

# CONTINUING EDUCATION



## BIBLE DOCTRINES, PART I: THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND HUMAN EXISTENCE

By Richard Rice

**W**ho and what is God? No question is more fundamental to religion, or to human life. What we think about God will affect our attitude toward everything else. Is life worthwhile? Do our choices really matter? Is there hope for the future? What we think about God makes all the difference as we try to answer these questions. But more important, the answer to this question will determine our understanding of ourselves. As John Calvin, the great reformer,

put it, "No one understands himself unless he has first looked on God's face."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Reality of God**

For most of human history, hardly anyone questioned the existence of God. In biblical times, everyone believed that there were divine beings. The great question of the Old Testament was not whether there is a God, but which was the true God. Things are different today. People now find it much more difficult to believe in God.

One reason for this change in attitude is the influence of modern science on our world view. The achievements of science and technology in Western culture are so

obvious that people naturally hold the conclusions of science in high esteem. The enormous prestige of modern science tends to negatively affect belief in God.

Science operates on the assumption that reality is uniform. If we know enough about the present, we can make reliable predictions about the future. Scientists maintain that a procedure performed anywhere in the world will yield identical results elsewhere if the original conditions are duplicated. Science concentrates its attention on the physical world, the world of matter and energy, disregarding intangibles that cannot be measured by use of the senses or instruments

### **HOW IT WORKS:**

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that are extensions of the senses, such as microscopes and telescopes.

For some people scientific truth is the only truth. For them the only reality is what science can investigate. Using this perspective, they have difficulty believing in God, because He is not an object that can be scientifically explained. We can't see Him, or hear Him, or touch Him. Telescopes and microscopes have never detected His presence.

Furthermore, people no longer use God as an explanation of how things work. For many years God was credited (or blamed) for things that science couldn't explain. He accounted for the "gaps" in our understanding of the world. However, scientific advances have done such a good job of filling in these gaps that there is seemingly less and less for God to do.

The problem of evil is an older obstacle to belief in God than modern science, and probably a greater threat to faith. Since Christians believe that God is both supremely powerful and perfectly loving, the presence of suffering in the world He created poses a tremendous problem. If God is all-powerful, He could prevent or eliminate evil. If He is all-loving, He would certainly want to do so. Yet evil exists. So, the traditional argument goes, God must be less than perfect in either power or love. In other words, the God in which Christians have traditionally believed cannot exist.

Because people today have difficulty believing in God, an adequate doctrine of God must address the question of His existence. The Bible deals with the reality of God, as it does with all great issues. The writers of the Bible all believed that God exists, but they never assumed that trusting God would be easy. They cited several kinds of evidence to support the reality of God.

The Bible authors found evidence of God's existence in the wonders of nature. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," David exclaimed, "and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).<sup>2</sup> Centuries later Paul asserted: "Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things he has made" (Romans 1:20).

The Bible also cites human behavior as an indication of God's reality. In his sermon at Athens, Paul referred to the religious practices of his audience. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious, for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown God.' What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim

to you" (Acts 17:22, 23).

Paul also found evidence that everyone experiences God in the area of conscience, or morality. Human beings everywhere have a sense of right and wrong. "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires... they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts" (Romans 2:14, 15).

Over the centuries, philosophers have also found evidence for God's existence in nature and human experience.

The most popular argument for God's existence begins with the complexity and intricacy we see in the world around us. When we look at the beauty of a starry sky or consider the sophisticated mechanism of our bodies, we find it difficult to believe that such things just happened, that they owe their existence to mere chance. They give every indication of being designed by an enormous intelligence.

Careful thinkers also find evidence for God in the mere existence of a world. In the realm of ordinary experience everything gets its existence from something else. But what accounts for the world as a whole? Why is there something, rather than nothing?

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This ultimate cause of the universe can't be something that derives its existence from anything else, for then it would just be another part of the collection of dependent objects. Consequently, its source must be self-existent, a being whose existence does not depend on anything else.

Philosophers have also found evidence for God in religion and morality—two universal factors in human experience. Human beings have a natural inclination to worship something, to invest something with ultimate importance. The tendency to worship is so basic to human experience that it is logical to conclude that it corresponds to something in reality. The existence of God provides the best explanation for this dimension of our experience. Centuries ago Augustine wrote: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, moral sensitivity is an essential characteristic of human experience, and it, too, is best explained by the reality of God. Only personal beings can feel responsible, and we can feel responsible only to other persons. So, if the universe is ultimately impersonal, if reality is

nothing more than the arrangement of finite particles of matter, then there is no good reason for our sense of right and wrong. Our moral experience has an explanation only if there is a supreme personal being who is the ultimate source of our moral standards and who holds us accountable for our behavior. Such activity, of course, is precisely what Christians have always attributed to God.

There seems, then, to be considerable evidence for the reality of God, from the world as a whole and from human experience.

People often say that no one can *prove* the existence of God, because no amount of evidence can convince someone against his or her will. But this is true of anything, not just God's existence. That is not what the various arguments for God are trying to do. Such reasoning is better viewed as indicating the reasonableness of believing in God. In effect, these arguments help make religious faith a genuine option for thinking people, rather than persuading those who are convinced otherwise.

Besides, if the evidence is less than compelling, this is exactly what we should expect from the kind of person God is. God invites us to believe in Him, but He will never force us. He always gives us room to make our own decisions about Him. Faith would be of little value if people had no alternatives.

With this perspective on God's reality, we can now examine some of the biblical descriptions of God.

### **The Biblical View of God**

We can get an overview of the biblical concept of God by looking briefly at three related topics—the names of God, the activities of God, and the qualities attributed to Him by biblical writers.

The disclosure of God's name was one of the most important aspects of biblical revelation. Two prominent names of God in the Old Testament are *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. *El* was the word used by the peoples surrounding the ancient Israelites to refer to a divine being. *Elohim* is its plural form in Hebrew. *El* and *Elohim* are a little like the word *god* in English, which is used both to refer to a divine being ("god") and as a proper name ("God").

*Elohim* appears 2,570 times in the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis 1:1. As a name for God, it indicates that all divine power is concentrated in Him. He performs many of the functions attributed to the gods of other peoples. He is the creator and sustainer of nature.

*Yahweh* is the most important of God's names in the Old Testament, where it

occurs more than 6,800 times. Unlike *Elohim*, it never refers to other gods, but only to the God of Israel. God identifies Himself as *Yahweh* in connection with the most important events in Hebrew history. As *Yahweh*, He delivered the Israelites from bondage, adopted them as a chosen nation, and guided them into the promised land.

These two important names point, respectively, to God's sovereign power and redemptive presence. *Elohim* names the Creator and *Yahweh*, the Redeemer. Together, they identify the comprehensive work of God in the world.

In the New Testament we find two interesting developments in the divine name. First, the use of one Greek word, *theos*, replaces the variety of proper names that appear in the Old Testament. *Theos* is the equivalent of "God" in English.

Second, the identification of God as "father" represents a significant insight that transcends the Old Testament view of God. In many ways, it summarizes the unsurpassable revelation of God in the person of Jesus. God is the Father of Jesus (Romans 15:6). And Jesus is the unique Son of God (John 3:16).

