

# *Toward a Christian Theology*

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### *Theology's Challenging Task: Definition and Methodology*

Theology is the task of discovering the nature and character of God. Traditionally, there have been two designs/models conceived whereby God may be discovered, general revelation and special revelation. In both designs, God is the One doing the revealing. Humankind does not generate any knowledge of God were it not for God choosing to be known. God is there to be known, not created. Ergo, general revelation is God disclosing something of himself through/in his creation and through/in the moral conscience of the human heart. Special revelation is God revealing himself through his prophets, his word and finally and completely in his Son. In both general and special revelation, God is revealing himself to those whom he has created and it is his desire that all “would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (Acts 17:27).

It is essential to have a reliable and consistent method of understanding. One of three methods for reasoning are typically utilized for investigation: 1) the inductive method, 2) the deductive method, and 3) the verificational or abductive method.

Induction is the process of discovering God from the effects of his creation. It assumes the only way one obtains knowledge is via objective sensory experience. In other words, knowledge of anything is the product of experience. In the inductive method God is not self-authenticating –

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he is derived from experience. While inductive reasoning is reliable for gleaning some things about God, it is not entirely dependable. First, it relies too heavily upon the senses or a posteriori knowledge. A person may see evidence of God in creation, but that evidence is filtered through the senses that may very well deceive, as Copernicus was painfully made aware.

Second, unless cause/effect relationships exist, one cannot possibly get from the effects of the universe to the cause of the universe. The best any person can do is remain within the boundaries of sensory experience – and this may or may not include God! [There is another realm of existence I would describe as the hypothetical world whereby one conceptualizes possibilities that either will not or cannot actualize. Whether or not God is discovered here is questionable and, therefore, will not be addressed. It is mentioned here only to acknowledge its subsistence within human experience.]

Third, induction alone is unreliable because God is reduced to a mere inference from experience. That is, discovering God is the best conclusion of the evidence. This suggests that experience of sensory input is a reliable means of discovering God's existence. As most can attest, human senses do deceive from time to time.

Deduction is the process of discovering God by assuming he is there to be discovered. Deductive reasoning would maintain that everything known must fit into some broad principle or classification. The particulars of knowledge and experience do not exist apart from innate categories within which to place them. For example, one could not know what a horse is unless there is some broad idea of "horseness" that exists prior to any experience of a particular horse. Similarly, one could not discover God from his/her experience of creation unless there is first some idea of God. The deductive method of understanding implies the notion that God is somehow self-authenticating. God's existence is assumed a priori to be true apart from experience.

The verificational method of reasoning is perhaps the most adequate for discovering God. It begins with an hypothesis that may or may not prove true. This method avoids the pitfalls of deduction in that God's existence is not assumed, it is proposed. And, unlike induction, the verificational method provides an interpretive schema that includes the facts of experience but is not limited by them.

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In the verificational method the criteria for discovering God involves all the elements of human existence: the existential world (viz., the rational, moral, empirical and practical) and (2) the phenomenal world, consisting of historical evidence of space-time events. The verificational method must be logically consistent (rational); provide sufficient grounds for explaining the sense of “oughtness” in every person (moral); and account for the experience of sense data in accordance with the other elements of human existence (empirical). Also, it must provide the means of living consistently with the truths discovered about God (practical) and adequately explain evidence from space-time events in human history (phenomenal).

In order to promote consistency, it should be observed that no hypothesis exists in a vacuum. Rather, hypotheses exist in a world view sustained by certain assumptions. The verificational method of discovering God must identify and continually challenge assumptions and adjust any hypothesis regarding the nature, existence, and revelation of God. However, certain issues must be held true or else all hypotheses will suffer the skeptic’s death of a thousand qualifications (the result being that no one could have reasonable certainty about anything). Some of these issues include: (1) the laws of logic [laws of identity, excluded middle, and non-contradiction]; (2) language and thought are meaningful; (3) the phenomenal world is real and not illusory; (4) relative truth is self-refuting ; and (5) absolute truth transcends all time and culture and is, therefore, absolutely true for everyone, everywhere, and at all times.

Finally, the discovery of God must have checks and balances. The Bible is the primary source for this. Principles of interpretation that account for historical, cultural, political, social, economical, literary, et al. settings of biblical times must be utilized for discovering God through Scripture. Moreover, it is prudent to consult the historical writings of the Church. In so doing one will avoid erroneous or inconsistent understandings and interpretations that have promoted division and even heresy.

Discovering God is possible. Within the effects of creation and the affections of the human heart, God is “there” to be found (general revelation). He has graciously chosen to disclose more of himself through specially selected prophets and apostles, their writings, and ultimately in his Son Jesus Christ (special revelation). The verificational method, as outlined above, provides a comprehensive means of discovering God within these two revelational designs.

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### *General Revelation: God's Communication to All*

God has chosen to make something known about himself to everyone, everywhere, and at every time. This is the essential propositional truth of general revelation. However, one must not assume this to be absolutely true without question. Whether God exists or not is an assertion with which we must wrestle. Although the existence of God is not wholly separate from the idea of general revelation, it must be treated at different, but related, levels of enquiry (viz., philosophical, moral, and natural).

Nevertheless, to keep within the verificational approach, it is important to begin by expressing the issue of general revelation in this manner: If it is possible that God exists, would he choose to reveal himself and, if so, how? A second crucial question to ask is: How much can be known about God and what is the scope and purpose of his revelation to humankind?

Beginning with the possibility of God's existence, one must ask where to look for the discovery of God. There are two arenas for inquiry: (1) the creation and (2) the nature of humankind. Whether God reveals himself, how he reveals himself, and what he has revealed about himself entails both of these arenas (creation and humankind). In fact, they are so interdependent that it cannot be said God revealed something about himself without maintaining what and how he has revealed himself. Whichever arena one looks to for the discovery of God, it is reasonable to conclude that God has communicated something of himself and that fact or truth about him is reliable.

The Apostle Paul clearly declares that something about God can be discovered from creation. In Acts 14:15-17 God is said to be Author of the universe (v. 15); a patient and forbearing divine Judge (v. 16; similarly Acts 17:30), and gracious Sustainer (v.17). Furthermore, Paul proclaims God to be Creator and Lord of all, who is unencumbered by human intent (v. 24); independent and self-sustaining Life-giver of all (v. 25); and impartial Sovereign over all (v. 26). Moreover, it is significant to note that Paul goes on to say even pagan poets can apprehend something of God (v. 28). While Paul is not endorsing everything said by these pagan poets, he does imply that some truth they have about God is reliable.

Romans 1:19-32 is telling, not only about discovering God from creation but of the results of having some knowledge about God. There is a degree of objective and reliable knowledge about God (v. 19). The objective knowledge of God is found in "what has been made." This suggests that inductive reasoning (viz., from particulars to the general idea; from effects to causes) is

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sufficient to discover some things about God. In other words, the creation communicates, to a degree, God. This knowledge of God is filtered through sinful humanity, the result being willfully perverted justice (1:32). In addition, wisdom turns to foolishness (v. 22) and knowledge, however limited, turns to ignorance (v. 25). While he may be discovered in the creation, general revelation proves insufficient for promoting a saving relationship with God. Instead, it serves only to bring humankind under divine judgment.

The second arena where God has chosen to be discovered is in the nature of human existence. Romans 2:14-15 states that Gentiles (non-Jewish, perhaps even non-religious people) mirror something of God's moral standards in their behavior. The source of these standards comes from God's law that is "written on their hearts." The greater context (Rom. 1:18-3:20) shows that Paul's purpose in this passage is to demonstrate that all are under the reign of sin (cf., Rom. 3:9-10). Paul does not say the "requirements of the law" are fulfilled. In fact, 2:15 suggests that moral behavior is sporadic and irregular ("their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them"). This inherent awareness of right and wrong brings about responsibility (v. 15) and accountability before God (v. 16). At present, people need only live with the pangs of their own thoughts and conscience. However, people are responsible, not to themselves, but to the source of these moral demands who himself will bring to light their guilt. General revelation is God disclosing himself to his creation in the realm of the human heart and its sense of right and wrong.

The scope of general revelation is universal. No individual can escape creation nor the inner world of moral sensibilities. If it is true that all are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9-10) and, as a result, are guilty before God, then the same is true for everyone, everywhere. Furthermore, since it is true that the created order and moral senses of humankind have not essentially changed throughout history, then it follows that the apprehension of God is possible for all people everywhere and at all times.

Because God has clearly disclosed himself through creation, there are no extenuating circumstances for anyone to appeal for excusal (Rom. 1:20). In spite of the extent of perversion (Rom. 1:23-31), people continually "know God's righteous decree" (present tense) regarding true justice, yet are incapable of living authentically with this knowledge (v. 32). While Paul speaks particularly of Gentiles in Rom. 2:14-15, the entire context indicates he is showing sin to be universal and all inclusive (Rom. 3:9-10; 19-20). Acts 14:16 explicitly affirms the scope of the message is "all nations." Finally, Paul's argument to the philosophers in Athens is replete with

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all-inclusive language (Acts 17:22-31). This sermon could not be understood in any other way but to conclude that the knowledge of God is universal.

The purpose of God making himself known in general revelation is to expose humanity's hopeless plight. Knowledge of God in creation and innate moral discretions serves only to bring the wrath of God in condemnation. Humankind is willingly incapable of discovering God without some further help [Being "willingly incapable" is not an incongruent notion, but illustrates the enigma of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Put another way, an individual inability does not absolve one of all responsibility. People make a significant contribution to their own despairing predicament.]. On the basis of a general knowledge of God, everyone everywhere and at all times is guilty before him. The whole world will stand in the divine courtroom of justice to hear the charges God brings against it. With the ever-present failure to meet the holy demands of God, the human race recognizes sin and guilt. It is in this recognition that all people are, admittedly or not, condemned (Rom. 3:19-20).

### *Special Revelation, Inspiration, The Bible's Completion*

#### Special Revelation

While general revelation provides a broad discovery for the knowledge of God, it is insufficient for personally introducing people to God. At best, general revelation results in the indictment and condemnation of all. To remedy this condition, God has taken the initiative in providing special revelation. Briefly defined, special revelation is God's gracious and providential activity in bringing some to a loving and eternally abiding relationship with himself.

