26: 18; Mic. 1:6; 3: 12) and of distortion of judgment: "The Lord has mingled within her a spirit of confusion; and they have made Egypt stagger in all her doings as a drunken man staggers in his vomit" (Isa. 19: 14).

The basic meaning is metaphorically present when *תְּבִזֵּב* or a related word is used to denote sin. The term frequently carries the suggestion of

16. Ibid., p. 149.

17. Gustave F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), p. 160; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 730.

punishment. Cain, for example, says, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4: 13). Again we see a close connection between sin and its consequences. Similarly, *תְּבִזֵּב* and its derivatives occasionally suggest the condition of guilt or iniquity. This emphasis is seen clearly in Hosea 5:5 ("Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt; Judah also shall stumble with them") and 14: 1(2) ("you have stumbled because of your iniquity"). Here emerges the concept of sin not merely as isolated acts, but as an actual alteration of the condition or character of the sinner. The one who sins becomes twisted or distorted as it were. The true nature for which and in which man was created (the image and likeness of God) is disturbed. This is both the result and the cause of sin.

#### 8. Abomination

The characterization of sin as abomination appears to have special reference to God's attitude toward sin and its effect upon him. "Abomination" is the most common English translation of *שִׁקְוֹת* (*shiqquts*) and *תֹּאֶבֶה* (*to'ebah*). These terms generally describe an act particularly reprehensible to God, such as idolatry (Deut. 7:25-26), homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), wearing clothing of the opposite sex (Deut. 22:5), sacrificing sons and daughters (Deut. 12:3 1) or blemished animals (Deut. 17:1), and witchcraft (Deut. 18:9-12). These practices virtually nauseate God. The term *abomination* indicates that these sins are not simply something that God peevishly objects to, but something that produces revulsion in him.

#### Terms Emphasizing Results of Sin

We come now to those terms which focus neither upon the predisposing factors that give rise to sin, nor upon the nature of the act itself, but rather upon the consequences which follow from sin.

#### 1. Agitation or Restlessness

The word *רְשָׁא* (*resha'*), which is usually translated "wickedness," is believed to have originally suggested the concept of tossing and restlessness. Related to an Arabic word which means "to be loose (of limbs)," the root of *רְשָׁא* may mean "to be disjointed, ill regulated, abnormal, wicked."<sup>18</sup> There is evidence of the literal meaning in Job 3:17 ("There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest") and Isaiah 57:20-21 ("But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked"). The wicked therefore are to be seen as causing agitation and discomfort

18. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 957

for themselves and for others as well. They live in chaotic confusion and bring similar disorder into the lives of those close to them. This moral sense is always present when the word **עַבֵּד** or a cognate is applied to human beings.

### 2. Evil or Badness

The word **עַבְּדָה** (*r-a*) is a generic term. It means evil in the sense of badness. Thus, it can refer to anything which is harmful or malignant, not merely the morally evil. For example, it can be used of food which has gone bad or a dangerous animal.<sup>19</sup> It may mean distress or adversity. Jeremiah 42:6 quotes the commanders of the forces as saying to Jeremiah, “Whether it is good or evil, we will obey the voice of the **Lord** our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the **Lord** our God.” The words “good or evil” could have been rendered “prosperity or adversity” here. In Amos 6:3 we read of a day of calamity. This word, then, binds together the act of sin and its consequences. In Deuteronomy 30: 15 God sets before the people the choice of ‘life and good, death and evil.’ They may choose to keep his commandments, in which case good will come to them, or to disobey, in which case the result will be evil: they will perish (v. 18).

### 3. Guilt

Although the idea of guilt is implied by some of the words examined earlier, in the word **עֲשֹׂם** (*asham*) it becomes explicit. In speaking of the act of sin, **עֲשֹׂם** means “to do a wrong, to commit an offense, or to inflict an injury.” A wrong has been done to someone, a wrong for which the perpetrator ought to be punished or the victim compensated. And, as a matter of fact, in about one-third of the passages where **עֲשֹׂם** or a related word appears, the meaning is “sin offering.” In Numbers 5:8 it means “compensation or satisfaction for injury inflicted”: “But if the man has no kinsman to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to the **Lord** for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made for him.” The idea in this case and in many others is that harm has been done by the act of sin, and there must be some form of restitution to set matters right.

The word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word **עֲשֹׂם**, **πλημμέλεια**, does not occur in the New Testament. There is a New Testament word for “guilty,” however—**ἔνοχος**, which appears only ten

19. Smith, *Doctrine of Sin*, p. 15.

times. Jesus pointed out that, regardless of the human verdict, whoever hates his brother is guilty of murder in the sight of God (Matt. 5:21-22). Paul warned that whoever partakes of the Lord’s Supper unworthily is guilty of profaning the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27). And James insisted that whoever offends in one point of the law is guilty of all (James 2:10). In all of these usages of the word **ἔνοχος**, the standard of justice is God’s. The sinner is liable to punishment for offending God. As we have seen, in Hebrew thinking the punishment is virtually inseparable from the sin.

### 4. Trouble

The word **עַבְּדָה** (*aven*) literally means “trouble.” It is almost always used in a moral sense. The underlying idea is that sin brings trouble upon the sinner. Thus **Hosea** refers to Bethel, after it became a seat of idolatry, as **Beth-aven**, the “house of trouble” (Hos. 4: 15; 10:8). In the Psalms the expression “workers of trouble” occurs frequently (e.g., 5:5; 6:8, etc.). The Arabic equivalent means “to be fatigued, tired”; it suggests weariness, sorrow, trouble.<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew term appears to bear the idea of consequent misery, trouble, difficulty, and sorrow. This implication of the term is clearly spelled out in its usage in Proverbs 22:8: “He who sows injustice will reap calamity.”

## The Essential Nature of Sin

We have seen that there is a wide variety of terms for sin, each emphasizing a somewhat different aspect. But is it possible in the midst of this bewildering variety to formulate some comprehensive definition of sin, to identify the essence of sin? We have seen that sins are variously characterized in the Bible as unbelief, rebellion, perversity, missing the mark. But what is sin?