But more than this, in Jesus God manifests and extends His Fatherhood to all human beings. By responding to this gracious overture, we are brought into an intensely close and personal relationship with God. We, too, become the children of God. We can thus speak of Him and to Him as our Father (Matthew 6:9; 1 John 3:1, 2). Jesus, in fact, used the Aramaic word *Abba* to show the intimacy of our relationship to God. This term is roughly equivalent to familiar English words like "Daddy" and "Papa."

We can learn several things from this biblical emphasis on the names of God. The most basic is the fact that God is a person. To name something is to elevate it from the realm of things to that of persons. We give names to people. We sometimes name animals and machines to indicate that they mean more to us than mere physical objects. The fact that God has names indicates that He is personal in nature. He is a "thou," not an "it."

Moreover, in revealing His names to us, God calls us into a personal relationship with Him. When we exchange names with someone, or introduce ourselves, we begin a personal relationship.

Third, in giving us His names, God gives us Himself. Remember the importance of names in Hebrew thought. A name summarized the essence of its bearer. God's names, therefore, tell us what God is like. In sharing His names with us, God shares Himself.

### **God's Actions and Qualities**

Besides the names of God, the Bible also describes a number of God's actions, or activities. Theologians customarily develop a doctrine of God by defining a series of divine qualities. But in the Bible, God's actions receive more attention than His attributes. Its writers identify God by describing what He does rather than what He is. We see this in the opening verse of Genesis: God created. The emphasis on action is also evident in the confession Hebrew worshipers made when they offered their sacrifices: "The Lord brought us out of Egypt" (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5-11).

New Testament writers continue this emphasis on divine actions. Paul says that God acted in the ministry of Jesus for human salvation (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus' resurrection, in particular, was a manifestation of divine power: "God raised him up" (Acts 2:24).

Creation and salvation are the two most important divine activities, but God also performs a number of related actions. He upholds the world (Nehemiah 9:6; Hebrews 1:3); forgives sins (Exodus 34:7); communicates with human beings (Amos 3:7; Hebrews 1:1-2); makes and keeps promises (Deuteronomy 15:6; 2 Peter 3:9); predicts the future (Isaiah 46:10); makes plans (Isaiah 46:11); and occasionally changes His mind (Genesis 6:6; Jeremiah 18:7-9). We see the personhood of God in His actions as well as in His names, for only a person can make plans and work to fulfill them or communicate with other persons.

Even though the Bible is primarily interested in God's activity, it does attribute a number of qualities to Him. It describes Him as supremely powerful (Jeremiah 32:17); everlasting (Isaiah 45:5) or immortal (1 Timothy 6:16); He is everywhere (Psalm 139:7-8; Acts 17:27-28), and knows everything (1 John 3:20). Because of His unrivalled greatness, God is unique, unlike anything or anyone else (cf. Isaiah 45:5; 46:9). Other gods are vastly inferior, and in the final analysis they amount to nothing at all (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The fact that God is different from anything else lies behind the quality of divine holiness (Leviticus 11:44; Isaiah 6:3). We tend to think of *holy* as meaning "pure," "undefiled," or "morally upright," and it does include these concepts. But more basically, it refers to the quality of being utterly different from ordinary things, a concept that is fascinating and terrifying at the same time.

The Bible attributes many personal qualities to God, but none is more impor-

tant than love. The English word *love* covers an enormous range of meaning. We use it to describe our attitudes toward everything from our favorite food to the people who mean the most to us. But Greek, the original language of the New Testament, uses several different words for love. Two of them are particularly important to understanding the nature of divine love. They are *eros* and *agape*.

*Eros* is the Greek root for such English words as *erotic* and *eroticism*. While these derivations have distinctly sexual overtones, the original meaning of *eros* was not necessarily sexual. It referred to the attraction a person feels for something he or she finds desirable and wants to possess. *Eros* may refer to the desire of one person for another, but it can also refer to one's attraction to anything, such as knowledge, money, or power.

*Agape*, in contrast, is love that flows entirely from the nature of the lover. It does not depend on desirable qualities in its object. And instead of seeking to possess its object, *agape* leads to self-giving and self-sacrifice. It is untainted by self-interest. So we can say that *agape* is unconditional. To use Shakespeare's words, it does not "bend with the remover to remove."<sup>4</sup> It continues whether or not it is ever reciprocated.

The New Testament uses *agape* to describe God's attitude toward human beings, as many familiar texts indicate: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19); "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10). We see God's love in the lavish gifts He bestows upon us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).

We see evidence of *agape* love in the fact that God loves the undeserving: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God's love, then is His unconditional commitment to the well-being of His creatures. It is aggressive, generous, and uncalculating.

Because of its unconditional character, we may be tempted to think of God's love for us as a benign indulgence. We may suppose that God doesn't really care what we do, because He will accept us no matter what. However, nothing is farther from the truth. According to the Bible, God is relentlessly opposed to sin and determined to eliminate it from the universe. He is a "jealous God" (Exodus 20:5), "who will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:7). He will bring "every deed into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 12:14), and finally destroy the wicked in a lake of fire (Revelation 20:14, 15).

Some people see a contradiction

between God's love and His wrath. They wonder how the same Being can be both a compassionate parent and a stern judge of evildoers.

In reality there is no contradiction between these aspects of God's character if we recognize the true nature of His love. It is unconditional, to be sure, but it is deadly serious, too. We cannot say that God loves us so much that nothing we do really matters to Him. Instead, we must say that God loves us so much that *everything* we do matters to Him. And because He loves us, He is satisfied with nothing less than the best for us. This explains why God is utterly ruthless in the face of sin throughout the Bible. It never goes unnoticed and unchallenged. This isn't because God is determined to even the score, to take revenge for every slight He has suffered. It is because He cannot stand idle while the people He loves destroy themselves.

So far we have considered the question of God's existence and reviewed some important features in the biblical portrayal of God. With this discussion in mind, we can attempt a more formal statement of the doctrine of God. Our

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objective is a description of God that is faithful to the Bible, meaningful to thoughtful people, and helpful to religious experience.

## God and the World

One of the most important statements about God appears in the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The claim that God brought the finite world into existence by a free creative act contains nearly all the basic elements in a Christian doctrine of God.

To begin with, the idea of creation presents us with a distinction that lies behind every aspect of Christian faith—the distinction between Creator and creation. Everything that exists belongs to one or the other of these categories. It is either creator or creature. As Creator, God is the source of all reality. He alone exists independently; everything else owes its existence to Him. Moreover, what is creaturely is always creaturely. A creature can never become a divine being.

This basic distinction between God and the world, between Creator and creation, rules out two other world views that

have had great influence in human history: monism and dualism.

As the word suggests, monism is the belief that all reality is one. This philosophy affirms that all reality is divine, so everything real is a part of God. According to monism, the distinctions that seem so important on the level of ordinary experience—between different persons, pain and pleasure, life and death, good and evil—all are illusory. They arise from our misinterpretation of things.

This world view provides a means of salvation that glorifies self-realization. It claims to help one discover his or her essential divinity, and usually includes a method for overcoming the distinctions suggested by ordinary experience. The great religions of the East typically present a monistic view of reality.