The means God uses to bring about this personal relationship with him are primarily his prophets and apostles, their inspired writings and deeds and, finally and completely, his Son. Secondary means of special revelation from God would include dreams and visions (Gen. 31:24; Acts 9:10); divinely wrought events in history (Ex. 10:19; Acts 3:6,7); God's people ministering to others by their divinely enabled giftedness (Rom. 1:11; 1 Cor. 14:12); and theophanies, or special appearances of God (Jud. 13:22; Lk. 3:22). Furthermore, God makes himself known to the unbelieving world through believers' testimony to his saving grace (Is. 49:6; 2 Cor. 5:20); to believers by directly communicating with them (Ex. 20:1; Phil. 3:15); and perhaps even pain and evil and/or material blessing (Deut. 7:12-15; 2 Sam. 12:15; Is. 30:30; Jn 9:1-3).

The manner of God disclosing himself in special revelation has been thought of in one of two ways. First, truths about the communication of God are considered propositional. That is,

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descriptions about the character or activity of God that universally and timelessly hold true are propositions that exist. These propositions are culture-specific, utilizing common thought forms and the vernacular of the day for expression and understanding. Others have said God can only be known personally. In the midst of crisis and confusion, somehow God emerges into personal life experiences and reveals himself

Rather than choose between these two, it would appear that both propositional and personal truths are viable modes of knowing God. One would not necessarily exclude the other. For example, in order to describe an experience of knowing God personally in some crisis situation, one must use words that communicate. Thinking of an experience with God, in so far as that experience is genuinely with the God of Scripture, would preclude the capability of thought forms that are common. It seems that both modes are reliable means of knowing God's special revelation. Succinctly put, one cannot know God without knowing something about God. Likewise, one cannot know something about God without knowing God.

Without question, Christianity throughout the centuries has held that the eternal Son of God is the consummate revelation of God to the world. The author of Hebrews claims God's Son is the "exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3). Jesus spoke propositional truth (Jn. 7:16-17; 12:49; 14:6, 10) and personal truth (Jn. 3:3; 6:47; 11:25). The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are God's special revelation rooted in history (Jn. 1:14; Acts 2:23; Mt. 28:6). Taken together, these claims constitute redemptive truth (Eph. 1:7; Rom. 5:9; Mt. 26:28; Heb. 9:12; 1 Pt. 1:19). The person and work of God's Son are where propositional and personal truths intersect in the fullest sense.

There are, however, both revealing and concealing aspects of God's special revelation. On the one hand, the Spirit of God enables believers today to be a manifestation of God's revelation as their witness goes out into the entire world (Mt. 5:14; Acts 1:8; 1 Thess. 1:8). Yet, God's special revelation is also veiled. In spite of the extensive revelation of God in Christ, the world did not know him (Jn. 1:10); the Son chooses to whom he will reveal the Father (Mt. 11:27); the knowledge of who Jesus really is only comes from God (Mt. 16:17); satanic blindness overshadows the gospel light (2 Cor. 4:4); and spiritual truths are imperceptible to those without the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14).

The purpose of God in special revelation is to bring about a loving and personal relationship with those whom he has graciously chosen. Though Jesus is the "Savior of all men" (1 Tim.

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4:10), he's not everyone's Savior. As the people of God keep in step with the truth of God, then he expressly continues revealing himself to the redeemed. Special revelation, therefore, remains today in the form of the Spirit-inspired writings of God's Word and the Spirit-filled people of God. As for the unredeemed, God illuminates his moral precepts in the hearts of all (Rom. 2:14-15), which enables them to occasionally perform those things which are in conformity to His will, albeit not unto salvation.

### Inspiration

For nearly twenty centuries Christianity has had the inspired and authoritative Word of God as its rule of faith and practice. The Bible is the standard of truth as it relates to God's relationship with humankind. Specially chosen people were used to declare God's Word through the medium of their own language and culture. Inspiration means that God expressed himself through human authors precisely what he intended to communicate.

Exactly how inspiration occurred has been difficult to understand. Nevertheless, Christians have continually affirmed what the Bible says about itself, viz. "all Scripture is God-breathed. . ." (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul does not say which books of the Bible he had in mind, neither does he give an exhaustive list of their benefit. The context certainly suggests those books that are "able to make [one] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). Granted, Paul's letter to Timothy was penned prior to the completion of the New Testament, and, no doubt, he primarily had the Old Testament in mind. However, Paul specifically meant those portions that have to do with "faith in Christ Jesus."

Another important passage is 2 Peter 1:19-21. Here Peter speaks of the origin of Scripture. Along with Paul, he primarily has in mind the entire Old Testament. However, Peter implies the writings of Paul are on a par with "the other Scriptures" (2 Pt. 3:16) intimating that Paul, too, was "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pt. 1:21). Peter does not say the faculties of the prophets were bypassed. What he does affirm is that Scripture is from divine origin through human means. The human authors were supervised by the Spirit of God in such a way that what was written is exactly what God intended. Contrary to a dictation theory (God commanding every word so the human authors were merely secretaries), the idea of inspiration means that Scripture originated with God and the human author's tendency to err (when they were writing Scripture) was overcome by God's Spirit.

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What Scripture says God says. Therefore, the Word of God is authoritative in the original writings. While the original documents are no longer available, we do have responsible translations from a variety of copies which are remarkably close to the original. Also, it is essential to distinguish between what Scripture is teaching and what is being learned from it. Incidental themes from human insights should never overshadow divine wisdom found in God's Word.

Scripture is both infallible (cannot err) and inerrant (does not err). Error is that which intends to defraud, deceive, or knowingly represent falsehood. Infallibility has to do with possibility, whereas inerrancy has to do with actuality. All sixty-six books cannot contain error and do not contain error. All of the affirmations and denials in God's Word correspond to reality and are therefore true. This is not to say there are no unresolved difficulties in Scripture. Sixty-six books written over 400 years would not harmonize so easily. While human understanding of Scripture (hermeneutics) is evolving, Scripture in se stands true for all times, everywhere, and for all people. Not only do infallibility and inerrancy apply to every word of Scripture, but to Scripture in its entirety.

### The Bible's Completion

Since it is true that Scripture is God's truth, then how is it that Christianity came to have the Old and New Testaments? Who approved the sixty-six books? Why not sixty-five or sixty-seven? What about other writings during biblical times? What criteria was used to distinguish between human voice and divine voice? How the sixty-six books of the Bible came to be recognized as God's Word is the topic of the canon of Scripture. Canon means a standard or rule against which to measure something.

The canon of the Old Testament was not officially identified until the councils of Jamnia (A.D. 90, 118). However, in Jesus' day he referred to the OT writings as "scripture" (Jn. 10:35); "law and prophets" (Mt. 7:12; 22:40); and "Law of Moses . . . Prophets . . . Psalms" (Lk. 24:44). This indicates that recognition of God's Word precedes an official canonized list. Likewise, the early Church had a body of trustworthy documentation prior to it being recognized by any organized group or institution. Oral tradition regarding Jesus' teaching (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; also known as kerygma), Paul's epistles and the first three Gospel accounts were circulated throughout the Roman Empire by the middle of the second century. These sources were recognized as faithful to the person and work of Christ and began the process of a completed canon.

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The Muratorian Fragment contains a list of books to be read publicly to the whole Church. Dated ca. A.D. 200, twenty-two of the NT books are included. In addition, Eusebius' canon (C. A.D. 260-340) is significant as the Arian heresy was hotly disputed during his time. Both Arias and Athanasius held to the authority of the Scriptures and turned to them in an attempt to reach a settlement on the meaning of Christ's deity and humanity. This surely indicates the importance of a standard whereby truth and error can be discerned.

The most significant and complete canon of the NT was recognized by Athanasius (A.D. 367). He acknowledged all twenty-seven books as Scripture and fully authoritative for faith and practice. Also, at about this time Jerome (ca., A.D. 386), a scholar of the biblical languages, included all twenty-seven books.

The first official recognition of a complete NT canon consisting of all twenty-seven books by the Church in the West came at the Third Council of Carthage in A.D. 397. Later (ca., A.D. 508) the Church of the East recognized all twenty-seven books. By the beginning of the sixth century the Church in all the known world recognized a completed NT.

This long process of the complete and final authoritative Word of God has been scrutinized and questioned time and again by the scholarly world. A major concern remains: Are the books of the Bible trustworthy to give an accurate account of God's dealings with humanity? To answer one must turn to the criteria used by the early Church in deciding what books to include.

One such criterion used for the NT canon is the consistency of the message and its broad scope of application. The four Gospels were regarded as accurate and authoritative by virtually every believer. Had the Gospel accounts been in question, those close enough to Jesus or his disciples could have made corrections before they were so widely circulated. Authorship by an apostle was another criterion used in determining trustworthy writings for the Church. Paul was acutely conscious of his authority (1 Cor. 14:37), so much so that rejecting his teaching was tantamount to rejecting the teaching of God (1 Thess. 4:8).

Apostolic authorship was not the sole means available to the Church in recognizing the inspired books of the NT. It does not explain the works of Mark, Luke-Acts, James, Jude and, possibly, Hebrews. Close association with an apostle was also important. Paul puts Luke's Gospel on par with Scripture (1 Tim. 5:18 quoting Lk. 10:7). The apostles themselves included the OT as canon for the Church and therefore did not insist that their writings alone be

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considered authoritative. In short, whatever books the apostles imposed as canonical are those works that the Church included.

Those who were charged with recognizing which books to include as Scripture did not so much determine the canon as identified it. If apostolic authorship or association, internal consistency of the message and the broad scope of application are the basis of knowing which books were to be included in the Bible, then all the Church was left to do was recognize those books that fit the criteria.

The canon of Scripture has never been the product of individual or institutional arbitration. Rather it came about as a result of many processes that contributed to its formation. The internal consistency of the Bible's message and the Church's use of it in defense of orthodox teaching has changed lives throughout history. Taken together, this evidence affirms the inspiration, authority and reliability of the written Word of God.

### *The Being of God, The Character of God, The Trinity*

#### *The Being of God*

Scripture indicates there is one, and only one, God (Deut. 6:4; Jn. 17:3; Mk. 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; Jm. 2:19). Although it is impossible to know God fully (Ps. 145:3, 5; 139:6; 1 Cor. 2:12; Rom. 11:33), it is possible to know and experience some truths about him which he has revealed (Ps. 139:17-18; Jer. 24:7; 31:34 = Heb. 8:11; Deut. 4:24 = Heb. 12:29; Jn. 4:24; Col. 1:10; 1 Jn. 1: 5; 4:8). And, when the knowledge of God is grounded in Scripture, what we can know about him is true.

