

## **The True God**

This article is taken from volume one of the series, entitled *The Sovereign God*.

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It is evident that we need more than a theoretical knowledge of God. Yet we can know God only as he reveals himself to us in the Scriptures, and we cannot know the Scriptures until we are willing to be changed by them. Knowledge of God occurs only when we also know our deep spiritual need and when we are receptive to God's gracious provision for our need through the work of Christ and the application of that work to us by God's Spirit.

Having established this base, we nevertheless come back to the question of God himself and we ask, "But who is God? Who is this one who reveals himself in Scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit?" We may admit that a true knowledge of God must change us. We may be willing to be changed. But where do we begin?

### **"I Am Who I Am"**

Since the Bible is a unity we could answer these questions by starting at any point in the biblical revelation. We could begin with Revelation 22:21 as well as with Genesis 1:1. But there is no better starting point than God's revelation of himself to Moses at the burning bush. Moses, the great leader of Israel, had long been aware of the true God, for he had been born into a godly family. Still, when God said that he would send him to Egypt and through him deliver the people of Israel, Moses responded, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" We are told that God then answered Moses by saying, "I AM WHO I AM. . . . Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:13-14).

“I AM WHO I AM.” The name is linked with the ancient name for God, Jehovah. But it is more than a name. It is a descriptive name, pointing to all that God is in himself. In particular, it shows him to be the One who is entirely self-existent, self-sufficient and eternal.

These are abstract concepts, of course. But they are important, for these attributes more than any others set God apart from his creation and reveal him as being what he is in himself. God is perfect in all his attributes. But there are some attributes that we, his creatures, share. For instance, God is perfect in his love. Yet by his grace we also love. He is all wise; but we also possess a measure of wisdom. He is all powerful; and we exercise a limited power. It is not like that in regard to God’s self-existence, self-sufficiency and eternity, however. He alone possesses those characteristics. He exists in and of himself; we do not. He is entirely self-sufficient; we are not. He is eternal; we are newcomers on the scene.

Self-existence means that God has no origins and consequently is answerable to no one. Matthew Henry says, “The greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely — and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say — *I am that I am*.”<sup>1</sup> So God has no origins; his existence does not depend on anybody.

Self-existence is a hard concept for us to grapple with for it means that God as he is in himself is *unknowable*. Everything that we see, smell, hear, taste or touch has origins. We can hardly think in any other category. Anything we observe must have a cause adequate to explain it. We seek for such causes. Cause and effect is even the basis for the belief in God possessed by those who, nevertheless, don’t truly know him. Such individuals believe in God, not because they have had a personal experience of him or because they have discovered God in Scripture, but only because they infer his existence. “Everything comes from something; consequently, there must be a great something that stands behind everything.” Cause and effect point to God, but — and this is the issue — they point to a God who is beyond understanding, indeed to one who is beyond us in every way. They indicate that God cannot be known and evaluated like other things can.

A. W. Tozer has noted that this is one reason why philosophy and science have not always been friendly toward the idea of God. These disciplines are dedicated to the task of accounting for things as we know them and are therefore impatient with anything that refuses to give an account of itself. Philosophers and scientists will admit that there is much they don’t know. But it is another thing to admit that there is something they can never know completely and which, in fact, they don’t even have techniques for discovering. To discover God, scientists may attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 284.

bring God down to their level, defining him as “natural law,” “evolution” or some such principle. But still God eludes them. There is more to God than any such concepts can delineate.

Perhaps, too, this is why even Bible-believing people seem to spend so little time thinking about God’s person and character. Tozer writes,

Few of us have let our hearts gaze in wonder at the I AM, the self-existent Self back of which no creature can think. Such thoughts are too painful for us. We prefer to think where it will do more good — about how to build a better mousetrap, for instance, or how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before. And for this we are now paying a too heavy price in the secularization of our religion and the decay of our inner lives.<sup>2</sup>

God’s self-existence means that *he is not answerable* to us or to anybody, and we don’t like that. We want God to give an account of himself, to defend his actions. Although he sometimes explains things to us, he doesn’t have to and often he does not. God doesn’t have to explain himself to anybody.

## No Needs

The second quality of God communicated to us in the name “I AM WHO I AM” is self-sufficiency. Again it is possible to have at least a sense of the meaning of this abstract term. Self-sufficiency means God has no needs and therefore depends on no one.

Here we run counter to a widespread and popular idea: God cooperates with human beings, each thereby supplying something lacking in the other. It is imagined, for example, that God lacks glory and therefore creates men and women to supply it. He takes care of them as a reward. Or again, it is imagined that God needs love and therefore creates men and women to love him. Some talk about the creation as if God were lonely and therefore created us to keep him company. On a practical level we see the same thing in those who imagine that women and men are necessary to carry out God’s work of salvation as witnesses or as defenders of the faith, forgetting that Jesus himself declared that “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Lk. 3:8).