As a religious force, dualism is not nearly as influential as it once was, but at times it has presented a serious rival to the biblical view of God and the world. Dualism asserts that there are two ultimate principles, rather than one. These opposing forces are engaged in permanent conflict with each other. One principle is good, usually symbolized by light. The other is evil, or darkness.

Dualism provides a convenient solution to the problem of evil, because it attributes all suffering to the evil force. In its pure form, dualism promises no end to suffering, since evil is just as powerful as good. However, almost all dualistic religions, such as Zoroastrianism, affirm the ultimate victory of good over evil.

With its affirmation of the creaturely world, the doctrine of Creation excludes monism. On the one hand, the world is real, even though it is not divine. Our experience of things in time and space is no illusion. On the other hand, the world is not evil merely because it is not God. The distinction between God and the world does not coincide with the distinction between good and evil. The world is good because it was created by a good and loving God.

The doctrine of Creation also conflicts with dualism in two ways. First, it allows for only one supreme being: God. He is the single source of all that exists. His power is unrivaled, allowing no chance of a permanent conflict between Himself and anything else.

Second, God is wholly good, and what He creates is essentially good, too. Evil doesn't belong in the scheme of things. God didn't create it. In fact, evil isn't a "something" at all; it is a distortion of what was meant to be.

As Creator, God enjoys universal sovereignty over the world, as affirmed by biblical statements like this: "The earth is the

Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). Everything belongs to God. Because God's sovereignty is all-inclusive, He is the only being who deserves to be worshiped. This is the single most important theme in the Old Testament—there is only one God. We find it in the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). We see it also in this great confession: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Because it emphasizes that God is one, the religion of the Old Testament is often identified as monotheism, in contrast to polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. Polytheism and monotheism involve divergent views of life and of reality as a whole.

In polytheism reality is divided up, or parceled out, among many divine beings. Each god has a different sphere of influence or limited range of power. One has charge of the sea; another is responsible for war. Still others preside over hunting, planting, building, and so on. In ancient times, for example, each nation had its favorite god, which looked after its interests. When one country defeated another in war, the people attributed victory to the superiority of their god over their enemy's god.

According to monotheism, a single divine being rules over everything and everyone. Reality is not divided up among different centers of divine influence, competing with one another for human allegiance. Reality forms a coherent whole.

This means that our personal, individual lives can have coherence, too. The various facets of our existence find unity in a single object of devotion: the one true God. This is precisely why the so-called first great commandment directly follows the confession of faith in the oneness of God: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5).

The universal sovereignty of God makes it possible to love Him with every fiber of our beings, because nothing we can do can take us outside His domain.

The emphatic distinction between God and creation excludes idolatry, the practice of identifying God with some finite reality. In its most rudimentary form, idolatry is the attempt to depict divinity by means of some physical reality.

An idol may be an object existing naturally, such as a stone or a tree, or it may be a human artifact. Either way, idolatry

crosses the boundary or blurs the distinction between Creator and creature. It brings God down to the level of a creature, or it elevates some finite being to the status of divinity.

Because God is the creator of all, no physical object adequately represents Him. As Paul said in Athens, "We ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29).

Idolatry also involves an attempt to limit and manipulate God. If God is restricted to some specific object or place, then we can control Him to some extent. We may be able to appease His anger with sacrifices or curry His favor with expensive gifts. At least, we can limit His control over us by running away. But Jonah discovered that you can't run away from God; He rules the sea as well as the land.

The basic problem with idolatry is not restricted to primitive or ancient peoples. Many sophisticated people have a distorted view of God. They regard Him as someone or something to be called upon to meet their needs from time to time, or as a source of personal gratification. They try to manipulate Him to get what they want.

Other people give finite things their ultimate devotion. They place their trust in human potential, scientific knowledge, or military strength. In its essence idolatry is still with us. It is the perpetual rival of genuine religion.

## God's Identity

A number of important divine attributes follow from God's identity as Creator. Self-existence is probably the most fundamental. It points to the basic difference between God and the world. The world needs God, but God doesn't need the world. Its existence is derivative, but His is original and underived. Because God is self-existent, He is also eternal. He has always existed and always will. Nothing can annihilate Him, because He made everything.

The most famous divine attributes are omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. As the source of reality, God must be supremely powerful, of course. But omnipotence goes beyond the idea that God is more powerful than anything else. It means that He could not be more powerful than He is. In other words, His power is perfect.

The concept of perfect power has led to considerable debate. If it is defined simply as "power to do anything," it quickly leads to difficulty. Can God make a rock so big He couldn't lift it? Can God add two and two and get five? Can God

make a square circle? Most theologians maintain that God cannot do things that are logically impossible—not because His power is limited, but because such things aren't doable, and because our language about God must make sense.

Omnipresence describes God's spatial involvement in the world; it is the quality of being everywhere. Like omnipotence, it follows from the idea that God is the universal sovereign, and it means that there is no part of the universe from which God is excluded.

On the practical religious level, this gives us the assurance of God's presence wherever we are. Nothing can separate us from Him. It also reminds us that we can never hide from Him. Everything we do is open to His gaze.

Omniscience is the quality of perfect knowledge. There is nothing that God does not know. This attribute, too, is widely discussed. Some people insist God knows everything; others maintain that God knows all that is logically knowable. The crux of the issue is divine foreknowledge, or God's knowledge of the future. If God is omniscient, a familiar argument goes, then He knows past, present, and future. He knows everything that will happen, as well as everything that has happened.

But if God knows the entire future, the counter-argument runs, then everything will happen just as God foresees, and freedom of choice cannot exist. If God knows all our actions in advance, we do not really make choices, we merely find out what they are.

We cannot settle this complicated issue here. But it is important to note that supporters of both views agree that God's knowledge is perfect. They differ in believing whether future free decisions can be genuine objects of knowledge. If so, then of course God knows them. If not, then God cannot know them, for the same reason that He cannot do things that are logically impossible.

### God's Attitude Toward the World

The events of Creation not only established God's essential identity, they also indicate the kind of being God is and reveal His attitude toward the world He made.

God brought the world into existence by a free, creative act. We see His freedom in the fact that His creative activity ended when it reached its conclusion (Genesis 2:2). It didn't go on indefinitely.

Because God is free and self-determined, we can speak of Him as a person. The Bible attributes many personal qualities to God, and it describes

His attitude toward His creatures in personal terms. The description of God as "father" indicates that His interest in creation goes far beyond a craftsman's or artist's interest in some product of his or her ingenuity. God not only values and admires what He has made, He also commits Himself to its welfare. Moreover, since God created human beings in His image, it is clear that He seeks to establish a personal relationship with His creatures.

God's personal interest in creation separates the Christian view of God from two other concepts of God's relation to the world, namely, deism and pantheism. Both of these affirm the reality of the world and the oneness of God, but each view in its own way denies that God is personally related to the world.

### Deism and Pantheism

According to deism, God is ultimately or originally responsible for the existence of the universe, but takes no part in its current operation and is unaffected by anything that happens in it. Since God designed the universe perfectly, He never needs to adjust its operation. This view leaves no place for supernatural revelation or divine intervention—everything operates according to fixed natural law.

Whereas deism separates God from the world, pantheism goes to the opposite extreme and identifies God with the world. It views "God" and "world" as referring to the same all-inclusive reality. Pantheism correctly maintains that God is the power that sustains all reality, but it denies that He is anything more than this. It thus reduces God to His function within the world.