The most complete statement that can be made in human language about the being of God is found in Exodus 3:14, "I Am WHO I AM." This suggests God is self-existent. That is, he exists absolutely independent of every other thing or being which exists (Acts 17:24-25). Only God exists fully and completely in himself Whereas the nature, character, and existence of created beings is derived, God's nature, character, and existence is contained in himself Also, God exists necessarily (Gen. 21:3 3; Deut. 3 3:27; Ps. 90:2; Is. 9:6; 40:28; Hab. 1:12; Rom. 16:26). In other words, God's existence remains the same in every possible world. There is no condition(s) under which God would not exist. God has always been and will always be who he is. Since God eternally sustains his own existence, he is able to fulfill all that he promises (Ex. 3:12, 15).

Moreover, God exists as a simple, indivisible being. He cannot exemplify properties independent of himself, nor is he a composition of individual parts. All of God's existence is

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united into one integrated eternal being. He is completely loving, just, holy, merciful, jealous, wise, etc. All of God's being exemplifies all of his attributes perfectly and completely. Moreover, every attribute is qualified by every other attribute. For instance, God is mercifully just and justly merciful. Not one of his attributes is laid aside in order to express another. Every activity of God is conditioned by all of his attributes simultaneously.

Similarly, while it is logically necessary that essence precedes function/activity, or being precedes doing, in biblical thought what a person does intimates who the person is (e.g., 1 Jn. 3:7). Therefore, God's attributes are what he is, not merely what he does in relation to his creation. God's entire being is in each attribute, and each attribute is in his entire being.

As an eternal, invisible Spirit (Jn. 1:18; 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16), God has no spatial or temporal characteristics. As eternal, there is nothing contingent about the being of God. He is eternally present in all that he is. Since all of God's being is simultaneously present, he has a relationship to time, but not in time (Ps. 90:4 = 2 Pt. 3:8). God's essential being transcends, or is beyond, time and location (1 Kgs. 8:17; Is. 66:1-2; Acts 7:48).

As a non-material being, all of God is present throughout the entire universe (Ps. 139:7; Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17). God does not exist in time and space, rather time and space were created by God (presupposed by the beginning of the created order, Gen. 1:1). Though biblical language describes God's activity in time (e.g., Gen. 22:1; Job 31:14; Ps. 69:13; Gal. 4:4), Scripture does not intimate God being bound by time (Is 46:9-10). He has the "birds-eye" view of all things actual and possible in a single, simultaneous thought.

That God is said to repent, grieve, express joy, et al. does not necessarily indicate his essential being or purposes can be altered nor impeded (cf., Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:10; Jonah 3:10; Eph. 4:30; Is. 62:3-5; Zeph. 3:17-18 respectively). Scripture clearly states that God does not change with respect to his substantial attributes or his promises (Num. 23:19; Ps. 102:27; Is. 46:11; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 1:11-12; 13:8; Jm. 1:17). As such, God has absolute sovereign dominion over all that occurs in the universe, ordering both the means and the ends (Pr. 16:1, 4, 9).

However, the Bible explicitly ascribes emotions to God as the fundamental outworking of the type of personal being that he is. Given the absolute sovereignty and omniscience of God, it is impossible for God to react to the things which occur in creation. When Scripture speaks of God's responses, they are best understood as anthropomorphic ways of illustrating the character of God.

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Finally, God is a dynamic being who interacts with the universe while remaining distinct from it (Deut. 4:39). This is not to say that God himself is always changing with the universe (contra, process thought), nor that he is the impersonal, indifferent Source (contra, Deism). Because God transcends the created universe metaphysically, he is changeless in his being and purposes. However, God is not a static sovereign, but a relationally loving, feeling being who answers prayer, withholds judgment upon repentance, and rewards the righteous with eternal life.

### The Character of God

God is metaphysically and morally transcendent in being. That is, he is ontologically distinct from his creation and morally, intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally perfect. No created being possesses such perfections. He is the greatest possible being who surpasses every creature in all his excellencies. The qualities of God are intrinsic such that he is endowed with absolute goodness, beauty, truth, justice, love, et al. Over and against extrinsic qualities which are contingent upon the notion of being-in-relation-to, God's character is what it is in itself, not in relation to other things, creatures, ideals, etc. Though God is relationally present in providential and redemptive activity (sustaining life in the world and calling some out of the world for eternal life), there is none quite like the "Most High God" (Ps. 78:35; Dan. 5:21).

Morally, God is good (2 Chron. 5:13; Ps. 34:8; 100:5; Jer. 33:11; Nah. 1:7- Mt. 19:17), just (2 Chron. 12:6; Jn. 5:30; 2 Thess. 1:6), merciful (Gen. 19:6; Ex. 34:6; Dan. 9:18; Lk. 6:36; Eph. 2:4), loving and compassionate (2 Kgs. 13:23; Ps. 25: 10; 62:12; 86:15; Rom. 9:15; Jm. 5: 11), and holy (Lev. 10:3; 11:44; Is. 6:3; 1 Pt. 1:15; Rev. 4:8). As a merciful God, he is tenderhearted toward those in need physically (Mt. 20:30-34) and spiritually (Rom. 11:30-32). In his mercy, God refrains from bestowing judgment, though it is deserved more often than not (Neh. 9:29-3 1; 1 Tim. 1:13-16), and instead conveys salvation and forgiveness (Ps. 51:1-2; Mic. 7:18-20; Eph. 2:4-5; Tit. 3:3-5).

Intellectually, God knows all things actual and possible (Ps. 139:1-4; 147:4-5; 1 Sam. 23:91-13; Jer. 38:17-18; Mt. 6:8; 11:21), possesses all wisdom (Job 12:13; Is. 28:29; Dan. 2:20; 28:20-21; Rom. 16:27; Rev. 7:12), and remains dependable and trustworthy because he cannot deceive himself, since he is truth and knows all truth. God is the ultimate Promise-keeper (Gen. 24:27; Jer. 32:40-41; Lam. 3:23; 1 Pt. 4:19; Josh. 23:14-15; 2 Cor. 1:20). As the omniscient God, he is never caught off guard by the irresponsible, sinful choices of humanity. The fact that he knows in advance what free moral agents will choose does not nullify genuine human freedom. Knowing all the possibilities available to humans, in addition to knowing which choice humans will

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make under certain circumstances, magnifies God's seemingly limitless knowledge. Though he knows with a purpose, and his purposes are never made contingent upon anything, God's enormous knowledge is beyond comprehension (Rom. 11:33-34).

Volitionally, God is self-determined and free with respect to anything outside his own being and purposes. In other words, God is free to be himself and nothing other than himself compels him to be or do anything. God does whatever pleases him (Job 23:13; Ps. 115:3; Pr. 21:1; Dan. 4:35). As a purely self-determined being, God is absolutely omnipotent. He is able to do whatever is in accordance with his perfect will and character. Nothing he purposes can be turned back (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27), nor is he limited to doing only what the human mind can conceive (Mt. 19:26; Eph. 3:20). Though there are some things that are impossible for God, these are not to be considered limitations, but rather perfections of his character (2 Tim. 2:13 Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18; Jm. 1:13).

Furthermore, as the Almighty God, he is sovereign over all creation. He alone is the ultimate cause by which all things occur. Though not directly responsible for evil in the world, God is behind evil indirectly. He permits the existence of evil as a means toward obtaining a universe where optimal conditions will someday exist for loving relationships to be freely and perfectly exchanged forever. Meanwhile, the sovereign God orchestrates every event in the universe so as to achieve this ultimate end (Is. 14:26-27).

Emotionally, God is an affective being who expresses love (1 Kgs. 8:23; Jn. 3:16), hates evil (Is. 61:8; Hos. 9:15; Mal. 1:3), is jealous (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; Josh. 24:19; Zech. 1:14), and enters into the suffering of his people (Is. 53:3; 63:9). That God is passionate does not entail him being capricious nor arbitrary. He is not apathetic toward his people, but is full of compassion (Ex. 3:7; Ps. 22:24). As a jealous God, he rightly desires that which is his own. His jealousy is born out of his love for his people and zeal for the realization of his covenant (Is. 9:7; 37:32).

It has been alleged that God's love and anger toward sinners is incompatible (Tillich, Kung). But, this is to misunderstand the nature of love. Love is patient, but it is not eternally tolerant, otherwise Hell would be empty (the hope of not a few misguided "theologians"). God is love, but he also divorced Israel because of her rebellion (1 Jn. 4:16; Jer. 3:8). It is not incongruous for God to offer every opportunity to enter into his love, only to find that those who persist in rejecting him are the cause of their own condemnation.

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### The Trinity

The Bible affirms the reality of one God who eternally exists in three persons-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though the word "person" usually connotes a separate entity, it is not the case that there are three different entities or divine essences (contra Tri-theism). When it is claimed that God is three persons, it is best understood to mean all three major roles or characters are played by the one God (persona, Latin for an actor's face-mask, viz., the role taken in a play). Equal in essence, but particular in function, these three persons administer distinct yet harmonious offices in the creative and redemptive plan of God.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not numerically identical with the Father, but rather essentially identical. While the biblical data teaches that Jesus is God (Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pt. 1:1), it denies that God the Father is Jesus. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is the complete expression of God and Jesus without being numerically identical to either of them (Jn. 16:14; 20:22; Acts 5:9; 8:39; 16:7; Rom. 8:26). However, Scripture seems to imply that the Spirit proceeds both from the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:7) such that the redeeming and sanctifying results are accomplished by one and the same triune God (Rom. 8:9-11; 2 Cor. 3:17; Jn. 3:5-7; 1 Jn. 3:9). The Father refers to the Son as a distinct person (Lk. 9:35), the Son refers to the Father as a distinct person (Lk. 23:34), and the Spirit speaks, prays, is grieved, gives joy and hope, and reveals truth as a person (Acts 8:29; 13:2; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17; Rom. 8:26; Eph. 4:30, also cf., Mt. 12:31f, Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Jn. 16:13-14). Though each member of the Godhead is distinguished, the Scriptures intimate that all three are one and the same God.

Subsisting within the members of the Godhead is an ordering of activities. This, however, in no way suggests one member holds an inferior status with regard to substance or essence (contra Subordinationism). For example, God the Son did not, in taking upon himself the fullness of humanity (Phil. 2:5-8), cease to become less than the essential God. Any theory which suggests God the Son relinquished any of the divine attributes in order to become human does not comport with biblical evidence. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is fully God (Acts 5:3-4; Ps. 139:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:10-11). The distinct activities of each member is clearly seen in redeeming the elect. It is the Father who plans redemption (Jn. 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:9-10), the Son accomplishes redemption (Jn. 6:38; Heb. 10:5-7; Eph. 2:13; Col. 1:20; 1 Jn. 1:7), and the Spirit applies the blessings and responsibilities of redemption (Jn. 3:5-8; Acts 1:8; Rom. 8:13; 15:16; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; 1 Pt. 1:2).

