

1. God Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

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The Nicene Creed begins:

“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty,

maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.”

It was natural for the creed to begin with the doctrine of God the Father, for the creed is trinitarian in its arrangement and content--Father, then Son, and then Holy Ghost. And although there are only a few brief ideas stated here about God the Father, those ideas cover a wide range of theological ideas. It is simply impossible for us to do justice to them all in one short meditation on the doctrine; but at least we can affirm the major points. The rest of this series of studies will keep coming back to the nature of God the Father in relation to all the other doctrines.

The Trinity

The first point that we must make about the creed in general is that it affirms the biblical teaching that there is only one God. The mystery of the trinity is that this one God exists in three persons (not three people, or three separate Gods). There is a unity

to the Godhead, one essence, but three persons. And this makes the study of the doctrine of God the Father a little complicated, because all three persons of the Godhead are actively involved in every work of God. We normally say that the Father decrees the work, the Son carries it out, and the Spirit enables the work to be done--whether it is creation, salvation, judgment, or any other of the works of God. Moreover, when we survey the attributes of God, all the attributes likewise apply to all three persons of the Godhead. Therefore, faith, prayer, praise, and all other forms of worship and service must include the entire Godhead.

The Bible is filled with this revelation about the triune God. True, in the Old Testament it is only hinted at, but nonetheless, when the full revelation of the New Testament is brought to the discussion, it is easy to see that the foundation of the trinitarian faith was laid down from the beginning. The creed of Deuteronomy 6:4 may be interpreted with this fact in mind: "Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one"; or, "Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone." The Scripture affirms through the teachings of the prophets and the apostles that there is one God; and yet the Scripture reveals that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). Knowing this we are more keen to note how in the Old Testament there are intimations of the tri-unity of the Godhead (see Isa. 6:8; 9:6; 48:15, 16; Prov. 30:1-4; Mal. 3:1-5, et al). Moreover, as we shall see later in the doctrine of Christ, Jesus claimed that he and the Father were one and the same (John 10:30) and that he was the I Am of the Old Testament (John 8:58). We cannot fully understand the trinity, not with our finite minds, but we must believe it if we accept the revelation of the Bible for the faith. And we cannot separate the three persons of the Godhead as if they were in some way independent beings. There is one God; but this one God revealed in the Bible is very different than the one God Islam and Judaism profess. This one God is fully revealed in the Son by the Spirit.

The Attributes of God

Most **theological** studies will begin with a list of the attributes or perfections of God, and this is a helpful way to organize the vast amount of material. After all, the whole Bible would have to be taken into consideration if there was not a way to synthesize the material. And after all, this is about the best we can do--describe a little of what God is like based on his revelation in his words and works. One of the more helpful works on this would be A. Pink's, *The Attributes of God*; but J. Packer's *Knowing God* is very helpful as well.

The attributes or descriptions are divided into two categories: the non-communicated attributes and the communicated ones. In other words, there are

attributes that belong to God that he did not share with humans through creation, and there are those he did. We conclude from the Bible that God is **sovereign** over all things, **eternal** and **infinite**, **all powerful**, **all knowing**, and **present everywhere** at once. Only God is like this. But when we try to understand and explain what these mean, we run into limitations. If we say God is infinite--what does that mean? We can only say God is not finite, not limited by time, space, or any other limitation. But that does not get us a full understanding. Or, we can say God is all powerful, that all the power in the universe, in any universe, belongs to him. Trying to imagine or understand that is very difficult. We can look at the acts of God revealed in Scripture and begin to appreciate it. But we are like Moses on Mount Sinai, seeing only the fringe of the hem of the garment as he passes by.

We have an easier time with the communicable attributes, for these we possess in a measure. Some of these are **love**, **mercy**, **wisdom**, **righteousness**, **goodness**, **compassion** and the like. We know though that we have only a finite amount of compassion, or love, compared to the amount that exists with God. So as we study the Bible we can see these key words used and described as they relate to the God who is the sovereign over all things.

The Revelation of the Father

The creed begins its description of this one God with the designation of the first person of the Godhead as the “Father.” The metaphorical language of “father” is the designation God has chosen for revelation, whether we like it or not. But we must be clear about this: it is a figure of speech; it does not mean that God is a male or a man, or that men are more important to God than women; nor does it mean that there was procreation in the Godhead that produced the Son. The term “Father” for God is a powerful description, lofty and elegant. It should not be trivialized to mean “daddy,” no matter how popular that idea may be.

The title “Father” was used in other countries of the ancient Near East as well to describe the high God of the pantheon, the sovereign. In Canaan, for example, the lesser gods of the heavenly court are called the “sons of God.” In the Old Testament, since there is but one God, the “sons of God” are the angels (see Job 1,2). And in contrast to the Canaanite myths, there is no physical intercourse with God. The gods of the pagans were far too human, base and low. The one true and living God creates by decree, not by copulation. So in the Bible we have this description of God as “Father,” some in the Old Testament, and more in the New Testament. But what is the expression designed to communicate about God?