Both deism and pantheism exclude a personal relationship between God and creation. If God is unaware of the world, He has no relationship with it. On the other hand, if God is essentially identical with the world, His relation to the world can never be truly personal, either.

We can use the terms *immanence* and *transcendence* to describe these views of God. *Immanence* refers to God's participation or involvement in the world.

*Transcendence* refers to the difference or distinction between God and the world.

The God of deism is wholly transcendent, and the God of pantheism is wholly immanent. Each view emphasizes one attribute to the exclusion of the other. In contrast, Christian faith attributes both qualities to God. God indeed transcends the world. He is unlike anything He has made and infinitely superior to everything else. At the same time, He is immanent. He is actively involved in the world, sustaining its operation and guiding it toward the fulfillment of His pur-

poses. The term *theism* is often used to refer to this view of God.

The discussion of these different concepts of God leads us to another essential part of this doctrine. God's personness requires a certain kind of relation to the world, and it implies the reality of divine activity in the world.

### God's Activity in the World

If "creation" refers to God's bringing the world into existence, "providence" refers to His continual involvement in its affairs. As described in the Bible, this activity takes several different forms. First, God sustains and guides the natural order of things on a moment-by-moment basis. Divine power maintains the universe. "Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and thou preservest all of them" (Nehemiah 9:6). The basic presupposition of modern science that our environment is orderly and predictable emerged from the belief that an orderly God is responsible for its operation.

Providence also refers to the activity by which God directs the course of history toward the fulfillment of His purposes. For the most part, He suggests, influences, and responds to human decisions and actions. But He may take a more direct role and cause specific things to happen.

Often apparently negative events help fulfill God's purposes. Joseph's older brothers sold him into slavery, but God used this betrayal to preserve the Hebrew people (see Genesis 45:5-8). The crucifixion of Jesus—the consummate act of human injustice—was the means by which God saved the world (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

According to the most famous biblical statement on divine providence God's ability to work for good is so great that there is nothing, however bad in itself, that cannot ultimately serve His purposes: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

The assurance that God can work for good in every situation has been a tremendous source of strength to Christians throughout history. We must, however, be careful to distinguish divine providence from divine determinism, the idea that God is directly responsible for everything that happens. Christian faith emphatically denies that God is responsible for evil and suffering. Even though God works through events, even negative ones, for our good, He does not Himself cause all the events He uses.

Prophecy is closely related to provi-

dence. It, too, emphasizes God's role in superintending the course of human history and portrays Him as an active participant in human affairs. The prophets viewed the prosperity of a nation as the result of divine favor and its misfortunes as a form of divine judgment. The overall theme of Daniel, for example, is God's ultimate supremacy over all other powers, including the mightiest nations on earth.

The biblical prophecies describe future events and express God's intention of doing certain things. Indeed, the course of the future depends on what God intends to do:

I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient time things not yet done. My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purposes.... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it (Isaiah 46:9-11).

God's course of action often changes in response to human behavior. For this reason we speak of many biblical prophecies as "conditional." The prophet Jeremiah gives us one of the clearest descriptions of conditional prophecy:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Since God modifies His plan to accommodate human decisions, many prophetic predictions do not provide an ironclad forecast of coming events. Instead, they describe what God will do if certain things occur. Like providence, conditional prophecy portrays God as an active participant in human affairs.

Christians believe that God is involved in the entire course of human history, but they attribute certain events or occurrences to specific divine activity. We usually refer to such events as miracles. A miracle is frequently an interruption in the normal course of events, which happens as the direct result of God's power.

Miracles played a prominent role in the ministry of Jesus, where they illustrated the nature of the kingdom of God. In feeding the hungry, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead, Jesus provided vivid examples of what takes place when God's will is realized in this world. Jesus' miracles were previews of what life will be like when the kingdom of God is fully established.

Viewed in this way, miracles are not violations of nature, as is often thought, but revelations of it. They provide a window on the true character of reality.

For this reason, it obscures the nature of miracles to define them as mere interruptions in the normal course of events, because this focuses on their exceptional character rather than their purpose. The true purpose of miracles is to awaken and strengthen human faith in God. But faith should never depend on miracles alone.

### **God's Experience of the World**

In its perception of God's experience of the world the Christian view differs sharply from other ideologies. For example, many Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, believed that God is totally indifferent to the world. In their view, the creaturely world was unworthy of God's attention. This left God in the splendid isolation of eternity with nothing to think of but Himself.

In contrast, Christians believe that God is completely aware of the finite world and intimately involved in its events. From Genesis to Revelation, we see God's intense interest in this world. He is

the supreme actor on the stage of history, as we described in the previous section, and takes a keen interest in what happens to His creatures. Indeed, according to Jesus, God numbers the very hairs on our head and even takes note when a sparrow falls (Matthew 10:29, 30).

Although all Christians believe that God knows and cares about His creatures, they do not agree as to the precise nature of His experience. Many hold the view that God's experience of the world is static. They believe that God experiences the course of history all at once—in a single, timeless perception. From the vantage point of eternity, therefore, He has access to all reality—past, present, and future.

Others see God's experience of the world as dynamic. They believe that God is so closely related to His creatures that He experiences their lives in a temporal way. In other words, He experiences the happenings of this world successively, as they occur, rather than all at once. This means that events make a contribution to God's experience precisely when they happen. Interestingly, there is biblical evidence for both ideas.

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Texts like the following play an important role in this discussion: "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6); "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8); and "Every 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" (James 1:17).

In the thinking of many people, God's perfection proves that His experience is static, since it excludes the possibility that He could change in any way. If God could improve, they reason, that would make Him less than perfect now; if He got worse, obviously He would become less than perfect. Consequently, a perfect being cannot change, and God's experience of the world must therefore be static—forever exactly the same.

Many biblical prophecies lend support to the view that God's relation to the world is static, because they seem to indicate that God experiences the future ahead of time. Certain important prophecies chart the general course of coming history (Daniel 2, 7; Matthew 24; Revelation 13). Others accurately predict the behavior of certain individuals, such as Pharaoh, who rejected God's demand to release the Israelites (Exodus 4:21), and Cyrus, the Persian king who supported the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28-45:4). Jesus' predictions of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial also belong to this category (John 13:21-30; Mark 14:29, 30).

Perhaps most remarkable are the numerous messianic prophecies in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus (e.g., Psalm 22; Isaiah 7:14; 53; Micah 5:2). We could extend the list considerably, but the pattern of prediction and fulfillment convinces many that God experiences the future, along with the past and the present, all at once.

Personal religion seems to require a changeless God, so this too, contributes to the idea that God's experience is static. If God changes, how can we trust Him? How can we be confident that He will not alter His attitude toward us? In order to commit ourselves to God completely, many believe, we need the assurance that nothing about Him could ever be different, including His experience of the world. To use traditional language, He must be "immutable."

Although one can find impressive evidence that God's experience of the world is static, there is also significant support for a contrary position. Numerous biblical passages seem to portray God's experience of the world as dynamic. These texts describe God as reacting to events as they occur. They also show Him to be highly sensitive to His creatures. What

they do and what happens to them has a powerful effect on Him.