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Though the Old Testament focuses upon the unity and oneness of God, there are hints of plurality within the essence of God (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; Is. 6:8). The plural pronouns used in these passages all refer to God and his creative or redemptive activity. It is certainly true angels are in heaven witnessing these events. However, the immediate contexts of these passages do not indicate that angels actually participate in the creative or redemptive events themselves. Therefore, it is very likely that the plural pronouns suggest a plurality within the unity of God.

Within the New Testament, there a number of passages that explicitly affirm a triune God (Mt. 3:16-17; 29:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Pt. 1:2; Jude 20-21). The Father, Son, and Spirit are all in the same company with the fullness of Deity. New believers are not told to be baptized into the name of God, his created Son, and a lovely, powerful influence, but to identify themselves as disciples of the triune God of the universe. While both the Son and the Spirit are sent (Jn. 3:17; 15:26), neither should be thought of as impersonal. First Corinthians 12:11 states that the Spirit sovereignly chooses what gifts will be distributed for edifying the Church, whereas verse 6 states God is the one who "works all of them [gifts] in all men." Therefore, both God and his Spirit are responsible for distributing gifts to members in the Church.

From a humanly finite perspective, it must be maintained that the triune God is not fully comprehensible. Ultimately, the Trinity remains a mystery. Though objectively and factually true, it has only been made clear to a degree by God's special revelation. The triune God of the Scripture must be defended against Sabellianism (God exists in three different modes, one after another). The concept of "three-in-oneness" may be mysterious, but not contradictory. God does not exist sequentially, as if he is one person at a time. Rather, the three personal distinctions are identical in essence and they eternally share a relationship as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### *God's Decrees, God's Providence, Creation and Humanity*

#### *God's Decrees*

As the sovereign, all-knowing God of the universe, he has an overall "blueprint," known only to him, in which he has already orchestrated every effect from every cause and every consequence from every condition. In his perfect wisdom and almighty power, God's conception and resolve is to bring about the precise goal which he intends for his creation. Ultimately, everything that comes to pass is what he has purposed, and everything he has purposed comes to pass (Is. 14:26-27; Eph. 1:11).

However, this does not eliminate intermediary causes. Persons are not puppets bound by a

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divine string. People make significantly free and, consequently, responsible choices that are part of the overall plan of God. Though human freedom is not absolute nor total in the sense that God's design is made contingent, all people everywhere and at all times have been endowed with considerable determination impelled by the inclinations of the self. In order for love to be meaningful, it must be freely given. So, God originally created humans with the ability either to remain in a loving relationship with him, or not. Choosing to break fellowship with God, humanity became enslaved by an impulse which was only contrary to his perfect will (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 3:1ff; Eph. 2:3).

Yet, God in his wondrous mercy, grace, and love set out to remedy our hopeless human plight by offering up Jesus as the Savior of the world. He did this so that some, who through faith alone in his Son, might become born anew and forever enjoy a relationship with him as their loving, heavenly Father (1 Jn. 3:1). Given this divine plan of creation and redemption, questions naturally raised are "In what logical order did God decide, determine, or purpose that these events should take place?" "If the divine will is ultimately prior to and authoritative over the human will, what about human freedom?" Answers to these questions are somewhat speculative. But a substantial amount of biblical data will show that 1) God's plan is certain and 2) human involvement is part of God's strategy he employs to bring about his perfect plan for the universe.

First, what God decrees will take place. This is God's decisive or decretive will. It is unconditional and effectual. There is nothing outside of God himself that would or could compel him to perform his decisive will. It is theologically certain in that it must necessarily come about because God willed it. That which God intends by his decisive will is certain to be actualized. Furthermore, everything which God decisively performs is only good, since he cannot perform evil (Gen. 1:31; Jm. 1: 13, 17; 1 Jn. 1:5). Examples of God's decisive will would be the intent to create (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14, et al.) and to redeem (Acts 2:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pt. 1:20).

However, it is also the case that Scripture clearly indicates God conditionally allows certain activities without being directly behind them. This is God's contingent will. That is, certain conditions, intermediary causes, or states of affairs must be in place prior to their actualization. God's contingent will is historically, or empirically certain, but only when the necessary condition(s) exist for the consequent result(s) to occur.

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Two categories serve to divide the contingent will of God: 1) God's preceptive will, and 2) God's permissive will. Neither is logically certain nor unconditionally definite. The first category pertains to God's sovereign rule de jure, or the way things ought to be in the moral arena, whereas the second category relates to God's sovereign rule de facto, or the way things are literally. God does not force resistance to him, but he does permit it (Gen. 3; Lk. 7:30; Acts 7:51). If God is sovereign (has total control) over the universe, and the universe is not always pleasing to him, then he must allow that which brings him displeasure (Ez. 18:23; Mal. 1:10).

The major concern over God's decrees has primarily to do with salvation and reprobation. For the strict Calvinist, God unconditionally elects some to salvation and some to damnation. Nothing with respect to God's purposes is conditional. Logically, God decides prior to the Fall to elect some to be saved and some to be lost. In fact, God creates in order to place people in the proper camp. This eliminates human responsibility altogether. Also, it oversimplifies a complex issue. The universe includes a variety of causes and effects, none of which are out of the control of God. But, this does not exclude intermediary causes of responsible human agents.

For example, Peter, under the inspiration of God, intimates there are four causes to Jesus' crucifixion. First, the Jews are a responsible cause for Jesus' death (Acts 2:23; note "you put to death" is emphatic; also, v. 36). Second, the Romans carried out this heinous crime ("with the help of wicked men" = Roman guards/government). Third, if it is possible the Savior suffered for the sins of the whole world (Jn. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:15; 2:6; 4:10; Tit. 2:11; Heb. 2:9; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:14), and death by crucifixion was the manner of his suffering, then it is likely all sinners are responsible for the suffering and death of the Savior. Fourth, God was in and behind it all, accomplishing what he himself graciously predestined ("by God's set purpose and foreknowledge," also cf., Acts 4:28).

The Arminian camp also sees God's relationship to the elect and non-elect from merely one angle. Only it is opposite a strict Calvinistic position—God elects both believer and unbeliever conditionally. Salvation and/or reprobation is conditioned upon human response. God foreknows what will occur in salvation; he does not, however, predetermine it. This makes God's plan of redemption wholly contingent upon human choices. In one sense, it is true God's decision to elect is contingent upon him knowing in advance how others will respond. After all, he does not choose in the dark! However, God's knowledge of future choices is perfectly accurate. He, therefore, knows with a purpose. What God knows regarding the redeemed, he

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wills for the redeemed. Those who reject God's salvation do so because they are responsible, self-determining agents. As a result, unbelievers bring condemnation upon themselves (Jn. 3:18).

A model for logically ordering God's decrees would be: (1) God unconditionally creates persons with enough freedom to experience an authentic, loving relationship with him; (2) God conditionally permits the Fall of the human race (Gen. 2:17; 3:3); (3) God decisively and unconditionally elects some to a saving relationship with him (1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:9); (4) God unconditionally provides redemption by sending his Son to accomplish salvation and the Holy Spirit to apply it (Rev. 13:8 [NIV]; Jn. 3:5) (5) God conditionally permits those who persist in rejecting his redemptive provision to enter into eternal damnation (Rom. 1:26 et al.; 2 Thess. 1:6-9); (6) God unconditionally brings the created order to a climactic end where he forever separates believer from unbeliever (Eph. 1:11; Rev. 22). And, the final stage in God's creative, redemptive drama will be where God's rule *de jure* and *de facto* are perfectly integrated as one.

### God's Providence

The history of the universe, from beginning to end, is governed, planned, guided, and directed toward the loving ends of the all-wise and all-powerful Creator. Nothing eventuates which has not already been intended, either permissively or purposefully, by the Almighty God (Pr. 16:33; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:11). Not only is God directly involved with creation by way of miracles, but he is indirectly involved through mediatorial means such as the natural laws of the universe, angels, individual human agency (good and evil), families, nations, and prayer.

The ordinary providence of God can be seen in his supplying the created order with regularity in its operation (Gen. 8:22- Job 38:4-38; Ps. 104; Mt. 5:45; Acts 14:17). However, God provides extraordinarily through miraculous intervention for his specific redemptive purposes (Ex. 14:16; Ps. 78:13; Josh. 10:12-14; 1 Kgs. 18:17-49; Dan. 3:27-29; Mt. 8:2-3; Lk. 4:40; Jn. 9; Acts 9:42; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:4). Miracles do not transgress the laws of nature, since God set them in motion. Rather, miracles are divine irregularities in a universe that is operated by the regular ways in which God governs through natural processes. Under his providential control, miracles primarily serve to redirect human and/or satanic activity toward God's redemptive agenda (Mk. 2:1-12; 5:30, 34). Though all miracles do not necessarily have their origin in heaven (Mt. 24:24; Rev. 13:13), those which clearly point to and confirm God's salvific plan originate in the kingdom of light (Acts 2:43; 3:6-26; 9:40-42; Heb. 2:3-4).

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God's providential control is seen in governing the affairs of nations. He is the chief architect and ruler over the nations (Job 12:23; Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Ps. 22:28; 33:14-15; Pr. 21:1; 16:9; Dan. 4:34-35; Acts 17:26). Even in the midst of evil God redirects the results of wrong human choices toward his ultimate purposes, whether his purposes are for blessing, discipline, or judgment (Gen. 37:28; 45:5; 50:20; 2 Kgs. 19:25; Is. 10:5, 12; 13:17; Jer. 25:9, 12; Ez. 14:9; Hab. 1:5-12; Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:11).

Not only does God redirect evil human activity toward his purposes, he also restrains evil. Abimelech was kept from having relations with Sarah, because God promised to fulfill his redemptive plan via Abraham's offspring (Gen. 17:16-21; 20:1-7). The wicked plan of Haman to destroy the Jewish population was overruled by God's providential plan to promote Esther in the Persian empire (Esther 4:14; 9:1-4). God contained the evil of the Ninevites by providing Jonah as a prophet to preach a message of repentance (Jonah 1:2; 3:10). Moreover, God provides government as a means of bridling the evil choices of humanity as well as allowing religious freedom (2 Thess. 2:6-7; Rom. 13:3-4; Acts 18:12-17).