A common element running through all of these varied ways of characterizing sin is the idea that the sinner has failed to fulfil God’s law. There are various ways in which we fail to meet his standard of righteousness. We may go beyond the limits that are imposed, that is, we may engage in “transgression.” We may simply fall short of the standard that is set, or not do at all what God commands and expects. Or we may do the right thing, but for a wrong reason, thus fulfilling the letter of the law, but not its spirit.

In the Old Testament, sin is to a large extent a matter of external actions or outward lack of conformity to the requirements of God.

20. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, pp. 19-20.

Inward thoughts and motives are not completely ignored in the Old Testament conception, but in the New Testament they become especially prominent. Here motives are virtually as important as actions. So Jesus condemned anger and lust as vehemently as he did murder and adultery (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). He also condemned outwardly good acts done primarily out of a desire to obtain the approval of man rather than to please God (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16).

Yet sin is not merely wrong acts and thoughts, but sinfulness as well, an inherent inner disposition inclining us to wrong acts and thoughts. Thus it is not simply that we are sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.

We offer, then, this definition of sin: "Sin is any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law of God. This may be a matter of act, of thought, or of inner disposition or state." Sin is failure to live up to what God expects of us in act, thought, and being. We must still ask at this point, however, whether there is one basic principle of sin, one underlying factor which characterizes all of sin in its manifold varieties. Several suggestions have been made.

#### Sensuality

One suggestion is that sin is sensuality. This was the view of Friedrich Schleiermacher among others. According to this conception, sin is the tendency of the lower or physical nature to dominate and control the higher or spiritual nature. This takes Paul's warnings against living "according to the flesh" quite literally, and bases sin in the physical or material aspect of man.<sup>21</sup> This conception, which often assumes that matter is inherently evil, is also prominent in the thought of Augustine, in his case growing out of his own struggle with sensuality.<sup>22</sup>

As appealing as this view is because of its simplicity, it nonetheless has significant shortcomings. For one thing, it seems to disregard the fact that many sins, and perhaps the worst sins, are not physical in nature. In Paul's famous catalog of sins in Galatians 5:19-21, many are indeed "works of the flesh" in the literal sense: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, carousings. But several are definitely more "spiritual" in nature: enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy. The view that sin is sensuality has to maintain that contact of the soul or spirit with a corrupted body produces these "spiritual" sins. But at this point the meaning of sensuality seems to have been stretched to incredible lengths.

21. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 271-73.

22. Augustine *Confessions* 2.

Further, rigid control of one's physical nature does not appear to have any marked effect upon one's degree of sinfulness. Ascetics attempt to bring their physical impulses under control, and often succeed to a considerable extent, yet they are not necessarily less sinful as a result. Other sins may be present, including pride. The sinful nature, repressed in one area, simply forces expression in some other area. This is often true as well of older persons. While their physical passions are frequently considerably diminished, they may display great fits of irritability, impatience, or something similar.

Moreover, the idea that sin is essentially sensuality is a misunderstanding of "flesh," especially as Paul uses the term (see pp. 598-99). Therefore, we must conclude that the view that sensuality is the essential principle of sin is inadequate.

#### Selfishness

A second view is that sin is essentially selfishness—the "choice of self as the supreme end which constitutes the antithesis of supreme love to God."<sup>23</sup> This view was held by Augustus Strong and, in a somewhat different form, by Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr contended that pride, hubris, is the major form of man's opposition to God.<sup>24</sup>

According to Strong, selfishness, the preference of oneself to God, may reveal itself in many forms. In someone with inordinate appetites or desires, it takes the form of sensuality. Selfishness may also reveal itself as unbelief, turning away from the truth of God. Or it may reveal itself as enmity to God, if we conceive of God's holiness as resisting and punishing us. Thus, sin in whatever form is selfishness. It is preferring one's own ideas to God's truth. It is preferring the satisfaction of one's own will to doing God's will. It is loving oneself more than God. The dethronement of God from his rightful place as the Lord of one's life requires the enthronement of something else, and this is understood to be the enthronement of oneself.<sup>25</sup>

Here again is a view which has much to commend it. It certainly strikes a responsive note in the thinking of many of us, for we know that selfishness holds a firm grip on our lives and induces us to commit many sins. Yet there is one major problem with this view. Some of what we do

23. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 567.

24. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner, 1941), vol. 1, pp. 186-207.

25. This idea is quite clearly advanced in Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1965), p. 9.

cannot really be characterized as selfish in the strict sense, yet is sinful. For example, there are those who sin against God, not by loving themselves more than they love God, but by loving some other person more. And there are some people (e.g., Communists) who give their lives for a cause that is opposed to that of God. It might, of course, be countered that this is what brings such people satisfaction. Suffering or death is what really meets their selfish needs and desires. But this counterargument would involve defining "selfishness" in such an elastic way that nothing could possibly count against the theory that selfishness is the essence of sin, in which case the theory would be a meaningless statement.

#### **Displacement of God**

An alternative preferable to the views that sin is basically sensuality **or selfishness is** that the essence of sin is simply failure to let God be God. It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his. Thus, choosing oneself rather than God is not wrong because it is self that is chosen, but because something other than God is chosen. Choosing any finite object over God is wrong, no matter how selfless such an act might be.

This contention is supported by major texts in both the Old and New Testaments. The Ten Commandments begin with the command to give God his proper place. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3) is the first prohibition in the law. Similarly, Jesus affirmed that the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Proper recognition of God is primary. Idolatry in any form, not pride, is the essence of sin.

One might ask what the major factor in our failure to love, worship, and obey God is. I submit that it is disbelief. Anyone who truly believes God to be what he says he is will accord to him his rightful status. Failure to do so is sin. Setting one's own ideas above God's revealed Word entails refusal to believe it to be true. Seeking one's own will involves believing that one's own values are actually higher than those of God. In short, it is failing to acknowledge God as God.

27

## The Source of Sin

### Various Conceptions of the Source of Sin

- Animal Nature
- Anxiety of Finiteness
- Existential Estrangement
- Economic Struggle
- Individualism and Competitiveness

### The Biblical Teaching

### Implications of the Various Views-The Cure for Sin

### Various Conceptions of the Source of Sin

We have seen that the Old and New Testaments have a wide variety of terms for sin. Now we need to ask regarding the source of sin, the cause of or occasion leading to sin. This is vital because our understanding of the source out of which sin arises will greatly affect our idea of the nature of the action necessary to prevent or eliminate sin.