At Creation, for example, God was delighted with what He had made; He saw that it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). By the time of the Flood, however, He regretted having created human beings; indeed, "it grieved him to his heart" (Genesis 6:6). Later on God felt distressed by Israel's apostasies (Jeremiah 3:20), and He expressed anguish at the thought of having to give His people up (Hosea 11:8). Such passages attribute various emotions to God at different times. They support the idea that His experience changes in response to what happens in the creaturely world.

The many conditional prophecies of the Bible present God as responding and reacting to events in human history (cf. Jeremiah 18:7-10). The most famous conditional prophecy is Jonah's prediction of Nineveh's destruction (Jonah 3:4). According to the Bible, the city's inhabitants repented when they heard this message, and "when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it" (verse 10). This statement gives the strong impression that God decided to spare the Ninevites in direct response to their repentance.

During His ministry, Jesus heightened this portrait of God's sensitivity to His creatures. In His most dramatic stories, Jesus described God's reaction when sinners return to Him (Luke 15). According to Jesus, God feels what the shepherd, the woman, and the father in the parables experienced when they recovered what was lost. In His words, there is "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7).

Further support for the view that God's experience is dynamic comes from the important biblical statement, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Christians believe that God's love is fundamental to the entire plan of salvation (John 3:16). If God's basic attitude toward His creatures is one of love, then He must be responsive to their experiences, for love must be sensitive to its objects. If God loves us more than any human being does, then our experiences have a greater effect on Him than on anyone else. He is infinitely sensitive to everything that happens to us.

These considerations lead many Christians to adopt a dynamic concept of God's experience of the world. They believe that various feelings or emotions apply to God's response to events as they actually happen. God sorrows when the sparrow falls; He rejoices when the sinner repents. He feels our joy and suffers our sorrow precisely as we do. He has the experience

when the event takes place, and not before.

The distinctions we have made in our doctrine of God help us to do justice to these insights. We have discussed the essential being of God, God's basic attitude toward the world, His activity in the world, and His experience of the world.

With these topics in mind, we can assert that God is changeless, or absolute, in some ways; and changeable, or relative, in others. Certainly, God's fundamental being and character could not change. It is inconceivable that God should not exist, or that the quality of His knowledge, goodness, and power should be less than perfect. Nor can Christians think of God as changing in His attitude toward His creatures; constant love is an essential quality of His character.

At the same time, we must regard His activity in the world as dynamic. Indeed, it is impossible to think of God's activity as static, because to act is to effect a change. Similarly, we must think of God's experience as dynamic, responsive to the experiences of His creatures. We can speak of God as both changeless and changing, as both absolute and relative, if we apply these qualities to different aspects of God.

### **The Trinity**

For many, the concept of the Trinity is the most baffling aspect of the Christian doctrine of God. It seems to present us with a mathematical absurdity. How can something be three and one at the same time? The idea of the Trinity also strikes some people as a relapse into polytheism. How can we reconcile the claim that God is somehow three with the strong Old Testament emphasis on divine oneness?

The doctrine of the Trinity arises from the claims that Christians make about Jesus. And for all of its complexity, the concept expresses one fundamental conviction: God's revelation in Jesus is a genuine self-revelation. In other words, the threefold manifestation of God in the history of salvation discloses and corresponds to distinctions within the inner being of God Himself.

The earliest Christians, the ones who had personal contact with Jesus, found God unbelievably close to them in His life—so close, in fact, that they had to speak of God as being personally present in Him. Jesus was not simply a messenger from God. He *was* God. There was no other way to do justice to their experience of Him.

At the same time, all the early Christians were confirmed monotheists. They never spoke of Jesus as another god, besides, or in addition to, the ruler of the universe. They experienced God *in* Jesus,



not God *and* Jesus. But even as they identified Jesus with God, they made a distinction between the Father and the Son, as Jesus Himself had done. Jesus was aware of the Father as distinct from Himself. He prayed to the Father, for example, and He urged His followers to do so in His name.

The experience of God as personally present in the life of Jesus was the first stage in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The second was the experience of Jesus' personal presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the early Christians and enabled them to fulfill the gospel commission (Acts 2:1-4; cf. 1:8).

The experience assured Christ's followers that He was with them at that very time, guiding and leading in their activities. Though physically absent, Jesus remains with His people through the Holy Spirit as the Comforter (John 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-14).

To summarize, the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the belief that the one God is present in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It expresses the conviction that God is Father, Son, and Spirit in Himself, as well as in our experience of Him.

We find hints of this doctrine in the Old Testament and preliminary expressions of it in the New. The Old Testament speaks of the "spirit of God" and the "word of the Lord" in connection with the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6). In a famous passage in Proverbs "wisdom" seems to enjoy near-divine status (8:22ff.). These expressions suggest a complexity within the being of God.

The complexity in God is much more apparent in the New Testament. Two texts mention the three together: Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and 2 Corinthians 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." In addition, several New Testament texts refer to Jesus and the Holy Spirit as divine (e.g., Acts 5:3, 4).

During the fourth and fifth centuries Christian thinkers sought to express more fully the threefold manifestation of God we find in the New Testament. They faced heretical tendencies to overemphasize either divine unity or divine complexity. Some Christians thought of Father, Son, and Spirit, not as real distinctions within God, but merely as modes through which the single divine Person manifested Himself. In contrast, others subordinated the Son to the Father in such a way that He was less than fully God.

It is no simple task to describe God in a

way that avoids these extremes. But out of the complicated discussion of those early years came a number of terms still in use today. Two of them appear in the formula, "one substance, three persons." The term *substance* refers to what makes something what it is. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in their essential divinity. But as persons, the three are distinct.

The Latin word *persona*, the origin of our word *person*, first referred to the mask an actor wore to identify his part in a play. In the Trinitarian formulas, it referred to the distinct manner of subsisting characteristic of each of the three. It did not indicate an independent center of will and consciousness, as the word *person* does today.

Because *person* means something different now, some of the familiar analogies for God break down rather quickly. We cannot, for example, think of God as a family of three, or as a committee that always votes unanimously. This separates the divine persons and compromises God's unity. On the other hand, we obscure the distinctions within God if we think of the three merely as different functions. A single individual, for example, may be a teacher, a parent, and an amateur radio operator, all at once. Similarly, some people think, the one divine person variously functions as Father, Son, and Spirit. But this view fails to recognize how the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct.

To avoid getting lost when we reflect on the Trinity, it is always helpful for us to keep in mind the basic conviction it expresses: the history of salvation reveals God as He really is. The threefold manifestation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is not an affectation or temporary expedient on God's part. It is a disclosure of God's inner reality. In the work of salvation, God truly gives us Himself.

## **The Doctrine of Human Existence**

The Christian doctrine of human existence is closely related to the doctrine of God. Both are enormous mysteries, and we can't think of one without thinking about the other. As John Calvin said,

Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. . . . [W]hich one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.<sup>5</sup>

"Creature" and "image of God" are the most basic descriptions of human existence. They appear in the very first mention of human beings in the Bible (Genesis 1:26). And they point, respectively, to what we have in common with other forms of life as well as to what distin-

guishes us within the natural world.