Prayer is an expression of trust and reliance upon God's providence and, therefore, is a means of God effecting change for the accomplishment of his will. God responds to the prayers of his people (Gen. 18:22-33; 21:17; 30:17; Ex. 32:14; 1 Chron. 14:14; Dan. 10:12; Mt. 7:7-11; Acts 4:29-31; 12:5-11). Conditions for answered prayer include prayers offered in Jesus' name (Jn. 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24). To pray in the name of Jesus is to enter the presence of God by the authority and reputation of Jesus rather than any individual authority (e.g., Acts 3:6; 4:7; 16:18; 1 Cor. 5:4). It implies a surrendering of all personal authority and privilege and a submission to the Lord Jesus' authority. Therefore, humility and dependence are necessary prerequisites to effective prayer (2 Chron. 7:14; Jm. 5:16; 1 Pt. 5:6-7). Also, Scripture teaches us to rely on God's providence by praying according to God's will (Mt. 6:10; 26:39; 1 Jn. 5:14-15). The fact that God knows in advance what we need before we ask (Mt. 6:8) suggests God's provision is not so much in the answers, but in the prayers themselves.

God has providential control over all of history, despite the free, responsible choices of humans. Though Satan is the ruler of this world who seeks to bind everyone in darkness (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Jn. 5:19; Rev. 12:9), God will have the final say (Rev. 20:10). Humans are endowed with significant freedom, both before and after the Fall, but nothing which occurs can make the plans and provisions of God contingent. Before the Fall God provided sufficient ability to choose good over evil, but after the Fall, humanity would only choose evil. Even if it were

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ontologically possible for fallen people to choose the good (Rom. 2:14-14; albeit Eph. 2:3), they still would not do so because freedom has been defaced by sinful rebellion (Jn. 12:37, 39). Therefore, progress via evolutionary means (per Liberal theologies) is simply not possible.

### Creation and Humanity

The Bible clearly states that God created the universe (Gen. 1:1; Mt. 19:4; Acts 4:24; 14:15). Moreover, the universe was created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), rather than from some pre-existent material or matter (Rom. 4:17- Heb. 11:3, where the instrument was *rhema* = God's spoken word; also, Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, et al.; Ps. 33:6; 148:5). The personal agency through whom God operated in creating the universe and humanity is the second Person of the triune God (Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2).

That the universe began to exist is virtually undeniable, both from a scientific and philosophical point of view. However, when or how God created the universe is difficult if not impossible to determine. The biblical data offers a variety of options and does not necessarily intimate a young earth. The Hebrew terms meaning "to create" (*bara*) and "to make" (*asah*) are used interchangeably (Gen. 1:26, 27, 31). Both are used as either a direct or indirect act of God (cf., Zech. 10:1 where God makes the storm clouds which produce rain; also, Acts 14:17). Hence, God can create directly and immediately without respect to time or indirectly and mediately through time and from other created processes.

Moreover, the Hebrew word for "day" (*yom*) used in Gen. 1:5, 8, et al. can mean a literal twenty-four hour period (Ex. 20:11), a month (Gen. 29:14), one year (Lev. 25:4-7), or an extended time (Josh. 24:7; 2 Chron. 15:3; Ps. 90:4-6 [Note: Moses wrote Psalm 90!]; 2 Pt. 3:8). Problems of understanding "day" to mean a literal twenty-four hour period include insufficient time for: (1) Adam to become lonely before Eve was created (Gen. 2:18); (2) vegetation to produce for Adam to begin working the Garden (Gen. 2:15-16); (3) Adam to name all the animals (Gen. 2:19-22). Finally, Adam's surprise at first seeing the woman could be rendered "here now at last bone of" which may suggest a longer period than just twenty-four hours (Gen. 2:23).

Though everything that exists ultimately owes its existence to God, he can and does use intermediary causes or processes whereby the existence of something(one) is derived from pre-existent objects/persons (Acts 17:26; 1 Cor. 11:8-9). This is not to say that God uses a Darwinian type of evolutionary process that is purposeless and random. As soon as God speaks things into existence, they appear (Gen. 1:11). Biological life did not require an inordinate

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amount of time when it came into being. In addition, Scripture states that each time God spoke, a specific "kind" of object came into existence (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 24, 26-27). This demonstrates that God is the God of order and design, not chaos (Job 38:10; Ps. 104:9; 1 Cor. 14:33).

The genealogies in Scripture do not necessarily indicate a strict chronology. When comparing the genealogy of 1 Chron. 3:10-12 with Mt. 1:8-9, a gap is present. The biblical authors may have had some other purpose(s) in mind, rather than writing an exhaustive, detailed account of every event in history. The overall purpose of creation is not to provide a laboratory for discovering all the secrets of how and when creation came about, but to point to the glory of the Creator (Ps. 19:1-2; Rev. 4:11).

It seems best to understand the first three days of creation to be periods of time in which God provided form, structure, and order to the universe that could sustain life. Days 4-6 could be understood as God filling in the structure or void with biological life that is dependent upon the natural processes that he set in motion during the first three days (Is. 45:18). This treats the Gen. 1-2 narrative as historical, just as Jesus, the Jews, and the apostles understood (Mt. 19:5; Mk. 2:27; 13:19; Acts 7:50 = Is. 66:2; 1 Tim. 4:4; Heb. 12:27; Jm. 1:18), while making room for science to hypothesize how and when this may have taken place.

The zenith of God's creative activity is Adam and Eve. They alone are endowed with speech which enables them to communicate (Gen. 2:16, 19; 2:23; 3:2, et al.). They alone are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and receive life from the very breath of God (Gen. 2:7). The rest of Scripture is taken up with humanity's need for a redemptive relationship with the Creator. Against a theistic evolutionary theory, material human was formed from the dust of the ground, but the principle of life was given by God (Gen. 2:7). Also, the woman was clearly brought forth from man indicating ontological continuity of humanity, rather than the product of a non-human species (Gen. 2:21-22). And, the first man and woman were fully developed sexually to allow for immediate reproduction (Gen. 1:28). Finally, humanity was given significant freedom to make moral choices and to rule over all other life forms (Gen. 1:28; 2:16-17).

### *Humanity in God's Image, Humanity in Rebellion*

#### *Humanity in God's Image*

The Bible declares that humanity is created after the image and likeness of the Creator (Gen.

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1:26). Humanity is the created representation of God on earth and redeemed humanity reflects the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10; Rom. 8:29; 1 Jn. 3:2). However, the image is a copy of the original, not the exact replica. Although the image and likeness of God (both are probably synonymous) is tainted by sin, Scripture indicates that it still remains after the Fall (Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jm. 3:9). So, it is not likely the *imago Dei* has been lost due to sin. Instead, the *imago Dei* is restored at regeneration and the effects of the Fall begin to be reversed so the believer can become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. also 1 Cor. 1:30). In all the creative work of God it is humanity alone who is made after the divine image. Hence, the *imago Dei* is what sets humanity apart from the rest of creation.

Furthermore, both male and female equally bare the image of the Creator (Gen. 1:27; 5:1-2a). Although male and female individually share in the fullness of the image, they are also the image of God together. This suggests that within the sphere of the image there exists a social dimension (Gen. 1:26; 2:18). The first man was created as a "son of God" (Lk. 3:38) and so is capable, to Eve's surprise, of passing on the image (Gen. 4:1; 5:3). Similarly, to be reborn of God is to restore the image and share, once again, in the nature of God (2 Pt. 1:4).

The *imago Dei* carries with it the privilege of ruling over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8:6-8). The first indication of human speech is in connection with his dominion-having authority over animal life (Gen. 2:19). Rather than the ruling over all of creation being a condition for having the image, more than likely it is a consequence of it. Whenever the theme of the image or likeness is present after Gen. 1, dominion over other life forms is never mentioned again (Gen. 5:1; 9:6; et al.). However, redeemed humanity will someday sit in judgment over the world and angels (1 Cor. 6:3).

Metaphysically, humanity is a complex unity consisting of material and immaterial substance. The body was created out of pre-existent material, but life was breathed into him from God who is immaterial (Gen. 2:7; Ecc. 3:19-21). Rather than a trichotomy of substances, it seems the biblical data suggests a dichotomy of substances. The words for soul and spirit are used interchangeably in the Old Testament. The word for "soul" (*nephesh*) is used of the principle of life (Lev. 17:11) and "spirit" (*ruach*) is also used this way (Gen. 2:7; cf., also, Job 7:11; Is. 26:9).

In the New Testament both "soul" and "spirit" are virtually synonymous. In referring to the whole person Jesus used dichotomous categories (Mt. 10:28; Lk. 12:5). Jesus and Stephen referred to their immaterial selves as "spirit" (Lk. 26:46; Acts 7:59; also, cf., Lk. 1:46-47; 16:19-31; and comp. Jn. 12:27 with 13:21). Against a strict monistic view, Paul understood existentially

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that a disembodied existence is possible (1 Cor. 12:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:8). This strongly suggest a duality of substances (cf., also Phil. 1:21-24; Acts 17:16; and Acts 23:6-8 where Paul's pre-Christian anthropology was carried over from his orthodox Judaism).

Scripture seems to favor the position that the soul/spirit (= enduring self) was originally created by God, then subsequently passed on from Adam. God rested on the seventh day of creation indicating his creative activity is complete. Adam and Eve gave birth to children after "his own likeness, [after] his own image" (Gen. 5:3). Also, David claims his sinful nature is derived from his human parentage which could not be true if God created each human soul/spirit (Ps. 51:5). Moreover, if the animal and plant life give rise to offspring "according to their kinds" (Gen. 1:24), so too can humans bear children according to their kind. Levi, as a united duality of body and soul, is said to have been in the "loins of his ancestor" (Heb. 7:10; also, Jm. 2:26).

As a duality of substances that are united into one integrated person, humans exist as social, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, volitional, and moral beings. Relationally, humans function in a temporal/spatial connection to the physical universe, God, self and others. Though the human body is mortal (Rom 6:12; 8:11; 2 Cor. 4:11), personal existence and identity continues after death (1 Sam. 28:12; Mt. 17:3; Jn. 20:28). The believer's goal is to be entirely sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23). Paul's prayer in this passage is for the sanctification process to be complete. He does not intend to promote a trichotomous view of humanity. In addition, the dualistic Greek mind (matter and spirit) would have understood both a material and immaterial aspect to the individual person. First Thessalonians 5:23 no more teaches three distinct substances, than does the Shema teach that there are four substances (viz., heart, soul, mind, and strength, cf., Mk. 12:30).

### Humanity in Rebellion

Humans were originally created good, but due to the Fall sin now defaces the image of God at conception (Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Rom. 5:12-21; Eph. 2:3c). Nevertheless, humans are not so ruined as to be incapable of restoration. Through faith in Jesus the image of God is renewed and gradually conformed to His Son's image (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). The first sin occurred in Eden by Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:1-19) and has been transferred from them to all throughout the generations.