God does not need *worshippers*. Arthur W. Pink, who writes on this theme in *The Attributes of God*, says,

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<sup>2</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 34.

God was under no constraint, no obligation, no necessity to create. That he chose to do so was purely a sovereign act on his part, caused by nothing outside himself, determined by nothing but his own mere good pleasure; for he “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11). That he did create was simply for his manifestative glory. . . . God is no gainer even from our worship. He was in no need of that external glory of his grace which arises from his redeemed, for he is glorious enough in himself without that. What was it moved him to predestinate his elect to the praise of the glory of his grace? It was, as Ephesians 1:5 tells us, “according to the good pleasure of his will.” . . . The force of this is [that] it is impossible to bring the Almighty under obligations to the creature; God gains nothing from us.<sup>3</sup>

Tozer makes the same point.

Were all human beings suddenly to become blind, still the sun would shine by day and the stars by night, for these owe nothing to the millions who benefit from their light. So, were every man on earth to become atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what he is in himself without regard to any other. To believe in him adds nothing to his perfections; to doubt him takes nothing away.<sup>4</sup>

Nor does God need *helpers*. This truth is probably harder for us to accept than almost any other. For we imagine God as a friendly, but almost pathetic, grandfather figure bustling about to see whom he can find to help him in managing the world and saving the world's race. What a travesty! To be sure, God has entrusted a work of management to us. He said to the original pair in Eden, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). God also has given those who believe in him a commission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk. 16:15). True, but no aspect of God's ordering of his creation has a necessary grounding in himself. God has chosen to do things thus. He didn't need to do them. Indeed, he could have done them in any one of a million other ways. That he did choose to do things thus is therefore solely dependent upon the free and sovereign exercise of his will and so does not give us any inherent value to him.

To say that God is self-sufficient also means that God does not need *defenders*. Clearly, we have opportunities to speak for God before those who would dishonor his name and malign his character. We ought to do so. But even if we

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, n.d.), pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Tozer, p. 40.

should fail, we must not think that God is deprived thereby. God does not need to be defended, for he is as he is and will remain so regardless of the sinful and arrogant attacks of evil individuals. A God who needs to be defended is no God. Rather, the God of the Bible is the self-existent One who is the true defender of his people.

When we realize that God is the only truly self-sufficient One, we begin to understand why the Bible has so much to say about the need for faith in God alone and why unbelief in God is such sin. Tozer writes:

Among all created beings, not one dare trust in itself. God alone trusts in himself; all other beings must trust in him. Unbelief is actually perverted faith, for it puts its trust not in the living God but in dying men.<sup>5</sup>

If we refuse to trust God, what we are actually saying is that either we or some other person or thing is more trustworthy. That is a slander against the character of God, and it is folly. Nothing else is all-sufficient. On the other hand, if we begin by trusting God (by believing in him), we have a solid foundation for all life. God is sufficient, and his Word to his creatures can be trusted.

Because God is sufficient, we may begin by resting in that sufficiency and so work effectively for him. God does not need us. But the joy of coming to know him is in learning that he nevertheless stoops to work in and through those who are his believing and obedient children.

## **Alpha and Omega**

A third quality inherent in the name of God given to Moses (“I AM WHO I AM”) is everlastingness, perpetuity or eternity. The quality is difficult to put in one word, but it is simply that God is, has always been and will always be, and that he is ever the same in his eternal being. We find this attribute of God everywhere in the Bible. Abraham called Jehovah “the Everlasting God” (Gen. 21:33). Moses wrote, “LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God” (Ps. 90:1-2). The book of Revelation describes God as the “Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). The creatures before the throne cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8).

The fact that God is eternal has two major consequences for us. The first is that *he can be trusted* to remain as he reveals himself to be. The word usually used to describe this quality is immutability, which means unchangeableness. “Every

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas. 1:17).

God is unchangeable in his attributes. So we need not fear, for example, that the God who once loved us in Christ will somehow change his mind and cease to love us in the future. God is always love toward his people. Similarly, we must not think that perhaps he will change his attitude toward sin, so that he will begin to classify as “permissible” something that was formerly prohibited. Sin will always be sin because it is defined as any transgression of or lack of conformity to the law of God, who is unchangeable. God will always be holy, wise, gracious, just and everything else that he reveals himself to be. Nothing that we do will ever change the eternal God.