## **Humans as Created Beings**

The concept of human creatureliness involves the idea of divine origin. According to the Bible, it is not blind chance, or good luck, that accounts for our origin, but the power and purpose of a personal God. This means that we belong in the universal scheme of things. We were meant to be here. Our existence fulfills an important purpose in God's plan, and our divine origin gives human life a transcendent meaning.

The condition of creatureliness also reminds us that we are part of a larger creation. We belong to the natural world, and participate in the various conditions and limitations of creaturely life.

This "limitedness," or finiteness, has several different dimensions. One is the dependent nature of our existence. We owe our existence to something else. Something greater than we are brought us here and continues to keep us going.

We are also dependent on the proper environment. Without exactly the right set of circumstances, human life would quickly cease. Human life can exist only within a certain temperature range. To maintain our health, we need certain nutrients. Without water our lives would end in a matter of days. Take away oxygen, and we would die within minutes.

Human frailty is a prominent theme in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. The Psalms, especially, recall the tenuous character of our lives, which they set in striking contrast to the power and eternity of God. "Men are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers" (Psalm 90:5, 6).

Human beings are limited in time and space. We can't be in more than one place at a time. We cannot avoid the passage of time. We grow older whether we want to or not. And we are limited to this particular time. We can't decide to live in the 19th or the 21st century. Our place in the passage of history is beyond our control.

## **The Nature of the Body**

The most vivid reminder of our finiteness is the fact that we exist in bodily form. As the Bible describes it, humans do not merely *have* bodies. More accurately, they *are* bodies. One of the most familiar biblical statements about human existence emphasizes its bodily nature: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

We see the importance of the body to human existence in biblical accounts of

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the resurrection. "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable .... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42, 44). For Paul, the transition from this life to the future life involved a dramatic transformation. However, this did not imply leaving bodily existence behind.

According to the Bible, the body is something good. It deserves careful treatment. In themselves, the things that make our lives physically enjoyable are good. God Himself provided food for Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:9, 16). Jesus promised to eat and drink with His disciples in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:16-18). And John says the redeemed will never hunger or thirst (Revelation 7:16). So a Christian view of human existence does not support the idea that physical needs and desires should be denied. In fact, the Bible urges us to attend to our health. A second implication of our corporeality is the unity of human life. While we are certainly more than mere physical organisms, our other qualities can never be separated from the physical. The

body—and whatever else makes us human—exist together as an indivisible unit. This contradicts "dualism," the popular idea that an inner part of human beings, such as the spirit or soul, has independent reality and survives the body at death.

### Body and Soul

We see a wholistic concept of human life in Genesis 2:7: "And God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." The Hebrew word here translated "breath," and elsewhere as "spirit," refers to the animating power within a physical organism. It doesn't exist apart from the body. In fact, it isn't even distinctively human. According to Ecclesiastes 3:19, human beings and animals have the same breath.

In addition, the Hebrew expression here translated "living being" ("living soul" in the King James Version) also appears in Genesis 1:21 and 24, where it refers to various forms of animal life. So we see that animals are souls, too, in the biblical sense of the word. Moreover, the

word translated "soul" in this verse refers to the organism as a whole, not to some part of it. The soul cannot be separated from the person. It is the person in his or her entirety.

Another aspect of our creatureliness is the social nature of our existence. Human beings exist as groups, not merely as individuals. What we are together is just as important as what we are by ourselves. In the familiar words of John Donne, "No man is an island." We influence other people, and their behavior affects us.

The social dimension of humanity is easy to overlook. In Western society, we value nothing more highly than individual accomplishments, particularly when they set a person apart from others. Children often grow up thinking that the most important things about them are those that make them different from others.

However, several things about us point to the social dimension of life. We owe our existence to other people—not just our physical origin, but our intellectual and cultural origins, too. We learn to speak because we are spoken to. According to child psychologists, we derive our basic self-concept from the way other people treat us during the early months of life.

We are fully human *only* in relation to others. The biblical account of Creation affirms our basic sociality. When God made human beings, He created two different individuals. So, the primary unit of human existence is the group, not the individual.

### Corporate Personality

This concept of "corporate personality" plays a prominent role in biblical thought. Each important human group, such as a nation or a tribe, has a collective identity more important than that of any of its members. Individuals who participate in the life of the group partake of its significance. On occasion, certain persons such as kings or priests represent the group and become bearers of its identity.

This concept of corporate personality lies behind many of the incidents in the Bible that initially perplex us. It helps us to understand why entire families sometimes suffered for the misdeeds of one member. When Jericho fell, Achan's family died with him for his act of looting, in disobedience of God's direct instructions (Joshua 7). On the positive side, all the soldiers of Israel participated in David's victory over Goliath, the champion of the Philistines (1 Samuel 17).

The biblical descriptions of the resurrection also point to the social dimensions of human existence. The dead rise together to receive immortality. We share

an eternal inheritance; it is not given to us one by one. Perhaps social life will be just as dramatically transformed by God's power as bodily life. Our closest relationships here may represent dim reflections of the intimacy available in the life to come.

## **A Christian View of Sex**

The biblical account of Creation indicates that human beings are sexual, as well as physical and social. God created humankind "male and female" (Genesis 1:26). On one level, sexuality is something physical. Male bodies have different features and functions from female bodies.

On another level, sex is social. Sexual activity is the means by which we create new human beings. It is also the way we express our most intimate human emotions.

Sexuality also highlights the essential differentiation within human existence. The things that distinguish us from one other should not create distances between us. Men and women are meant to complement each other. The fact that sexuality is fulfilled in the union of male and female reminds us that no one individual can be everything human beings are meant to be. It takes a social unit to display humanity at its fullest.

The Bible employs a positive approach to sex. Instead of urging people to deny their sexuality, it honors procreation and affirms sex as something natural and therefore good (Genesis 1:28).

These features separate the Christian view of sex from the puritanical or playboy view. According to the puritanical view, sex is evil and ought to be avoided. The less we hear of it, the better. This contrasts with the playboy attitude, which sees sex as the key to meaning in life. It asserts that giving sexual drives free rein will assure happiness and peace of mind.

The Christian view of sex stands apart from both these attitudes. In contrast to the puritanical view, it regards sex as good and purposeful. And in contrast to the playboy attitude, it maintains that sex is only a part of life, not all of it. We can realize its value only as we keep it in perspective and relate it to other aspects of life.

In recent years the question of appropriate sexual behavior has received much attention. According to traditional Christianity, the only acceptable framework for sexual relations is heterosexual monogamy—marriage involving two individuals, a male and a female. However, the Bible does seem to tolerate certain departures from this norm. Many of the central figures of the Old Testament

practiced polygamy, including Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon. And according to the first Gospel, one of Jesus' statements on marriage permits divorce in the case of adultery (Matthew 19:9).

The Bible straightforwardly denounces other practices. The seventh commandment prohibits adultery—sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than his or her spouse (Exodus 20:14). Paul admonishes Christians to avoid fornication—sexual intercourse between unmarried people (see 1 Corinthians 6:18). And several biblical statements condemn homosexual activities (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10).

Popular entertainment suggests that unrestrained sexual activity is the norm rather than the exception today. Even some Christians accept the idea that people may experiment with several sexual partners.

However, we can find many nonbiblical reasons to abstain from sex before marriage and to stay faithful afterward. These include the risk of pregnancy or contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which are more life-threatening now than ever.