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As the NT indicates, the Genesis account is an historically trustworthy record of the origin of sin (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22; 1 Tim. 2:13-14; Jude 1:11, 14). Though sin is inherited by Adam, this is not to say that humans are as sinful as they could be. By the restraining providence of God in civil government, family, and conscience (Ps. 145:9; Lk. 6:33; Rom. 1:32; 2:14-15; Heb. 12:7-11) the common grace bestowed upon all limits the effects of sin in the human heart. Though fallen humanity is not totally depraved, all are totally undeserving of experiencing God's mercy and grace (Rom. 3:10; Eph. 2:4).

Some may object that original sin is taught in Scripture. It could be that all the Bible speaks of is actual sin rather than original sin. However, sin, like beauty, is more than skin deep. It is true all have sinned actually (Rom. 3:23), but it is equally true that all have sinned originally in Adam (Rom. 5:12). Paul declares that "death came to all men" where "all" stands first in the clause indicating emphasis as well as the repetitive word "men" which would have been understood. Moreover, Paul indicates "all sinned" (aorist indicative) because of Adam's sin in the past. Hence, the context is not referring to individual activity (though this is implicit), but to corporate responsibility. There is a solidarity to the human race in that the original humans stand as the moral, physical, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual representatives of all people everywhere and at all times (Acts 17:26). Just as our biological nature is derived from our parentage, so too is our spiritual nature.

It should be noted that the situation of responsible adults is Paul's primary focus in Rom. 1:8-5:21 and any application from this pericope to the fate of infants who die prematurely would be an argument from silence. Scripture simply does not explicitly say when humans are morally accountable. And, with Augustine, where the Scriptures are silent so must we be.

Scripture speaks of a sinful heart (Ps. 66:18; Pr. 21:4; Jer. 17:9; Mt. 15:17-19), a sinful mind (Rom. 1:26; Eph. 4:17-19; Tit. 1:15), and sinful speech (Pr. 8:13; Rom. 3:13-14; Jm. 3:9; 2 Pt. 2:18). Jesus taught that the spiritual condition of the heart is what determines a person's behavior and speech (Mt. 6:21; 12:35; Lk. 6:45). Though unbelievers are capable of doing some good, it is impossible, despite the amount of righteous human activity, to close the gap between God and fallen humanity (Is. 64:6).

Consequently, God judges all on the basis of one man's sin (viz., Adam; cf., Rom. 5:12, 16, 18; 1 Cor. 15:21-22) because all are conceived with the desire only to do what is contrary to God (Rom. 8:5-9; Gal. 5:16-17). And, the result in living out the natural desires and inclinations is

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enslavement to sin's power (Rom. 6:6, 16-17, 19; 7:14). Though it may not appear fair that God would judge all on the basis of one man's sin, it is the disposition of Adam's guilt rather than his sin per se that is inherited – just as Christ assumed our guilty status instead of our particular sinful acts (Is. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:14, 21; 1 Pt. 2:24; 3:18).

The Pelagian view that all are born without a disposition to sinful activity does not fit the biblical data nor human experience. The rise of sin coming from nurture rather than nature does nothing to explain how sin came to be in the first place. If the universe was free from sin and Adam and Eve were the only individuals around, from whence comes the negative example? The perfect moral standard (i.e., God's Law) was weakened not by social or environmental problems, but by the sinful nature (Rom. 8:3). And the principle of sin is found, not in the examples from others, but in the essential self (Rom. 7:18). In the biblical schema of reality persons are held morally responsible, not circumstances nor surroundings.

### *The Incarnation, Virgin Birth, and Uniqueness of the Lord Jesus*

The Incarnation and Virgin Birth of the Lord Jesus

"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). This truth marks the final unfolding of God's redemptive plan in human history. Was the virgin birth really a miracle? Was Mary a sinner in need of redeeming grace? If so, is it possible for her sin not to be passed on to her human son? Was Jesus aware of his divine nature? Before discovering why it was necessary that God become man, it is important to ask if it is even possible that God could become man and still remain God.

Illustrating Christian humility, Paul writes of Jesus' humility in becoming man (Phil. 2:6-7, NIV). Paul uses the expression "but made himself nothing" (v. 7) which in Greek is the word *kenosis* meaning emptying. In fact, the NRSV translates v. 7 "but emptied himself" According to the *kenosis* theory, Jesus gave up or emptied himself of either (1) all of his divine attributes or (2) some of them in order to become man.

Problems with these options abound. First, how is it that God can remain fully God and not have some or all of his attributes? One answer would be to maintain that Jesus was not fully God during his time here on earth. This answer creates far more problems than it solves and, according to biblical-historical Christianity, is heretical. All the characteristics which are essential to any existence must remain for that existence to retain its status. Water (H<sub>2</sub>O) must include one part oxygen for it to retain its status as water. Likewise, Jesus must necessarily retain all the attributes that are essential to deity in order to retain the status of deity.

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Paul just finished saying that Jesus is “in very nature God” (v. 6). One of the qualities of God is that his essential being does not change (Num. 23:19; Jm. 1:17). Paul explicitly says the incarnation of Jesus means he was in “very nature God” and “the very nature of a servant, made in human likeness” (vv. 6-7). The voluntary act of taking “the very nature of a servant, made in human likeness” is the time at which Jesus “made himself nothing.” At his conception God the Son willingly and humbly chose to clothe himself with humanity. The God-Man Jesus voluntarily chose not to have the continuous use of all the divine attributes. Rather, he selectively exercised the attributes of deity while here on earth in accordance with his Father’s will (Jn. 8:28-29; 10:25, 32).

Matthew and Luke record the miraculous birth of Jesus. Many have tried seeing this as everything but a miracle. However, a clear reading of the Gospel accounts testify otherwise. In the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew repeatedly refers to Jesus’ human ancestry with the phrase “the father of” but when he gets to the birth of Jesus he says “Joseph, the husband of Mary, [italics mine] of whom was born Jesus. . .” (1:2-16). This identifies Jesus’ mother as Mary but implicitly says that Joseph was not the father of Jesus. Matthew 1:18 says Jesus was conceived prior to Mary and Joseph having relations. Granted, Mary could have been raped (a recent theory) and the authors of Scripture didn’t know about it. However, this argues from the depths of silence and has absolutely no historical evidence. Also, Mary conceived Jesus “through the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18, 20; Lk. 1:35) and not through human agency (also, cf., Mt. 1:25). Matthew and Luke record Mary believing herself to be a virgin (Mt. 1:23; Lk. 1:27, 34). Finally, one would expect Elizabeth’s joyous reception of Mary to turn sour if Mary had pre-marital relations with anyone.

That Jesus was sinless throughout his earthly life is made clear in Scripture (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15). Unfortunately, some have taught that in order for Jesus to be born into humanity and remain sinless he must have had sinless parentage (viz., Mary). However, it is not essential to being human that one be sinless as well (e.g., the pre-Fall state of Adam and Eve). Jesus could and did remain fully human without a sin nature. Arguments for Mary’s sinlessness are beyond Scriptural support and ultimately fail at every juncture (cf., Rom. 3:9-10, 23; Eph. 2:3c).

Jesus himself knew of his divine nature early in life. At twelve years old he recognized his special relationship with the Father (Lk. 2:49). Speaking of God as one’s own father was, in the Jewish world, considered blasphemous (Jn. 5:17-18) and probably helps to explain Mary and

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Joseph's perplexity (Lk. 2:50). Furthermore, Jesus knew his origin to be from heaven (Jn. 6:3 8, 50-51; 16:5) and he explicitly affirms that he was the expected Messiah (Jn. 4:25-26).

### The Uniqueness of the Lord Jesus

That Jesus is one integrated person who exists both as fully God and fully man is the meaning of the incarnation. How this can be is what the early Church sought to clarify. Explaining this mysterious union of the divine and human natures resulted in not a few debates and counsels. Closely akin to this issue were other related concerns about the Lord Jesus. For example, since he was without sin (Heb. 4:15), was Jesus able to sin? If not, what was the point of his temptation by the devil? Similarly, what is the nature of temptation?

The intellectual framework within which the early Church was to understand the two natures of the Lord Jesus was a complexity of Greek thought and Jewish monotheism. Philosophical assumptions included that there is one and only one substance in the world; all distinctions are mere illusion. Yet, Greek dualism separated spirit (intrinsically good) from matter (intrinsically evil). Neither spirit nor matter can combine since good and evil are entirely distinct. Jewish monotheism, of course, taught there is one God who is distinct from, but directly involved with, creation.

Two schools of thought emerged from this intellectual background regarding the disposition of Jesus' two natures. First, the Antiochene school fought to keep the two natures of the Lord Jesus separate. According to this view deity and humanity should not be confused. The result was an inadequate understanding of the Lord Jesus as one integrated person and a deficient understanding of Jesus' humanity. The opposing view from Alexandria overemphasized the unity of Jesus' two natures. It sacrificed the two natures of Jesus to the extent that both were dissolved into one nature with the divine side stressed.

There are problems with the Antiochene school in denying the essential union of the two natures. First, it is logically possible for two natures to exist, without division, in one integrated person. Simply because the constitution of each nature is substantially different does not mean there is a gulf between them. It is a mistake to maintain too much distance between the two natures as it leans toward a division of person. Hence, the God-Man is not divine + human, but divine-human. Second, the two natures are found to be united, without separation, into the one integrated person of the Lord Jesus. By way of analogy, the Church is the body of Christ consisting of Jews and Gentiles. Paul refers to this phenomenon as "one new man out of the two" (Eph. 2:15). There is distinction but not division. Likewise, in the Lord

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Jesus there is distinction between the two natures but no division. Third, Jesus' personality subsists in the divine nature (enhypostasia) such that he is always one in purpose, thought and speech with God the Father (Jn. 10:30; 14:24b). Thus, those divine attributes of Jesus are, in totality, the same as the attributes that are essential to being fully divine. Likewise, those human attributes of Jesus are, in totality, the same as the attributes that are essential to being fully human. The Lord Jesus is one integrated person with two natures.

The Alexandrian school, represented in extreme by Eutyches, erred in denying any distinction between the two natures of the Lord Jesus. The human nature was absorbed into the divine nature to create a single divine nature. Difficulty with this view entails not being able to distinguish the true identity of Jesus. Was he God or man? Did the man Jesus redeem us or God? Eutyches would answer "God" in both cases. However, if the Lord Jesus were not fully God and fully man, then he could not redeem as the God-Man (Acts 20:28; Rom. 5:14, 19; Phil. 2:6-7; Rev. 1:17-18). In addition, this view creates an unnecessary bifurcation (an either-or scenario that does not offer a third alternative), which asks nonsensical questions that do not apply given the two-nature-one-integrated-person view. The Lord Jesus is essentially and morally identical with God the Father and numerically identical with the Godhead; a "tri-plex" unity consisting of one divine essence with three eternal distinctions (not divisions), viz., God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Could the Lord Jesus sin? This question is hypothetical and isn't explicitly answered in the Scriptures. However, it is meaningful for those who require a degree of psychological certitude that Jesus really understands their struggle with sin. After all, what's the point of his temptation if he couldn't sin? However, this line of reasoning presupposes certain things which may not be true regarding human nature, the sin nature and the nature of temptation.