God is also unchangeable in his counsels or will. He does what he has determined beforehand to do and his will never varies. Some will point out that certain verses in the Bible tell us that God repented of some act — as in Genesis 6:6, “The LORD was sorry that he had made man.” In this example, a human word is being used to indicate God’s severe displeasure with human activities. It is countered by such verses as Numbers 23:19 (“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?”); 1 Samuel 15:29 (“The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent”); Romans 11:29 (“The gifts and call of God are irrevocable”); and Psalm 33:11 (“The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations”).

Such statements are a source of great comfort to God’s people. If God were like us, he could not be relied on. He would change, and as a result of that his will and his promises would change. We could not depend on him. But God is not like us. He does not change. Consequently, his purposes remain fixed from generation to generation. Pink says, Here then is a rock on which we may fix our feet, while the mighty torrent is sweeping away everything around us. The permanence of God’s character guarantees the fulfillment of his promises.”<sup>6</sup>

The second major consequence for us of God’s unchangeableness is that he is *inescapable*. If he were a mere human and if we didn’t like either him or what he was doing, we might ignore him knowing that he might always change his mind, move away from us or die. But God does not change his mind. He does not move away. He will not die. Consequently, we cannot escape him. Even if we ignore him now, we must reckon with him in the life to come. If we reject him now, we must eventually face the One we have rejected and come to know his eternal rejection of us.

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<sup>6</sup> Pink, p. 41.

## No Other Gods

We are led to a natural conclusion, namely, that we should seek and worship the true God. This chapter has been based for the most part on Exodus 3:14, in which God reveals to Moses the name by which he desires to be known. That revelation came on the verge of the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. After the exodus, God gave a revelation on Mount Sinai which applies the earlier disclosure of himself as the true God to the religious life and worship of the delivered nation.

God said, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:2-6). These verses make three points, all based on the premise that the God who reveals himself in the Bible is the true God:

1. We are to worship God and obey him.
2. We are to reject the worship of any other god.
3. We are to reject the worship of the true God by any means that are unworthy of him, such as the use of pictures or images.

At first glance it seems quite strange that a prohibition against the use of images in worship should have a place at the very start of the ten basic principles of biblical religion, the Ten Commandments. But it is not strange when we remember that the characteristics of a religion flow from the nature of the religion's god. If the god is unworthy, the religion will be unworthy too. If the concept of God is of the highest order, the religion will be of a high order also. So God tells us in these verses that any physical representation of him is dishonoring to him. Why? For two reasons. First, it obscures his glory, for nothing visible can ever adequately represent it. Second, it misleads those who would worship him.

Both of these errors are represented by Aaron's manufacture of the golden calf, as J. I. Packer indicates in his discussion of idolatry. In Aaron's mind, at least, though probably not in the minds of the people, the calf was intended to represent Jehovah. He thought, no doubt, that a figure of a bull (even a small one) communicated the thought of God's strength. But, of course, it didn't do so adequately. And it didn't at all communicate his other great attributes: his sovereignty, righteousness, mercy, love and justice. Rather, it obscured them.

Moreover, the figure of the bull misled the worshipers. They readily associated it with the fertility gods and goddesses of Egypt, and the result of their worship was an orgy. Packer concludes,

It is certain that if you habitually focus your thoughts on an image or picture of the One to whom you are going to pray, you will come to think of him, and pray to him, as the image represents him. Thus you will in this sense “bow down” and “worship” your image; and to the extent to which the image fails to tell the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth. That is why God forbids you and me to make use of images and pictures in our worship.<sup>7</sup>

### **“My Lord and My God”**

To avoid the worship of images or even the use of images in the worship of the true God is not in itself worship. We are to recognize that the true God is the eternal, self-existent and self-sufficient One, the One immeasurably beyond our highest thoughts. Therefore, we are to humble ourselves and learn from him, allowing him to teach us what he is like and what he has done for our salvation. Do we do what he commands? Are we sure that in our worship we are actually worshipping the true God who has revealed himself in the Bible?

There is only one way to answer that question truthfully. It is to ask: Do I really know the Bible, and do I worship God on the basis of the truth I find there? That truth is centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, as seen in the Bible. There the invisible God is made visible, the inscrutable knowable, the eternal God disclosed in space and time. Do I look to Jesus in order to know God? Do I think of God’s attributes by what Jesus shows me of them? If not, I am worshipping an image of God, albeit an image of my own devising. If I look to Jesus, then I can know that I am worshipping the true God, as he has revealed himself. Paul says that although some knew God they nevertheless “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). Let us determine that this shall not be true of us. We see God in Jesus. So let us know him as God, love him as God, serve him as God and worship him as God.

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<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 41.

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