In addition, the idea that provisional sexual relationships prepare people for marriage is woefully misguided. Marriage involves a total commitment between two people. No one can make a total commitment on a trial basis.

Moreover, a casual attitude toward sex destroys relationships. Sex has the capacity to express and to generate the deepest feelings of which human beings are capable. Any sexual activity that ignores this capacity is destructive. Whether we call it recreational sex or fooling around it inevitably lowers our respect for ourselves and our partner.

## **The Image of God**

Although human beings are undeniably a part of nature, they are obviously more than nature. Several characteristics make humans remarkably different from other forms of life. In Christian thought these distinctive qualities are encompassed by the symbol of "the image of God," a term that first appears in Genesis 1:26, 27: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion....' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Two related questions about this symbol have occupied Christian thinkers for centuries. What is the image of God, and what happened to it as a result of the Fall?

The prevalent pre-Reformation view

separated the "image" and the "likeness" of God in human beings. The image included certain natural powers, but the divine likeness was an additional, supernatural gift. It included powers that enabled human beings to know God and retain immortal life. At the Fall, the likeness was lost, but the image of God remained intact.

The Protestant Reformers rejected this distinction between image and likeness. Their study of the Hebrew language led them to conclude that the two terms refer to the same thing. They also maintained that the image of God was not a set of qualities, but a positive orientation of the will toward God.

The Reformers also believed that the image of God was devastated by the Fall. In John Calvin's words, it was "so corrupted that whatever remains is horrible deformity."<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary theologians disagree about the image of God. Is it better understood as a certain quality human beings possess, or a particular relationship they have? We can answer this question by taking a close look at the context in which the expression first appears.

Directly after the words, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,'" we find the words, "'And let them have dominion....'" This suggests that the image of God refers primarily to a function, rather than a quality. Human beings enjoy the status of dominion, or sovereignty, over other creatures. Accordingly, one theologian describes the image of God as our "creative mastery of existence."<sup>7</sup>

## **Implications**

Human beings fulfill this assignment as they modify their environment to serve their interests. Art suggests imaginative ways of looking at the world. Science seeks to explain the various phenomena we encounter. Technology alters certain features of our world. We use the resources of the earth to provide ourselves with food, shelter, and clothing, as well as transportation and communication.

The image of God also involves a special relationship between human beings and God. It reminds us that we are God's representatives in the world, not His replacement. The earth is still the Lord's, and human beings, too, are subject to His sovereignty.

For this reason, we must think of ourselves as stewards of the world's resources. God entrusts the world to our care, but He holds us accountable for the use we make of it.

Human sovereignty has important limits. As God's representatives in the world,

our dominion should resemble the sovereignty of God. God enjoyed and valued the products of His creative power. The resources of the earth are ours to use, but we must not exploit or abuse them.

Moreover, since we all bear the image of God, one human being should never be the property of another. Neither race, nor sex, nor age elevates one group above another. The image of God rules out all forms of slavery—economic, political, or sexual.

To summarize, the Bible gives human beings a unique position in the order of things. As creatures, we are subject to divine sovereignty along with the rest of creation. But since we bear God's image, our relation to other creatures resembles the sovereignty of God.

### The Human Condition

Human life today is vastly different from the way God created it. According to the Bible the reason for this tragic discrepancy is sin—willful disobedience or deliberate violation of God's intentions for human life.

Paul's frequent use of the singular *sin*, as distinct from *sins*, underscores the fact that sin is a pervasive condition of our existence. True, the Bible condemns various actions, but specific sins are symptoms of a deeper problem, our basic lack of harmony with God. This is why solving the problem of sin requires much more than changing our behavior. Nothing less than a transformation of our nature will do.

Sin is a complex phenomenon comprising several different aspects. One is unbelief, or distrust. According to Genesis 3, the tempter began his conversation with Eve by asking, "Did God say...?" raising doubt in her mind as to God's real interest in human beings. In addition to questioning God's trustworthiness, sin also involves claiming divine prerogatives. "You will be like God," the serpent promised, encouraging Eve to deny her dependence on a higher power. Pride, too, lies at the heart of sin.

Another aspect of sin is disobedience, or transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). The first human sin challenged God's command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). Sin countermands God's will for human beings.

Sin is also rebellion against the sovereignty of God. As our Creator, God has a right to our allegiance. Sinners reject God's rightful claims on their lives.

### Dimensions of Sin

Sin also violates our personal relationship with God. This is why David cried,

"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). His crimes of adultery and murder hurt many people, but the loss of fellowship with God brought him the greatest pain. Sin is not an act or an object. It is fundamentally a breakdown in our relationship with God.

In addition to its spiritual or vertical dimension, sin also has a horizontal or social dimension. It affects our relationship with other human beings. The two great commandments—love to God and love to our neighbor—are inseparably linked. Rejecting God's sovereignty inevitably leads us to violate the rights of other people.

Sin has disastrous consequences. It distorts every aspect of the human situation. One effect is "condemnation" (see Romans 5:8). Sin places every human being under the judgment, or wrath, of God. A "guilty" verdict hangs over everyone's head.

Our condition in sin is also one of corruption, or disintegration. Sin destroys the harmony and balance of life. Because it distorts our fundamental relationship to God, it distorts everything else about us, too. It leads to spiritual decay and to idolatry, the substitution of false objects of worship for the true God (Romans 1:23-25; 7:23, 25). It also leads to social disruption, or injustice (Romans 1:29-31), and to lust, or sexual corruption (verses 26 and 27).

We express this idea with terms like *estrangement*, or *alienation*. The reaction of Adam and Eve to their original transgression suggests a breakdown in the essential relationships of human existence (Genesis 3:10-13). Their effort to hide implies a ruptured relationship with God, while their willingness to blame each other indicates that their human relationships were also fractured. Their exile from the garden and the curse of the ground illustrate their alienation from creation in general (Genesis 3:24, 17). The shame Adam and Eve felt also suggests self-rejection or alienation (Genesis 3:10). Clearly, sin corrupts every human relationship.

### Consequences of Sin

The consequences of sin are comprehensive, irreversible, and inevitable. The theological concept of "total depravity" emphasizes the comprehensive effects of sin. As used by the great Reformers, this expression does not mean that human beings are as bad as they could possibly get, but that sin affects every facet of our lives. In John Calvin's words, "The whole man is overwhelmed—as by a deluge—from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds

from him is to be imputed to sin."<sup>8</sup>

Paul emphasizes the irreversibility of sin by describing the condition as slavery, or bondage (Romans 6-7). According to Romans 7:7-25, sinners are powerless to do good. In fact, they cannot even choose to do good. All their efforts proceed from a sinful desire to gain righteousness on their own. Their motives, as well as their actions, are wrong.

The controversial concept of "original sin" points to the inevitability of sin in human experience. This does not mean that sin could not have been avoided; but once it entered human history, there was no escaping its influence. Like total depravity, this concept locates sin on the level of human nature. The fact is, we all sin. No Christian belief has more practical evidence than this one!

Every now and then people question the inevitability of sin. Like the fourth-century heretic Pelagius, some people today believe that each person has the natural ability to choose between good and evil. Morally speaking, they maintain, everyone starts at the same point as Adam and Eve when they were placed in the Garden of Eden.