The first meaning of the expression “Father” is **creator**. When we call God Father, we are saying that he is the **sovereign creator** of all things. He produces everything, but he also provides for it, and he protects it. Creation, provision, providence. All these ideas are there with the image of “Father.” No other description could capture them all at once. And since God creates and sustains everything by his decree, he is truly “Almighty.” We shall return to this in a moment.

The second meaning of the expression “Father” has to do with **Covenant**. When we call God our Father, it means that we enjoy a covenant relationship with him. In the world of the Bible “father-son” language is the language of covenant. You might read in a genealogy that a city is the son of an ancestor. It means there was some kind of treaty there. In Israel, king Ahaz was known as the son of Pul (Tiglathpileser, the king of Assyria); it means he was a political dependent, a vassal. And so in the covenant with Israel God calls the people his son. He warned Pharaoh to let his son go or he would kill Pharaoh’s son (Exod. 4:23). And in the covenant that God made with David (2 Sam. 7:14), the king would be the son and God would be the father in the new relationship. Thus, when a king came to the throne he would declare his right to rule with the words from the covenant found in Psalm 2:7, “The LORD said to me, You are my son; today I have begotten you.” This was fine until Isaiah turned the language on its head and predicted that the Davidic king would be known as the “father of eternity”--the one who produces and provides for everything in eternity (Isa. 9:6). Of course, that would be fulfilled by Christ who declared that he and the father were one and the same. But it was the resurrection from the dead that authenticated that claim and declared that Jesus was the Son of God (Rom. 1:4).

In the New Covenant that Jesus inaugurated we who have put our faith in Christ Jesus, the son of God, have the right to be called the sons or children of God, and the privilege to call God “our Father,” especially in our prayers. God is not only our sovereign creator, but our redeemer as well, bringing us into covenant with him. To call God Father in our New Covenant praying is to seek the sanctity of his name and the fulfillment of his sovereign will on earth as in heaven, as well as to seek the daily provisions from the Lord of the covenant.

And third, when we call God Father we are also attesting that God is a person, one who we can know and have fellowship with, because the language is that of human relationship and **community**. This is no impersonal God, no abstract force in the universe. God is personal, and the description indicates that the relationship he has with his people is intimate and relational. This is because the language first applies to the relationship within the Godhead: as the Father God decrees the sovereign will and oversees its outworking; as the Son God carries out the will of the Father; and as the Spirit God empowers the work to be done. The Son submits to do the will of the Father, but they are equally God. We shall return to this in the doctrine of Christ.

Creator

The creed focuses on the doctrine of creation at the beginning, and rightly so. If the biblical teaching on creation is removed or watered down, the faith will not be the same. The doctrine clearly reveals that God is the sovereign over all his creation; remove the doctrine and he is not sovereign, we are not accountable to him, and in fact, there is no basis for ethics and morality. The Bible teaches that God is the primary cause of all things. Out of his will, and by his decree, he brought everything into existence. One may quibble over the means used in all the points, but the fundamental point, the non-negotiable teaching of the Bible is that he is the Maker of everything. And he did this by decree, by his powerful word (Gen. 1; Ps. 33; Isa. 44, 45; John 1; Romans 1; Colossians 1). There is no room for natural development apart from God's superintendence in the Christian view of origins. At the risk of simplifying this too much, several observations are in order:

- 1) The Bible affirms that God existed before anything else; and that He is the creator of everything that exists.
- 2) The Bible affirms that God created everything that exists by decree; he called everything into existence. This does not say anything about intermediate means; it does say that God is the source of everything.
- 3) The Bible affirms that God created everything after its kind (Gen. 1). This rules out the idea that from one form evolved all the species.

So regardless of the debates of the age of the earth, fossils, natural selection or beneficial mutations, there are some straightforward declarations in the Bible that clearly teach that God is the creator of everything, and that as a result he is the one who has control over the world he created. He is called "Almighty" because he must be almighty to do the things that he has done, notably create and sustain everything! All power belongs to him; he is the sovereign Lord of the universe he has made. (Perhaps this is the real issue! Perhaps people would accept the biblical doctrine of creation more readily if it did not mean that he is the almighty God who will hold them accountable for what they do.) But a god who cannot create, is not a sovereign god; it is a god who does not have to be listened to. However, to acknowledge God as the creator is to accept him as the sovereign Lord, all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever present everywhere. And to accept him as the almighty God is to accept that he is the sovereign Creator.

A BIBLICAL EXPOSITION

There are many passages in the Bible that capture the revelation of this sovereign creator God very well, but a couple of Psalms do it in a very practical way. The first is Psalm 33, a psalm of praise to God. The psalm has the standard parts of the descriptive praise psalm: the call to praise (vv. 1-3), the cause for the praise (vv. 4-19), and the conclusion (vv. 20-22).

In the cause or reason for the praise, we have a carefully planned structure: verses 4 and 5 form the summary statement. Verse 4a says God's word is right and true, and that will be developed in verses 6-9; verse 4b says God's works are dependable, and that will be developed in verses 10-12; verse 5a says God is righteous, and that is explained in verses 13-15; and verse 5b speaks of God's faithful loyal love, and that is elaborated on in verses 16-19.