#### *Animal Nature*

One conception of the source of sin considers man to have evolved from animals and thus to possess an animal nature with impulses still

persisting from earlier periods. Since man is yet evolving, those impulses are declining and man is less sinful today than he was in the past. This view of sin was particularly popular in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a period when theological construction was under a couple of highly significant influences. The biblical accounts of creation and the fall were beginning to be regarded in a somewhat different light. The critical study of the Pentateuch and acceptance of the documentary hypothesis were probably at their peak. The other major factor was the popularity of the theory of biological evolution. From the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species in* 1859, belief in his view had spread steadily and had extended into areas other than merely the biological.<sup>1</sup> For example, the various religions were thought of as products of long periods of development. As critical analysis of the biblical sources was supplemented by study of the development of religions, it was concluded that the Hebrews' religion was the product of an evolutionary process and had derived many of its major conceptions from the religions of the surrounding peoples. The Genesis account of the creation of man came to be regarded as untenable, and with it belief in the historicity of the story of the fall had to be abandoned as well. So another explanation of the origin of sin had to be found.

One significant attempt in this direction is that of Frederick R. Tennant. The extent of Tennant's interest in the subject is indicated by the fact that he wrote no fewer than three works on sin.<sup>2</sup> He regards the doctrine of the fall, that is, the belief that man of his own free will rebelled and fell from a state of original righteousness, as a convenient explanation adopted by theology and sometimes by philosophy to account for the widespread phenomenon of sin. Although the belief has been popular, Tennant asserts that there is no justification for reading the Bible's teaching back into the early history of the human race.<sup>3</sup> On the grounds of several different sciences and a number of other disciplines it is now impossible to believe in a state of original righteousness:

The increased light which has been thrown upon the early history of mankind, not to speak of the continuity of the human species with those lower in the scale of animal life, compels us to entertain the conviction that what was once necessarily received as a genuine tradition is rather, transfigured and spiritualised, the product of primitive speculation on a

1. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), pp. 46-1-65.

2. Frederick R. Tennant, *The Concept of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1912); *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1902); *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

3. Tennant, *Origin and Propagation*, p. 26.

matter beyond the reach of human memory. Literary Criticism and Historical Exegesis, Comparative Religion and Race-Psychology, Geology and Anthropology all contribute materially to the cumulative evidence on this head.<sup>4</sup>

Tennant notes that there also is a problem if one attempts to reconcile two propositions which grow out of the experience of the believer. On the one hand, there is the fact of the commonness of sin, which even seems universal. On the other hand, the sense of guilt which each of us has suggests personal responsibility. This requires that each one be his own Adam. Sin is universal, yet individually chosen. As long as belief in original sin is maintained in terms of the old Augustinian doctrine that all sinned in Adam, this antinomy cannot be reconciled? Tennant thinks it is possible to find the source of sin instead in the makeup of human nature and in man's coming to moral consciousness as he gradually developed through the process of evolution.<sup>6</sup>

Tennant finds the outlines of his view expressed in the thought of Archdeacon J. Wilson and in Otto Pfleiderer's philosophy of religion. Wilson said in his Hulse lectures:

Man fell, according to science, when he first became conscious of the conflict of freedom and conscience. To the evolutionist sin is not an innovation, but is the survival or misuse of habits and tendencies that were incidental to an earlier stage in development, whether of the individual or the race, and were not originally sinful, but were actually useful. Their sinfulness lies in their anachronism: in their resistance to the evolutionary and Divine force that makes for moral development and righteousness. Sin is the violation of a man's higher nature which he finds within, parallel to a lower nature.<sup>7</sup>

Pfleiderer traced sin to the natural impulses of the human which survive from an earlier stage. Every living being, man included, tends to satisfy its own natural impulses. This is not evil or sinful. It is merely the expression of the implanted instinct for survival. When we humans advance to the point where we have knowledge of the law, these natural strivings do not simply die away. Conflict arises. We are no longer enslaved to animal impulses, but have developed enough freedom of will to control them. Pfleiderer termed as sin every failure in the attempt to

4. Ibid., p. 27.

5. Ibid., p. 80.

6. Ibid., p. 81.

7. Quoted in Tennant, *Origin and Propagation*, p. 82.

bring these natural impulses under the dominion of the higher or rational nature, and every conscious desistance from the struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Tennant adopts and expands upon the suggestions of these two theologians. His first major axiom is that man evolved from lower forms of life: "I shall venture to assume as overwhelmingly probable that there is continuity between the physical constitution of man and that of the lower animals."<sup>9</sup> The first life of man was social; the tribe was all-important, and the individual relatively insignificant. While we do not have direct historical knowledge of this early stage, we can extrapolate from what we do know a picture of how man has developed within history. The study of contemporary primitive societies supplements our knowledge. This leads us increasingly to the conclusion that the individual was of relatively little importance in the early stages of man's life. The idea of moral personality emerged extremely late in human thought.<sup>10</sup>

Tennant does not get involved in the question of the origin of the acts which we today call sin. They are simply the continuation of acts of self-preservation which are natural to animals and thus, because of their origin, to human beings as well. When moral consciousness arose, these acts took on the character which now deserves the designation of sin. Personal moral consciousness, or what we call conscience, evolved when what was merely arbitrary or ceremonial became by degrees internal and introspective. The origin of sin, in this sense, was a gradual process.<sup>11</sup>

Tennant makes much of Paul's statement, "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. ... Apart from the law sin lies dead" (Rom. 7:7-8). It is this law that gives natural acts the character of sin. "The appearance of sin, from this point of view, would not consist in the performance of a deed such as man had never done before, and of whose wickedness, should he commit it, he was previously aware; it would rather be the continuance in certain practices, or the satisfying of natural impulses, after that they were first discovered to be contrary to a recognized sanction of rank as low as that of tribal custom."<sup>12</sup> On this basis, the first sin was not the most tragic point in the history of the human race. It was, rather, quite insignificant. Indeed, the sinfulness of sin has gradually increased from zero as the human race has become more and more sensitive to the fact of the wrongness of their actions.<sup>13</sup>

8. Tennant, *Origin and Propagation*, p. 84.

9. Ibid., p. 86.

10. Ibid., p. 90.

11. Ibid., pp. 90-91.

12. Ibid., p. 91.

13. Ibid.

At the same time, of course, humans have continued to evolve and the number of sinful acts has diminished.