In contrast, a wide spectrum of thinkers, ranging from Augustine to Ellen White,<sup>9</sup> claim otherwise. The fall of our first parents did more than give us a bad example, it affected our very nature and influences everything we do.

### Sin and the Great Controversy

Seventh-day Adventists view human sin as part of a cosmic conflict between good and evil. This Great Controversy began with the rebellion of Lucifer, the highest created being, who ministered in the very presence of God (Ezekiel 28:14). Lucifer resented God's authority and sowed dissension among the angels. His animosity ripened into open revolt (Revelation 12:7), and he ultimately persuaded one-third of the angels to join him in rebellion (Isaiah 14:13, 14; Ezekiel 28:17; Revelation 12:3, 4). As a result, God expelled these angels from heaven (Isaiah 14:12; Revelation 12:9).

Now called the devil, or Satan, this fallen angel tempted Adam and Eve and led human beings into sin (Revelation 12:9). Though his eventual defeat was insured by the death of Jesus, he still works desperately to take as many people as possible to destruction with him (1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:12).

Central to the Great Controversy is the issue of the sovereignty of God. God bases His government on love. He desires from His creatures an allegiance that arises from an intelligent appreciation of His character, not just respect for His

power. Lucifer thus threatened God's government by raising doubts about His real attitude toward His creatures. He accused God of being a tyrant who oppresses His creatures, depriving them of dignity.

God could not meet Lucifer's charges with a display of superior power; He could refute them only by demonstrating the depth of His love. What the Great Controversy required, therefore, was a revelation of God's character so vivid, so compelling, that it would convince even His enemies and forever silence questions about His love.

This is precisely what the Plan of Salvation represents—an unmistakable manifestation of God's love for sinners. The cross of Christ shows how deeply God cares for us. It reveals His willingness to risk everything, even the life of His only Son, to overcome the alienation of sin. It allows no conclusion but that God deserves to be God.

The Great Controversy is a powerful theological idea. It also provides a way of integrating many important themes in Christian faith, including the love of God, sin's entrance into the world, the meaning of the cross, and the end of history.

### **The Meaning of Death**

The Bible's view of death is related to its view of human existence. As we have seen, the Bible presents a "wholistic" view of human nature. Although multidimensional, a human being is a unity; his components cannot exist in isolation. Consequently, when someone dies, the whole person dies. Part of the person does not continue in some other mode of being. Death, in other words, is the cessation of life. All experience comes to an end, mental as well as physical.

Numerous texts support this view, including Psalm 146:4, "When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on the very day his thoughts perish;" Ecclesiastes 9:5, "The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing;" and Ecclesiastes 12:7, "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." This verse suggests that death reverses the process of human creation, when God formed human life from the dust of the ground, and breathed into Adam the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

Because death is the end of life, anything beyond it must be a new beginning, not merely an extension or continuation of life. The resurrection of the dead can be compared to the creation of human beings. It occurs only by virtue of specific divine activity (see Romans 4:17).

The biblical view of death contrasts

sharply with the popular conviction that life somehow continues after death. According to Greek dualism, human beings are the union of a physical body, which is mortal and doomed to perish, and an immortal soul, which is the true bearer of personal identity. At death the soul escapes the body and goes on to exist in another realm. According to this view death is not the cessation of life, or even an interruption of it. It is merely the transition between one phase of life and the next. Personal experience never stops, and the future life is a continuation of the present one.

Besides describing what happens at death, the Bible also interprets its meaning. From the biblical perspective, death is an enemy, an intruder. It was never meant to be. Although human beings are mortal, it was never God's plan that we should die. He intended for us to live forever, as the presence of the tree of life in Eden indicates.

People began to die as a result of violating God's will. As Paul states, "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). This recalls God's prohibition in the Garden of Eden relating to the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). We should not think of death as an arbitrary penalty for sin, as if God were out to get even with people for offending Him.

God is the source of life, and our existence depends on His sustaining power. Consequently, rejecting His sovereignty means cutting ourselves off from life. Rebellion against God is a kind of suicide (see Proverbs 8:36). Death is simply the inevitable consequence of sin.

The unnatural, or intrusive, character of death justifies our instinctive sense of revulsion toward it. We are right to think of death as horrible and frightening. It doesn't belong in God's world. We are also right to feel a sense of loss at death, for it is the great antithesis of life. When a person dies, he is gone, and we are entitled to feel a sense of bereavement.

This realistic assessment of death contradicts those who would give death a happy face. Many people believe that a healthy approach to death is to accept it as the natural end of life. In contrast, others encourage us to confront death with clenched fists—to "rage against the dying of the light," to quote Dylan Thomas.<sup>10</sup>

### **Avoiding Extremes**

A Christian view of death avoids both of these extremes. It acknowledges the inherent negativity of death, but it denies death any kind of victory. It affirms the reality of a future beyond death.

The Bible portrays death as an enemy

(1 Corinthians 15:26), so we have a right to feel frightened by it and resist it. The touching scene of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus reinforces this negative view of death (John 11:35), as does the horror He felt as His own death approached (Matthew 26:37-44). At the same time, the Bible describes death as a conquered enemy. Its power over us has been broken, and it will ultimately come to an end (1 Corinthians 15:26, 54, 55; Revelation 20:14). For this reason we can be hopeful, even confident, in the face of death, in spite of its ominous character.

### **The Future Beyond Death**

In the Bible the term *resurrection* describes the recovery of life after death that the Christian hope anticipates. The resurrection is eschatological—it occurs at the end of the age, when Christ returns to this earth (John 5:8-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). It is thus part of a cluster of events that culminates the Plan of Salvation. The resurrection involves glorification, as Jesus' resurrected form indicates. Paul describes the bodies of the resurrected as "imperishable" and "immortal" (1 Corinthians 15:42, 53).

Evidently the resurrection will restore human existence to the quality it had before the entrance of sin. The bodies of the righteous will be re-created imperishable to disease. All human powers will be fully developed. While transforming physical appearance, the resurrection also preserves personal identity. Those who are resurrected are the same individuals who existed before.

### **Collective Immortality**

The Bible declares that human beings do not enter their eternal destiny at the moment of death. The redeemed receive their eternal inheritance together. Paul asserts that the living will not precede those who have died. Instead, living and dead will enter the presence of God together (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17).

The biblical doctrine of human existence involves a number of challenging topics. We see the essence of humanity in the biblical descriptions of people as created beings who bear the image of God. The biblical concept of sin and death illuminate the human condition. These topics set the stage for the central concern of Christian theology—the doctrine of salvation. In this life we never find perfect humanity, because sin affects every part of our experience. But we never find purely sinful humanity, either, because salvation also permeates our present situation.

Even before sin entered the world, God had a plan to mitigate its conse-

quences and restore human beings to fellowship with Him. Salvation is the restoration of God's sovereignty in human affairs. We can look forward with anticipation to its culmination when sin and death are completely destroyed and God's people are restored to eternal communion with Him.

(Part II, dealing with the doctrines of the Church, Eschatology, and the Sabbath, will appear in the February-March 1989 issue of the JOURNAL.) □

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<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. 1.

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<sup>10</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1957), p. 128.

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