1. His word is true. In verses 6-9 the psalmist describes how God created everything by his powerful word. He simply spoke, and everything came into existence. Borrowing from Genesis 1:3, he actually says, "he spoke, and it was." This is the simplest expression of a profound truth. God has such power and such authority that he simply had to give the command and everything came into existence into conformity to his will. Some will say, this is poetry and not to be taken seriously. That is just silly, for the poetry simply reiterates in hymnic form the great teachings of the Bible. The desired result of this teaching, the psalmist says, should be adoration, fear, and praise.

2. His works are dependable. The works described here are the works of a true sovereign heavenly God. He nullifies all the counsels of the nations, but his plans and his will stand firm. Any plan that any nation or people have that does not harmonize with the will or plan of God will ultimately come to frustration. He rules over history, over nations, over the will of man. This too is powerful. We do not understand the choices he makes, the reasons for the way he rules; but the Bible teaches he is sovereign, and he knows what he is doing. Daniel simply praised God for his rule over history (Dan. 2).

3. He loves righteousness. Now, in verses 13-15, the psalmist focuses on how God looks into the hearts of all humans to see if there is righteousness. He must be omniscient and omnipresent and all-wise to do this. But he examines and evaluates the

human heart. How can he do this? He made the human heart--if he created all things, then he certainly knows what is going on in what he made. The examination is a form of judgment, for the knowledge of God is both penetrating and evaluative.

4. He extends his loyal love to his people. In the fourth part, verses 16-19, the psalmist deals with a practical issue--warfare. He affirms that a king cannot win a battle by military armaments alone, whether horses or today's arsenal of weapons. His strength alone cannot save him. Victory comes only if the sovereign God allows it to come. Jesus told Pilate that he, Pilate, would have no power at all unless it was given to him from above. This is the faith; this is the sovereignty of God. The truth is that God extends his faithful covenant love to his people, to deliver them from death (yes, they may die, but the covenant promises demand a future life) and from all danger. The eyes of the Lord are on those who hope in him. Believers in the sovereign love of God know that the world is not out of control, that God has his eye on them, and that nothing will happen to them outside the Lord's plan.

Another psalm that brings the doctrine of God to the practical level is Psalm 139. It can be divided into four stanzas of 6 verses each. In the first stanza David reflects on the truth of the knowledge of God--that God knows everything about us. It is as if God has gone on a search of our lives--he knows us. He knows every move we make, and he knows the reasons for those moves before we even do them (v. 2). In fact, this knowledge of God is penetrating, because he discerns our daily activities, always evaluating them (v. 4). Specifically, this may be illustrated by our speech: before we can get the word out, God knows it entirely (v. 4). David's initial reaction to this is that he is uncomfortable with it--it is surpassing, beyond his control. He feels hemmed in all around, not free (vv. 5, 6). And this is the natural reaction at first to the sovereignty of God. One wonders in what sense he or she may be free, if God is God. The first impulse is to escape from that penetrating knowledge--there must be some place where our wills are sovereign, we think, where we are from his sovereign knowledge.

So the second stanza, verses 7-13, raises that issue: where can we go? The theme of this stanza is the omnipresence of God--God is everywhere, and therefore there is no place to which we might flee to get away from his penetrating knowledge. But when David begins to think of some of the places he might go--the dark deep in the sea, sheol, all places of grave danger, then he begins to see God's knowledge and God's presence are real comforts--even there God leads him and takes his hand. Nothing can separate him from the powerful presence of God, not darkness, not bruising, not distance or time. He is there. And he knows all about us.

The third stanza of the psalm explains why this is possible, in terms that Psalm 33 briefly mentioned. He made us (vv. 13-18). God formed both our bodies and our

spirits in the womb. Of course David knows that natural reproduction was the means--but it was God who was behind it all. He supervised the details of the birth and the life that would follow while we were yet in the womb. God lovingly prepared for our lives on this earth, making us with the characteristics we have to suit his divine purpose for each one of us. And all the events of our lives were written in his book, meaning, planned out for us (divine omniscience does not need to keep a day book) before there was even one of them. Now David is filled with adoration and praise--here is a God who lovingly planned his life and prepared him for it.

So the conclusion of the psalm is the practical application in his experience. He is surrounded by enemies who hate God and his will. But David takes comfort in the fact that God will protect him, because he is loyal to God, totally rejecting them and their evil ways. But he wants God to continue to examine him to make sure there is no evil way in him. He wants to be loyal to God, so that God's everlasting plan will work out completely in his life.

In these psalms we have a grand picture of the sovereign God who is the creator of all things, who is sovereign over all things, who knows all things, who is present with all things, who evaluates everyone, and who protects his own by his love and righteousness. Rather than try to explain how this works with our wills, or try to escape from this penetrating presence, all we can do as believers is put our trust in him and his word and seek to do his will, knowing that he is the one true and living God, our Maker and our Father in heaven who loved us and brought us into fellowship with himself through the Son and the Spirit.