Let us recapitulate what Tennant has said. Man has certain impulses which are his by virtue of being an animal evolved from less highly developed forms. These impulses are natural, being means to his survival. They have been intensified through the process of natural selection over long periods of time. It was not wrong for God to make man with these impulses; nevertheless, they are to be brought under control to the extent that we are conscious of the moral law.

We are natural beings before we are moral beings, and just as the individual recapitulates the physical development of the human race, so does he recapitulate its moral development. Thus, just as the race came to moral consciousness relatively late, so also the individual comes to realize the moral significance of his acts slowly and gradually.<sup>14</sup>

The universality of sin is to be accounted for by the fact that all of us have necessarily passed through the process of evolutionary development, which produces persons with natural tendencies to self-preservation.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, only as humans progress and natural impulses diminish, do they actually become sinful. If a fall is to be spoken of, it must designate the coming to moral consciousness first of the race and then of the individual. Since the rise of conscience has made natural acts sinful and introduced responsibility and thus guilt, it may appear to be an unfortunate development. The human sense of guilt, stemming from the fact of responsibility, must be seen, however, as a major advance upon the natural condition of the other creatures. The fall was therefore not a fall downward from the original perfect state, but a fall upward. For while this development introduced sinfulness, it also made it possible to overcome the tendencies of the animal nature, or at least to bring them under the dominance and redirection of human reason and moral will. The awakening of moral consciousness thus introduced the possibility of that perfection which the Christian view has traditionally placed at the start of man's development.

#### Anxiety of Finiteness

Reinhold Niebuhr sees the problem of sin as arising from another source, namely, the predicament of man's finitude on the one hand, and his freedom to aspire on the other. In his assessment of the human predicament Niebuhr follows the thinking of Albrecht Ritschl, who saw the removal of this contradiction as the aim of every religion. For Nie-

14. Ibid., pp. 93-94.

15. Ibid., p. 109.

buhr, this contradiction is not sin, but the occasion of sin, although not its cause. This situation need not lead to sin, although it often does.

A corollary of man's finitude is insecurity; he is faced with problems that threaten him. This is what Niebuhr calls "natural contingency." This insecurity is painful and distressing to man. Man seeks to overcome this insecurity in two major ways. One, perhaps the more common, is by asserting the will in an effort to gain such power as oversteps the limits of the human creature's place. Or the quest to overcome insecurity may take a more intellectual form. Although man is limited in mind, he is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge and the finiteness of his perspectives.<sup>16</sup> This intellectual pride and assertion of will to gain undue power disturb the harmony of creation. They are the fundamental forms of sin. There are both religious and moral dimensions to sin. The former manifest themselves as rebellion against God. The latter show themselves in man's injustice to his fellow man.

The biblical depictions of the primal sins bear out Niebuhr's contention. Note the picture of the devil suggested in the condemnation of Lucifer in Isaiah 14:12–15. Lucifer's fault lay in his ambition to ascend into heaven, to set his throne above the stars of God. Being unwilling to remain within the bounds of his proper position, he fell into sin.<sup>17</sup> Such was also the case in man's fall. The temptation placed before Adam and Eve was the temptation to become as God, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:5). In other words, their sin consisted in yielding to the temptation to try to be more than what they were created to be, human. They tried, in effect, to be God.

Temptation to go beyond what is proper is possible (and successful) only because of what man is. On the one hand, he is a limited human being, incapable of knowing everything and of doing everything.<sup>18</sup> Yet he is capable of envisioning the possibility of knowing and doing everything, of imagining what he might be but is not. Consciously or unconsciously, man never escapes the fact of his finiteness, his failure to be what he is not and can never be, but can aspire to be.

Niebuhr depends heavily upon Soren Kierkegaard's *Concept of Dread*. Kierkegaard's "dread" is the dizziness encountered in the face of freedom. It is, he says, like the dizziness one feels when looking down from a great height. There is the temptation to jump, and there is also the fear of the consequences. Yet something within wants to jump. There is the realization that one has within his grasp the power of being and non-

16. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner, 1941), vol. 1, p. 182.

17. Ibid., p. 180.

18. Ibid., p. 181.

being. This is *dread*. It is the awareness of being free and yet of being bound. It is the precondition of sin. It is not sin itself, but it can be the occasion of sin.<sup>19</sup>

This is what Niebuhr means by "anxiety." It is the inevitable spiritual state of man standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finitude. It is the subjective experience of temptation—"anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation."<sup>20</sup> This state is not to be identified with sin, however, for there is always the possibility that perfect faith will purge it of its tendency toward sinful self-assertion. One who places his trust fully in God will find complete security. Thus, orthodoxy has regularly regarded unbelief, lack of trust, as the root of sin. This is why Jesus said, "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need [all these things]" (Matt. 6:3 l-32). No life, even the most saintly, conforms perfectly to the injunction not to be anxious.

To seek to overcome the state of anxiety, the tension between finiteness and freedom, by denying one's finiteness is the more obvious form of sin. It leads to various manifestations of pride and self-exaltation; for example, failure to recognize that one's own knowledge is finite, or domination and exploitation of others. Each case represents an attempt to build one's security by one's own effort.<sup>21</sup>

The other form of sin is the attempt to relieve the tension between freedom and finitude by denying one's freedom. This involves 'losing oneself in some aspect of the world's vitalities.'<sup>22</sup> Here sin is sensuality, living merely in terms of some particular impulses of one's own nature.<sup>23</sup> While these impulses may be of many varieties, they all represent man's descent to the level of the animal, or capitulation to nature's determination of his behavior. In whichever direction man goes, denying his finiteness or freedom, the sin is occasioned, but not caused, by the state of anxiety. Man's finitude in itself is not sinful. But being finite and also able to imagine and aspire to the infinite places man in a position of tension which can become either faith or sin.

Niebuhr has analyzed the dynamics of sin and temptation in a way which is in many respects insightful and accurate. Yet a problem remains. His solution to the anxiety of finiteness entails learning to trust God, accepting the fact of one's own finitude, and living with the realization

19. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reider Thomte (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1980), p. 61.

20. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, p. 182. .

21. Ibid., pp. 186–205.

22. Ibid., p. 179.

23. Ibid., p. 228.

that there will always be a measure of insecurity. But is this really possible? Does this not require self-stimulation, motivation, and ability exceeding human capacity? To generate faith by one's own effort would require human ability which experience belies, to say nothing of Scripture. To suggest that faith can be generated by man and maintained by volitional control runs contrary to the experience of even the most vital Christian, who frequently finds it necessary to pray, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). The failure to acknowledge the need for a transformation wrought by God undermines the force of Niebuhr's contentions.

#### *Existential Estrangement*

Paul Tillich has constructed a view of sin built to a large extent upon an existentialist basis. He notes that various ancient myths make man responsible for the fall. In these myths, among which he includes the biblical account, both subhuman and superhuman figures influence man's decision. In the Bible it is the serpent who induces man to sin. Tillich clearly rejects a literal understanding of Genesis 3, replacing it with a reinterpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Tillich's doctrine of God is that God is the ground or power of being of all that is rather than a being as such. Everything that exists because of its participation in this ground of being. Man's state of existence, however, is a state of estrangement-from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself. In many ways this estrangement is an equivalent of what Christianity has traditionally called "sin." "Man's predicament is estrangement, but estrangement is sin," Tillich says.<sup>25</sup> Yet estrangement is not identical with sin, for "sin" refers to something not included in the concept of estrangement, namely, the personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs.<sup>26</sup> If estrangement is the state of not being what one essentially is and ought to be, sin is the act of becoming estranged, man's conscious step into estrangement. It is necessary to distinguish between man's essence, or what he was intended and created to be, and his existence, what he actually and empirically is. For man, to be in existence is to be in a state of estrangement. Existence and estrangement coincide.<sup>27</sup>

Those who hold to a literal interpretation of Genesis speak of a point

24. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), vol. 2, pp. 29-44.

25. Ibid., p. 46.

26. Ibid., p. 44.

27. Ibid., p. 46.

within time when man was not estranged or, in their terms, sinful. Their position is that the fall of man changed the structures of nature; the divine curse upon Adam and Eve involved a change of nature in and around man.<sup>28</sup> A change from essence to existence took place within time. Tillich is emphatic in rejecting this view: "The notion of a moment in time in which man and nature were changed from good to evil is absurd, and it has no foundation in experience or revelation."<sup>29</sup> His alternative is: "Creation and the Fall coincide in so far as there is no point in time and space in which created goodness was actualized and had existence."<sup>30</sup> Tillich maintains that this is the only possible position for anyone who rejects the literal interpretation of the story of the fall and takes seriously the reality of estrangement as it is found about us on every hand. "Actualized creation and estranged existence are identical. Only biblical literalism has the theological right to deny this assertion. He who excludes the idea of a historical stage of essential goodness should not try to escape the consequence."<sup>31</sup>

Niebuhr, among others, has pointed out a problem in Tillich's position. If creation and fall coincide, then is not Tillich's view close to that of Origen, that man fell in a preexistence, and therefore is sinful from birth?<sup>32</sup> This would seem to make sin both necessary and identical with finitude. Aware of the criticism, Tillich admits that the hesitancy of many critics to accept the identity of creation and fall is "caused by their justified fear that sin may become a rational necessity, as in purely existential systems."<sup>33</sup> He insists, however, that once created by God, newborn children themselves fall into the state of existential estrangement. Growing into maturity, they affirm their state of estrangement in acts of freedom which imply responsibility and guilt.<sup>34</sup> Tillich claims that it is every human's freedom and responsible actions which produce the estrangement.

Tillich is presenting a detemporalized scheme. Thus, man is not at one point in time un fallen and innocent, and at another fallen and guilty or estranged. Rather, at each moment every person is estranged by his own choice. In keeping with the existentialism with which Tillich works, he would characterize man as both fallen and un fallen at every moment of experience; these categorizations cannot be compartmentalized into a

28. Ibid., p. 40.

29. Ibid., p. 41.

30. Ibid., p. 44.

31. Ibid.

32. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 180-83.

33. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 44.

34. Ibid.

before-and-after temporal scheme. Thus, the essence of what is created is good, but we creatures always utilize our freedom in such a way as to fall into the state of estrangement.

Has Tillich really resolved the problem? If it is in any sense meaningful to say that creation and fall coincide, must not the free choice or affirmation of alienation be somehow contained within our creation? If all without fail choose in this way, then is not the fall a virtual result of creation? Bear in mind also that Tillich has carefully excluded any possibility of a fall at some point in time and space. The tension here between freedom to choose and the coincidence of creation and fall needs to be resolved, or at least clarified.

#### *Economic Struggle*

Liberation theology understands sin as arising from economic struggle. This is quite different from the conventional or orthodox view. If orthodoxy sees Genesis 1-3 as the key to understanding sin, liberation theology might be thought of as understanding sin in the light of Exodus 1-3. We are here speaking of liberation theology in a rather broad fashion, including therein such movements as black theology and feminist theology.

A first step in understanding the position of liberation theology is to note its rejection of the privatization of sin.<sup>35</sup> In the traditional understanding, sin is often seen as a matter of the individuals broken relationship with God; thus sin is basically unbelief, rebellion, or something of that type. Liberation theology, however, is much more concerned about the social and economic dimensions of sin. Thus, James Cone says, "Sin is not primarily a religious impurity, but rather it is the social, political, and economic oppression of the poor. It is the denial of the humanity of the neighbor through unjust political and economic arrangements"<sup>36</sup> The true nature of sin and God's reaction to it are apparent in passages such as Amos 5:11-12:

Therefore because you trample upon the poor  
and take from him exactions of wheat,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not dwell in them;

35. Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 23.

36. James H. Cone, "Christian Faith and Political Praxis," in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First- World Response*, ed. Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richeson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), p. 57.

you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions,  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

A major dimension of sin, then, is oppression and exploitation.