As mentioned before, it is not necessary that one have sin in order to be human. Adam and Eve were wholly human prior to the Fall. The essential properties of humanity (e.g., sentience, reason, will, moral consciousness and love) were in tact prior to Genesis 3. Adam and Eve and the Lord Jesus had all of these human traits. In his temptations (Mt. 4:1ff) Jesus experienced pains of hunger, a desire to use his powers contrary to the Father's mission (vv. 3 -4), the possibility of manipulating God (vv. 5 -7) and the desire to attain power by false means (vv. 8-10). Yet, in all of this he was faithfully submissive to the Father. Jesus can, and did, experience the full gravity of temptation without yielding to the desires. Sympathy with and complete understanding of temptation does not require falling into sin. So, it is not necessary for there

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to exist in Jesus the real possibility of sinning for him to be able to know temptation (Heb. 4:15).

### *The Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, and Intercession of the Lord Jesus*

#### The Cross of the Lord Jesus

Calvary is the hallmark of Christianity. What God accomplished in the death of Jesus is the most important event in all of history and, apart from the cross, there would be no salvation. Although there are many different vantage points from which the cross can be seen, it is essential that a biblical view be established of God, humanity, and sin before addressing the Lord Jesus' work on the cross.

We begin by looking at why it was necessary for God to send his Son to die. Due to our determined bent toward evil and independence, any hope for a relationship with God is impossible. Sin is rebellion against God's holy demands and death is his judgment against this revolt (Gen. 2:17; Lev. 17:11; Nah. 1:3; Hab. 1:13; Rom. 5:12; 6:23). Since the Fall, God pronounces everyone guilty and has required that the penalty for sin be paid. This is what it means for sins to be atoned for (cf., Heb. 9:22). The Old Testament sacrificial system was God's temporary provision for the atonement of sin. Yet, it was not designed as a permanent, once-for-all, means of atonement (Heb. 10:1-18). It is only through Jesus' offering of himself that sin is forever atoned for.

The purpose for Christ's coming was to assume our guilt (1 Cor. 5:7; 2 Cor. 5:21) and offer himself as our ransom payment (Mk. 10:45; Heb. 9:15). Jesus' death is closely tied to the idea of deliverance in that believers are rescued from sin's power and reign (Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13). Origen's idea of Christ making payment to the devil is foreign to NT thought. God does not owe the devil anything but the coming judgment (Rev 20:10)! In addition, the work of the cross as seen primarily through the concept of a ransom payment being made to the devil gives too little attention in the direction of God. It is God's holiness that is offended by our sin and where the offense lies is where the debt is owed. Christ offered his life as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:6). This is not to say that all are saved (contra Barth, Roman Catholicism). The cross was never meant to apply forgiveness. Rather, the cross is the means whereby forgiveness is made possible through faith and repentance. Jesus is the Savior of everyone (1 Tim. 4:10), but he is not everyone's Savior.

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Another manner in which to view the cross of Christ is one of substitution. Christ died for us. Jesus offered his life in exchange for our new life. Jesus was seen as a sacrificial Lamb (Jn. 1:29), was made to be sin for others (2 Cor. 5:21), became cursed for others (Gal. 3:13) and bore the sins of others (Is. 53:6; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pt. 2:24). Also, in many passages where the Greek preposition *anti* is used, it carries with it the idea of 'instead of' (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45). A different Greek preposition, *hyper* (in behalf of), has a similar meaning in 2 Cor. 5:15 and 1 Tim. 2:6, both referring to the death of Jesus. Only serious damage to the biblical (and extra-biblical) usage of these words could render them to mean anything other than substitution.

The cross of Jesus is also the propitiation of God's anger toward sin. The word propitiation is used three times in the NT (Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10, NASB). The idea is the removal of God's anger. Twice propitiation is tied to our sins, which provoke the wrath of God (1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10; see also Col. 3:5 -6; 1 Thess. 2:16). Atonement (a penalty paid) is related to propitiation, but it must not be overlooked that what Jesus accomplished on the cross is the turning away of God's wrath toward sinners. This makes the most sense out of the previous context of Romans 1:18-3:20. The cross of Jesus is not only a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners and the penalty paid for sin, but also the means by which God's anger is turned away from sinners and toward his Son.

Redemption is the first of two benefits that result from the cross. Because of the cross believers are freed (*viz.*, redeemed) from the guilt of sin, the penalty of sin, and the powers of sin. It is through God's Law that believers become aware of their guilt from sin (Rom. 3:20; 7:7; Heb. 9:9; 10:22). Christ has redeemed believers from the "guilty" pronouncement of the Law (Gal. 3:13) pronouncing them "just" (*viz.*, in good moral standing before God, *cf.*, Rom. 3:24). Also, forgiveness is a result of the believer's redemption where the offense of sin is pardoned and all obstacles in having a relationship with God are removed (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). Finally, redemption provides a holy incentive for believers to live their lives doing those things which please God (Tit. 2:14).

The second result of the cross is the possibility of reconciliation between God and humanity. There exists, prior to faith in Jesus, an infinite degree of hostility toward God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21; Heb. 10:27). It is humanity that is hostile toward God and not the other way around. While God's holiness requires that he respond to sinners appropriately in righteous anger, it is not exclusively the way in which he relates to all. In fact, Scripture states that God loves the sinner in spite of his or her enmity toward him (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8). However, note that God is the one

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who takes the initiative in the reconciliation process (see esp., Eph. 2:4-5). As was noted earlier, humanity is incapable of responding to or even recognizing the grace of God in the cross of Jesus. In other words, God reconciles the world to himself, the world does not reconcile itself to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Col. 1:22).

But did all become reconciled? How extensive does the cross meet the need of humanity to be reconciled? If Christ died for all, as some Scriptures attest (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:10; Tit. 2:11; Heb. 2:9), then is it necessary that all will be saved? Still others avoid a universal atonement and see the cross as being only for those who would believe (e.g., Mk. 10:45). However, the provision of the cross and the acceptance of the cross are two distinct activities that must be combined for the bestowal of any benefit from the cross. While this is a complex problem, it remains the best alternative that the cross is sufficient for everyone's sin but only efficient for those who, by faith alone, respond to the gospel call.

The cross of the Lord Jesus demonstrates God's love for all, justice to all, example to all, and victory over evil once and for all. A holy and righteous God must act against sin. If he were to do anything else he would cease to be worthy of worship. Salvation from sin is impossible unless the price of sin is paid in full, meeting the demands of God's holy justice. Out of love God accomplished through the work of Christ on the cross what we could never accomplish for ourselves. Jesus paid the penalty that we ourselves incurred, taking the consequence of our sin upon himself thus becoming for us a once-for-all representative, substitutionary sacrifice offered to God. Because of the cross the effects of redemption will be enjoyed by all who, by grace alone through faith alone, enter into an eternal relationship with God that is filled with peace and purpose.

### The Resurrection, Ascension and Intercession of the Lord Jesus

After his death Jesus he was miraculously brought back to life as the resurrected Lord. The composition of his resurrected body remains a mystery. The fact of his resurrection, however, squares with every line of evidence. The tomb was empty (Lk. 24:24). His grave clothes were undisturbed. Appearances to the disciples cannot be explained any other way. Continued existence of the church in the midst of torture and persecution remains an unsolvable mystery if Christ is not raised. Given the reliability of the New Testament documents, the existence of the Christian Church, and lives that continue to be transformed by the gospel, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus can only be disputed on irrational and anti-historical grounds. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees believers of (1) hope in the face of death (1 Cor. 15:20, 23,

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51-57), (2) power to live a life pleasing to God (Eph. 1:18-20), and eternal life with God (1 Thess. 4:14-17).

The ascension of the Lord Jesus marks the beginning of a new era in the plan of God. Jesus promised he would send a Counselor called the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:16-17) whose role would be to teach the disciples (Jn. 14:26; 15:26). He also indicated that his return to the Father was the necessary precursor to the coming of the Spirit of truth (Jn. 16:7). Acts 2 is this fulfillment, the Church is born, and the new era of grace installed. Jesus' ascension into heaven places him at the "right hand" of God – the highest place of honor in the universe (Acts 2:25, 33-34; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:13, etc.) where he rules as King and Sovereign over the his Church (Lk. 22:30; Jn. 18:36; Eph. 5:23).

As one who speaks on God's behalf, Jesus is a prophet who reveals truth concerning God and is himself the Truth of God (Jn. 1:1, 14, 17; 14:6). Jesus believed himself to be a prophet (Mt. 13:5 7; Lk. 13:3 3) and others saw him as a prophet (Mt. 21:11, 46; Mk. 8:27-28; Lk. 24:19; Jn. 6:14; 7:14). Likewise, The early church believed Jesus was the fulfillment of Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22; 7:37). Jesus was the complete manifestation of the eternal God (Jn. 1:18; Heb. 1:2) who gave light to everyone (Jn. 1:9). He was different from all other prophets in that he is pre-existent (Jn. 1:1), spoke as an equal with God the Father (Mt. 5:22, 28, 32, etc.), and had a unique relationship with God (Lk. 4:18-19). Jesus claimed absolute authority for his words and challenged anyone to question his prophetic ministry (Mt. 24:35).

The priest in the OT is to serve as one through whom an offering is made to God for the atonement of sin. Upon presenting the prescribed offering to the priest, forgiveness was granted (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35, etc.). As High Priest Jesus is the perfect One who shared in humanity to offer himself as an atonement for sins (Heb. 2:17). He is both the offering and the Offerer. Jesus priestly ministry is different from that of OT priests in two ways. First, the OT system was temporary and had to be repeated (Heb. 10:11-14), whereas Jesus' offering of himself is once-for-all, never to be repeated (Heb. 10:12). Second, offerings in the OT economy were symbolic in nature and could not objectively or finally take away sin (Heb. 10:1-4), whereas Jesus' offering is the objective basis upon which sin is taken away forever (Heb. 7:25). Because of Jesus' perfect life, atoning death, miraculous resurrection, and entrance into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God, he forever intercedes on behalf of all believers (Heb. 8:1-2).