Gustavo Gutierrez has described sin as selfish turning in upon oneself.<sup>37</sup> To sin is to refuse to love one's neighbors and therefore the Lord himself. This refusal, whether personal or collective, is the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and oppression. Gutierrez classifies as unjust and sinful the use of violence by oppressors to maintain the inequitable system. On the other hand, he justifies the use of violence by the oppressed to liberate themselves.<sup>38</sup> Clearly such a view is notably different from traditional Christianity, particularly of the pacifist type, according to which the use of violence is wrong, even in resistance to sinful and unjust actions by others.

James Fowler classifies liberation theologians as either "ideological theologians" or "theologians of balance."<sup>39</sup> The former, including James Cone, Albert Cleage, and William Jones, see things in sharp dichotomies. In their view God is to be identified with either the oppressed or the oppressor. It cannot be both ways. Cone says, "Black theology cannot accept a view of God which does not represent him as being for blacks and thus against whites. Living in a world of white oppressors, black people have no time for a neutral God."<sup>40</sup> The theologians of balance, on the other hand, see the line separating good and evil as drawn, not between the two groups, but through each of them. "In the struggle against the structures of evil and oppressors Christians must struggle as those who hope for the redemption of the oppressor."<sup>41</sup>

What of the oppressed? What would sin consist in for them? In the traditional understanding of sin and, for that matter, in the approach of the theologians of balance, sin might well be thought of as hatred, bitterness, lack of love for the oppressor. For Jesus commanded us to

37. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleton (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), p. 35.

38. Ibid., pp. 108-09.

39. James W. Fowler, "Black Theologies of Liberation: A Structural-Developmental Analysis," in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First- World Response*, ed. Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richeson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), p. 86.

40. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), pp. 131-32.

41. Fowler, "Black Theologies," p. 86.

love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). In the view of the ideological theologians, on the other hand, the sin of the enslaved consists in their acquiescence to the oppressive situation. Cone says, "Their sin is that of trying to 'understand' the enslaver, to 'love' him on his own terms."<sup>42</sup> To accept the oppressive situation, rather than resisting and attempting to overthrow it, is the sin of the oppressed. Justo and Catherine Gonzalez put it this way:

If we turn to anthropology, liberation theology rejects the notion that God is best served by our self-abasement. Too often has the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith been presented in such a manner. It is significant that many of those who tell us that humility is the greatest virtue, or that the root of all sin is pride, are doing so from prestigious pulpits and endowed chairs. ... Traditional theology has often been bent on promoting the virtue of humility, particularly since those who are humble will stay in their place and refuse to claim their rightful status in human societies as children and heirs of God.<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not one believes liberation theology to be influenced by Marxism, it is not difficult to recognize certain parallels between the two, in both the conception of man's problems and the means advocated for overcoming the problems. In each case, the problems of society, whether termed evils or sins, are seen as resulting from inequitable distribution of power and wealth, and the solution lies in removing these inequities and the attending oppression.

The assumption of liberation theology, as of Marxism, is that it is the economic struggle, and particularly the inequities in power and property, that determine human behavior. Presumably, those who are promoting such inequities are great sinners, while those who fight injustices are not. In fact, certain liberation theologians will in some cases regard a particular action (e.g., killing) as sin if it is committed by an oppressor, but not if it is committed by the oppressed in the struggle to remove inequities. The removal of inequities is believed to result in the removal of the occasion of sin as well.

In reality, however, this theory seems not to have worked out quite this way. In the Soviet Union, where the classless society has been achieved, there are still notable power struggles among the leaders and repression, even involving the use of violence, of those outside the power structure, as millions of Hungarians, Czechoslovakians, and Poles can testify. It appears that possession of adequate resources for the supplying of the

42. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 100.

43. Gonzalez and Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching*, p. 23.

basic necessities of life does not negate the tendency to seek one's own satisfaction, even at the expense of others. Redistribution of power and wealth does not eliminate "sin."

#### *Individualism and Competitiveness*

Another view is that sin derives from individualism and competitiveness. In the midst of the neoorthodox emphasis upon human sinfulness, particularly in the 1930s, voices were raised in protest. One of the objectors was Harrison Sacket Elliott, professor of Christian education at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Like many others who sought a return to the theme of the goodness and perfectibility of man, Elliott had been deeply influenced by John Dewey's instrumentalism in philosophy and his progressive approach to education.<sup>44</sup>

Elliott did not merely reinterpret the idea of human sinfulness, as theologians like Tennant had done. Rather, he denied that man is sinful at all. He did acknowledge the existence of sin and the fact that man sins, but the idea of innate depravity or corruption had no place within his thought. There are four basic points in his argument:

1. The idea propounded by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner that all human self-assertion is sinful is related to and derived from an authoritarian view of God as an absolute sovereign or a father who insists upon total submission to his will. Anything less is rebellion. Sociologically, this view of God is correlated with an authoritarian view of human institutions, including the family? To Elliott, however, sin in a son does not consist in asserting his own will against his father, but rather in assuming that what he is and has accomplished is his own independent doing.<sup>45</sup> Sin is denial or misuse of the native endowment and social heritage one has received.<sup>46</sup> It is self-absorbed, individualistic struggling against other humans and God instead of cooperating with them. Contrary to the authoritarian view, which makes the relationship between man and God somewhat adversative in nature, Elliott stresses comradeship between the two. This does not necessarily mean that the two must be thought of as equals, but that they will work together to attain their comr-non goals. Human beings will take initiative and responsibility, they will make deci-

44. Mary Frances Thelen, *Man as Sinner in Contemporary American Realistic Theology* (New York: King's Crown, 1946), p. 27.

45. Harrison S. Elliott, *Can Religious Education Be Christian?* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 152-53.

46. Ibid., p. 158.

47. Ibid.

sions, but they will also recognize and acknowledge their dependence upon God, whose resources they utilize.<sup>48</sup>

2. The idea of man as a sinner does not and cannot stand up under logical analysis. "Sin" defies exact definition. It does not stand for any **one** entity, but is actually a label for a whole complex of different acts. The interpretation of sin varies greatly and is distinctly influenced by the cultural situation.<sup>49</sup> Elliott rejects all attempts to reduce sin to one particular type of behavior, and especially to egoism. While the "American sin" has been characterized as the egoistic striving of the "rugged individualist," one cannot make the generalization that all assertiveness, all egoistic **striving**, is wrong. It may well be accurate to characterize the egoism of the supercompetitive, superaggressive individualist as sin, but what of the persons "who are the victims of this competitiveness and whose problem is sensitiveness, fear, inability to call [their] life [their] own, defeat"?<sup>50</sup> Such people need to be more egoistic. For them egoism is not sin.

3. The idea of man as a sinner can be psychologically unhealthy and harmful. In particular, sacrificing for the sake of others in an effort to atone for one's sinful condition may lead to giving up one's own legitimate ego rights.<sup>51</sup> In addition, emphasis upon sin and guilt may well lead to the individuals turning in upon himself destructively.<sup>52</sup>

4. Psychological analyses of the human condition have not led to the conclusion that man is sinful. The idea of sinfulness assumes that certain tendencies or drives are actually innate and inflexible, incapable of being altered or modified. The evidence, however, seems quite otherwise, indicating that humans are quite malleable. Indeed, Elliott contends, there are no well-defined inborn tendencies in man, either evil or good. "The original nature is a-moral in the sense that there is nothing in the nature with which an individual is born which predetermines whether he will be a saint or a devil. Whether the 'divine' or the 'demonic' possibilities are developed depends upon what happens to that original nature in the experiences of life. The individuals personality is of social origin."<sup>53</sup>

Elliott sees sin, then, not as something innate, but as something learned. It is not egoism or assertiveness per se, but egoism or assertiveness to an excessive degree—the ruthless competitive struggle of individuals against one another. This need not be, however. While man can use

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

the resources of his mind to develop instruments of power unknown in the animal world, he can also substitute for ruthless competitive struggle cooperative relationships which go far beyond the mutual aid found in the animal world.<sup>54</sup>

Elliott proposes that since individualistic competitiveness is not inherent, but is acquired as a "second nature," so to speak, it can be socially modified, primarily by means of education. Education has not always succeeded, however, as Niebuhr has observed.<sup>55</sup> Instead of using science for the alleviation of human suffering, man has instead used it to develop instruments of destruction, which he turns against his fellow man.

Elliott, recognizing the legitimacy of Niebuhr's criticism, contends that the problem lies not in man's intelligence, but in the present strategy for developing and using it. There are two difficulties with the way in which liberal education has usually been conducted. One is that it has been overintellectual. The attention has been almost exclusively upon the training of the mind, with little or no attention given to the emotions. The second problem is even more pertinent to the issue at hand. Education has been an individualistic matter, the logic being that persons with individual initiative will solve the problems of society. Experience shows, however, that reason becomes the servant, rather than the master, of the individuals desire for power.<sup>56</sup> If there is an appeal to attend to social needs, it is soon subordinated to individualistic egoistic concerns. Elliott suggests that instead of emphasizing individual activity, competition, and success, education emphasize cooperative activities in which individuals contribute to a group goal and receive the benefits of the group's success. If the wrong kind of education and social conditioning has led to the "sin" of individualistic competitiveness, then the right kind of education should remove it.

From the perspective of forty years later, the suggestions of Elliott seem almost humorous, as do those of more-recent advocates of his view. Progressive education has been attempted and found wanting, from the standpoint of both Christian theologians and many secular educators. The hopes of seeing a radical modification of human nature have not materialized with the introduction of noncompetitive learning situations. Indeed, our society not only seems no less competitively structured, but may be even more competitive than it was when Elliott wrote.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

55. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1956), pp. 84-91.

56. Elliott, *Religious Education*, pp. 205-06.

### The Biblical Teaching

We have examined five different views of the source of sin. We have found each of them to be seriously lacking at one or more significant points. Therefore, we must now inquire more thoroughly as to what the Bible actually teaches on the subject. Certain aspects of some of the conceptions we have rejected will be found in the biblical understanding of the nature and cause of sin. Yet the scriptural position is in many ways far different from all of the others.

It is important to note first that sin is not caused by God. James very quickly disposes of this idea, which would probably be quite appealing to some: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). Nor is any encouragement given for the idea that sin inevitably results from the very structure of reality. Rather, responsibility for sin is placed squarely at the door of man himself: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). By analyzing this and other passages, both didactic and narrative, we can determine what the Bible teaches to be the basis or cause of sin.

Man has certain desires. These, at root, are legitimate. In many cases their satisfaction is indispensable to the survival of the individual or the race. For example, hunger is the desire for food. Without the satisfaction of this desire or drive, we would starve to death. Similarly, the sexual drive seeks gratification. Were it to go unsatisfied, there would be no human reproduction and hence no preservation of the human race. Without attempting to deal here with the question of the propriety of eating for enjoyment or of sex for pleasure, we may assert that these drives were given by God, and that there are situations in which their satisfaction is not only permissible but may even be mandatory.

We note, further, man's capability. He is able to choose among alternatives; these alternatives may include options which are not immediately present. Man alone of all the creatures is capable of transcending his location in time and space. Through memory he is able to relive the past, and to accept or repudiate it. Through anticipation he is able to construct scenarios regarding the future, and choose among them. Through his imagination he can picture himself in some other geographical location. He can imagine himself to be someone other than who he is. He can envision himself occupying a different position in society, or married to a different partner. Thus, he may desire not only what is actually available to him, but also what is not proper or legitimate for

him. This capability expands greatly the possibilities of sinful action and/or thoughts.<sup>57</sup>

Man has a number of natural desires which, while good in and of themselves, are potential areas for temptation and sin:<sup>58</sup>

1. The desire to enjoy things. God has implanted certain needs in each of us. Not only is the satisfaction of those needs essential, but it can also bring enjoyment. For example, the need for food and drink must be satisfied because life is impossible without them. At the same time food and drink may also be legitimately desired as a source of enjoyment. When food and drink are pursued, however, merely for the pleasure of consumption, and in excess of what is needed, the sin of gluttony is being committed. The sex drive, while not necessary for the preservation of the life of the individual, is essential for sustaining and continuing the human race. We may legitimately desire satisfaction of this drive because it is essential and also because it brings pleasure. When, however, the drive is gratified in ways which transcend natural and proper limitations (i.e., when it is satisfied outside of marriage), it becomes the basis of sin. Any improper satisfaction of a natural desire is an instance of "the lust of the flesh" (1 John 2: 16).
2. The desire to obtain things. There is a role in God's economy for the obtainment of possessions. This is implicit in the command to have dominion over the world (Gen. 1:28) and in the stewardship parables (e.g., Matt. 25:14-30). Further, material possessions are regarded as legitimate incentives to encourage industriousness. When, however, the desire to acquire worldly goods becomes so compelling that it is satisfied at any cost, even by exploiting or stealing from others, then it has degenerated into "the lust of the eyes" (1 John 2: 16).
3. The desire to do things, to achieve. The stewardship parables also depict this desire as both natural and appropriate. It is part of what God expects of man. When, however, this urge transgresses proper limitations and is pursued at the expense of other humans, it has degenerated into "the pride of life" (1 John 2: 16).