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### *Conversion and Regeneration, Justification and Reconciliation*

#### The Conversion and Regeneration of Believers

In an effort to understand the nature of salvation, the concepts of conversion and regeneration deserve a closer look. It is important to note that conversion and regeneration are without respect to time; they occur as one event. Nevertheless, for the purpose of understanding, it is necessary that they be seen as a sequence of events whereby conversion leads to or results in regeneration. What brings about conversion? Is it simple belief or is there something more involved? Where does faith come in? How does repentance pertain to conversion? Does God require certain conditions to be fulfilled before one is regenerated? These are the questions related to conversion and regeneration.

Conversion has three primary elements: (1) belief, (2) repentance and (3) trust. Belief is a conscious acknowledgment of truth. It is more than a mere knowledge of truth; it is a persuasion of the facts. For example, belief (unto conversion) is not simply knowing that Jesus died on the cross but knowing he died on the cross for me (Mt. 27:42; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Thess. 4:14). Many have a knowledge of the truth but are unconvinced as to its relevance (see Jn. 2:23-24; 8:31ff). Belief involves being persuaded of those facts which God has graciously revealed about me: (1) I am a sinner and as a result; (2) I am guilty before God yet; (3) God provided the penalty for my guilt to be paid by the death of his Son and; (4) promised me hope for everlasting life with him by raising his Son from the dead.

Although belief (or persuasion of truth) has mostly to do with the intellectual element of our soul, conversion touches the full spectrum of our existence. It entails a behavioral change as well. Hence, belief that converts yields repentance. While repentance involves a knowledge of and regret for our offense (e.g., Mt. 27:3; 2 Cor. 7:9-10; Heb. 12:17 KJV), repentance unto conversion always issues in a determined active response to abandon a lifestyle dominated by sin (see, Is. 59:20; Ez. 14:6; Mt. 3:8; 4:17; Lk. 5:32). In fact, on several occasions Scripture indicates that repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness (Lk. 17:3-4; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22). Repentance is not only desired but demanded by God (Acts 17:30; 2 Pt. 3:9) and was the beginning and end of Jesus' message (Mt. 4:17; Lk. 24:46-47). Repentance involves turning from everything(one) which seeks to rule an individual's life and turning to God as the sole Lord, Ruler and Master of all (Mt. 6:24; 12:30; Acts 3:19; 14:15; 20:21; 26:20; 1 Thess. 1:9). Repentance is more than just a change of mind, it is a change of masters! Finally, repentance unto conversion is granted by God (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25) and does not lie dormant within the human soul (simile Tillich's concept of creative transformation).

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Trust is not just a commitment to the truth God has revealed in the gospel and the new lifestyle God enables. It is not simply a cognitive or behavioral event. Rather, trust involves a personal relationship to the Revealer of truth. It is allegiance to God. Trust is an active confidence that what God has said in the gospel and promised to do upon belief and repentance will happen (Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12). At least ten times the NT references trusting in God (Jn. 12:36; 14:1, 23; Rom. 4:5, 9:33, 10:11, 15:13; Tit. 3:8; Heb. 2:13; 1 Pt. 2:6). Moreover, trust yields a rest from all human effort to bridge the gap between God and us. If one has genuinely trusted in Christ and His work on the cross for the full, substitutionary payment of sins committed, then all personal activity to win God's favor will be abandoned for the rest given by conversion (see Heb. 4).

Faith, then, is the sum total of the conversion experience. Faith is believing. Faith is repenting. Faith is trusting. It entails belief in something. Rather than being irrational or even supra-rational (blind leap), faith involves persuasion of the facts such that one's life is transformed. Genuine faith, therefore, is a determined mindset that ungodly habits and desires are replaced with godly ones. Imagine Abraham hearing God's call and staying in Ur (Gen. 12:1-3; see also Jm. 2:20-22, 26)! Still, knowledge and repentance is insufficient for experiencing the new birth. One must rely upon the Truthgiver. This reliance is a settled persuasion that he who promises is faithful to perform no matter what (Rom. 4:20-22; 8:38-39; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12).

The result of conversion is regeneration – that activity of God wherein he radically transforms the moral fiber of a person through the unique work of the Holy Spirit. This transformation is analogous to a new birth where one begins his/her life (Jn. 3:3-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Tit. 3:5; Jm. 1:18; 1 Pt. 1:3; 1 Jn. 2:29). The new birth has its start and finish in God the Holy Spirit who alone brings it about without respect to human activity (Jn. 1:13; 3:8; Tit. 3:5-7). Value systems are wholly renovated, not just altered. Old impulses and habits are replaced with new ones (Gal. 5:19-24; Col. 2:11-12) and a death takes place of the old self (nature) which was dominated by sinful desires and activities (Rom. 6:1-11-11; Gal. 2:20). In the place of the old life God renews the converted person and imparts new spiritual life never to be corrupted (1 Pt. 1:4).

Regeneration is also a cleansing whereby the Spirit of God purifies the converted person from moral corruption. Contrary to Pelagianism, Finney and some liberals, all of whom downplay human depravity, it is necessary that complete moral reformation occur before the estranged can fellowship with God (Jn. 13:8; Rom. 3:11-12; 7:18; Eph. 2:1). Regeneration is God's gracious means that he employs to purify us from sin. This purification or washing is actualized at the

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time of conversion when the Holy Spirit enters the life of a believer and symbolized at the time of baptism (Acts 10:47; Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 6:11; possibly Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 1 Pt. 3:21).

Titus 3:5 is the clearest reference on regeneration. It says (1) salvation is offered solely on the basis of God's mercy and is not contingent upon any human effort (note "He saved us;" see also v. 4) and (2) the means employed by God is through (dia with the genitive indicating means) the "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Paul clearly states here and elsewhere (Rom. 4:4-5; Gal. 2:16-17; Eph. 2:4-5, 89) that regeneration is of God alone. Therefore, salvation is monergistic rather than synergistic. Water baptism is probably not in view here as it is an expression of regeneration and is never seen as the means of it.

### God's Justification and Reconciliation of Believers

Believers placed in a right standing with God, who were once guilty before him, is the business of justification. However, many questions arise as to how and, to what extent, this happens. Does God pronounce once-for-all that believers are righteous before him or does he prompt believers throughout time to become more righteous? Is God's righteousness something given to us in full or do we have to work at attaining more and more of it? What are the results of justification? If believers are declared righteous once for all, do we have occasion for recklessly sinning? Can believers have assurance that they will never lose their adopted status in the family of God? Answers to these questions are essential for a proper grasp of the salvation event.

Believers are justified solely on the basis of what God has done in the work of the cross. The ground of justification is God's work in Jesus and wholly separate from human merit and achievement. As Calvin noted, we come with empty hands offering only our need (Lk. 18:13-14). Scripture affirms that our righteousness is completely insufficient for acquiring a right standing before God (Is. 64:6; Phil. 3:8b-9). "Justified" is God's proclamation of the believer's legal status before him. It could be said that condemnation is the opposite of justification (Rom. 5:16, 18; 8:33-34; 2 Cor. 3:9). "Guilty" is God's legal description of the unbelieving resulting in condemnation. Justification is God's ruling upon the believer as being "not guilty" (Rom. 8:33-34). God, in his mercy, pardons the ungodly who, through faith alone, trust in the all-sufficient work of the cross (Rom. 3:26; 4:5).

This is contrary to Roman Catholicism which holds that justification increases for the believer throughout life. Rather than justification being a proclamation of God whereby he declares

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believers "not guilty," Catholicism insists that God continuously prompts believers in life to become more righteous by their works. This presumes far too much upon humankind. God is the only one who can provide deliverance from the penalty of sin. No acts of righteousness will break the gripping power of sin; only by an act of faith (enabled by him) can one's standing before God be altered. Scripture is clear that the basis of justification is Christ Jesus and the means of justification is faith alone (Gen. 15:6; Hab. 2:4; Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:20-30; 4:1-5; 5:1, 9; 10:10; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24; Tit. 3:7).

In Scripture justification is seen as a declaration of God whereby he imparts the righteousness of Christ to those who have responded to him in faith. The believer's righteousness is not his/her own but that of Christ's (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17). It is a gracious credit made to our account. We have not the means to deposit it nor earn it in any way! When our account is called up (so to speak) it reflects a debt that has been canceled (Col. 2:13-14, NASB). God declares righteous those whose sin has not only been atoned for but altogether dismissed from the account (Rom. 4:6-8).

Upon declaring believers righteous, God forgives all sin and makes the pronouncement "not guilty" (Rom. 4:6-8; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 2:13; Heb. 8:12; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2:12). The Arminian view holds that God grants initial justification but requires righteous acts throughout life in order to complete justification. But this is to confuse the categories of justification and sanctification. While it is true that God does not think of believers as something they are not (justified in and of themselves), God accepts believers on the basis of Christ's work which meets all of his righteous requirements. God enables the justified to live, with increasing measure, in accordance with his holy demands (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13; Rom. 8:4). This holy living that all believers are called to is not the process of justification but the call to perseverance which is our sanctification. Justification is the Father's proclamation of our righteous standing; sanctification is the Father's enablement of our righteous living. The former is complete; the latter is ongoing.

Being reconciled to God and adopted into his family is the result of justification. Whereas justification is legal in nature and has to do with the believer's moral status, reconciliation is relational and has to do with familial status. Before faith, the relationship to God is of an entirely different nature. Believers were God's enemies, separated from and hostile toward him because of sin (Rom. 5:10; 8:7; Eph. 2:12; 4:18; Col. 1:21). But, having been justified, believers now have peace with God through faith in Christ (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14-18). The initiative for

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restoring peace is God's alone because of Christ alone (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 1:30a; 1 Jn. 4:19). It is God who reconciles us to himself. He is the one offended because of our sin, and it is he alone who closes the gaping hole between our sin and his holiness (Col. 1:19-20, 22). The coming of Christ our Savior is a message of peace showing that God turned his favor upon his creation reconciling the world to himself (Lk. 2:14; Acts 10:36; Rom. 3:17; 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 6:15).

The reconciling work of the cross provides access to God as a loving Father rather than divine Judge. Having been reconciled to God through faith, believers are adopted into the loving family of God (1 Jn. 3:1-3). Because of God's gracious activity at Calvary, believers can now count themselves among his family (Jn. 1:12-13). Adoption results in being united with Christ. Union with Christ, however, is not a meshing together of two substances (viz., the individual + Christ) resulting in a new substance (*tertium quid*), but a sharing in the riches of fellowship and communion with God as Father, Christ as Savior-Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as Comforter-Enabler (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Jn. 1:3).