There are proper ways to satisfy each of these desires, and there are also divinely imposed limits. Failure to accept these desires as they have

57. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), pp. 35-37.

58. M. G. Kyle, "Temptation, Psychology of," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 5, pp. 2944-2944B.

been constituted by God and therefore to submit to divine control is sin. In such cases, the desires are not seen in the context of their divine origin and as means to the end of pleasing God, but as ends in themselves.

Note that in the temptation of Jesus, Satan appealed to legitimate desires. The desires which Satan bade Jesus fulfil were not wrong per se. Rather, the suggested time and manner of fulfilment constituted the evil. Jesus had fasted for forty days and nights and consequently was hungry. This was a natural need which had to be satisfied if life was to be preserved. It was right for Jesus to be fed, but not through some miraculous provision, and probably not before the completion of his trial. It was proper for Jesus to desire to come down safely from the pinnacle of the temple, but not to require a miraculous display of power by the Father. It was right for Jesus to lay claim to all the kingdoms of the earth, for they are his. He had created them (John 1:3) and even now sustains them (Col. 1:17). But it was not right to seek to establish this claim by worshiping the chief of the forces of evil.

Oftentimes temptation involves inducement from without. This was true in the case of Jesus. In the case of Adam and Eve, the serpent did not directly suggest that they eat of the forbidden tree. Rather, he raised the question whether the fruit of all the trees was off limits to them. Then he asserted, "You will not die ... [but] will be like God" (Gen. 3:4-5). While the desire to eat of the tree or to be like God may have been present naturally, there was also an external inducement of satanic origin. In some cases another human entices one to overstep the divinely imposed bounds upon behavior. In the final analysis, however, *sin is the choice of the person who commits it*. The desire to do what is done may be present naturally, and there may be external inducement as well. But the individual is ultimately responsible. Adam and Eve chose to act upon impulse and suggestion; Jesus chose not to.

In addition to natural desire and temptation, there must of course be an opportunity for sin as well. Initially, Adam could not have been tempted to infidelity to his wife, nor could Eve have been jealous of other women. For those of us who live after the fall, and are not Jesus, there is a further complicating factor. There is something termed "the flesh" which strongly influences what we do. Paul speaks of it in numerous passages, for example, Romans 7:18: "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." In Galatians 5:16-24 he speaks vividly of the opposition between the flesh and the Spirit, and of the works of the flesh, which constitute a whole catalog of evils. By "flesh" Paul does not mean the physical nature of the human being. There is nothing inherently evil about man's bodily makeup. Rather, the term designates the self-centered life, denial or rejection of God. This is something that has become a part of human

nature-a bent, a tendency, a bias toward sin and away from doing God's will. Accordingly, man is now less able to choose the right than he originally was. It is even conceivable that his natural desires, which are good in themselves, may have undergone alteration.

### Implications of the Various Views-The Cure for Sin

But, one might ask, what real difference does it make what position is taken on this matter? The answer is that our view of the cause of sin will determine our view of the cure for sin, since the cure for sin will necessarily involve negating the cause.

If one holds, as Tent-rant does, that sin is simply the persistence of normal instincts and patterns of behavior from one's animal ancestry into a period when one is responsible morally, the cure cannot be a reversal to an earlier innocent stage. Rather, it will be a matter of completely freeing oneself from those older instincts, or of learning to control or direct them properly. This conception of the cure for sin embraces the optimistic belief that the evolutionary process is carrying the human race in the right direction.

If one adopts Niebuhr's view that sin grows out of the anxiety of finiteness, being the attempt to overcome through one's own efforts the tension between finiteness and freedom to aspire, the cure will involve accepting one's limitations and placing one's confidence in God. But this cure is a matter of altering one's attitude, not of real conversion.

Tillich relates sin to man's existential estrangement, which seems to be virtually a natural accompaniment of creaturehood. Here, too, the fundamental cure is a matter of changing one's attitude, not of real conversion. The solution entails becoming increasingly aware of the fact that one is part of being, or that one participates in the ground of being. The result will be cancellation of one's alienation from the ground of being, other beings, and self.

If one adopts the premises of liberation theology, the solution to the problem of sin is to be found in eliminating oppression and inequities in possessions and power. Rather than the evangelism of individuals, economic and political action aimed at altering the structure of society will be pursued as the means of eliminating sin.

On Elliott's terms, the solution is education. Since sin (individualistic competitiveness) is learned through education and social conditioning, it must be eliminated the same way. The antidote is education that stresses noncompetitive endeavor toward common goals.

From the evangelical perspective, the problem lies in the fact that man is sinful by nature and lives in a world in which powerful forces seek to

induce him to sin. The cure for sin will come through a supernaturally produced alteration of one's human nature and also through divine help in countering the power of temptation. It is individual conversion and regeneration that will alter the person and bring him or her into a relationship to God that will make successful Christian living possible.

---

---

28

## The Results of Sin

### Results Affecting the Relationship with God

- Divine Disfavor
- Guilt
- Punishment
- Death
  - Physical Death
  - Spiritual Death
  - Eternal Death

### Effects on the Sinner

- Enslavement
- Flight from Reality
- Denial of Sin
- Self-Deceit
- Insensitivity
- Self-Centeredness
- Restlessness

### Effects on the Relationship to Other Humans

- Competition
- Inability to Empathize
- Rejection of Authority
- Inability to Love

**O**ne emphasis that runs through both Testaments is that sin is a very serious matter with very serious consequences. It is not some-