

The Nature of God

By Andrew S. Kulikovsky B.App.Sc.(Hons)
November 12, 2000

I. INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that every human being has a “God shaped vacuum” inside them – everyone has a God-consciousness, although many apparently suppress it (Romans 1:20-21). Yet even Christians, who do acknowledge the reality of God, often hold to a great variety of ideas about what He is like. In fact, many of these ideas conflict with each other and also with what the Bible actually teaches. But if our belief in God is to be rational, then it follows that our conception of who and what God is should be coherent. If we claim to know God and love Him then it stands to reason that our understanding of God should match what He has revealed about Himself both generally in the natural world and specifically in the scriptures. As A. W. Tozer writes “there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”¹ Furthermore, Tozer goes on to point out that wrong thoughts about God are in reality a form of idolatry.²

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a concise but coherent description of who God is and what He is like – His nature and His character.

II. THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF GOD

1. *Spiritual*

In John 4:24, Jesus declares that “God is spirit,” and therefore His worshipers must worship Him “in spirit and in truth.” This predicate is clearly adjectival and indicates that God is essentially spiritual. This means that He has none of the physical constraints associated with matter – He cannot be killed or destroyed, will not decay or perish, and cannot be detected by our senses.³ God is not destructible like material nature⁴ - He, and He alone, is immortal (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15-16). God is also not limited to any particular geographical place or spatial location (Acts 17:24).

Yet many scriptures seem to indicate that God has a physical body. For example, He is described as having hands (Exodus 15:17), feet (Psalm 110:1), ears (Exodus 3:7) and lungs (Genesis 2:7). However, such statements only occur when God is interacting with His creation, and are clearly anthropomorphic. We cannot fathom precisely how God acts into the world, so it is necessary to describe such actions in a way that is familiar.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Carlisle, UK: OM Publishing, 1987) 13.

² *Ibid*, 14-15.

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958) 66.

⁴ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1998) 294.

Note also that the problem of theophanies in scripture is solved in a similar way. Such theophanies occurred for the purpose of interacting with the creation.

2. *Self-existent and Eternal*

The grounds of God's existence is in Himself. He is uncaused,⁵ and is, in fact, the ultimate cause of everything, and therefore, there is no other god nor anything else behind Him. Furthermore, God has no needs – nothing is necessary for Him.⁶

The fact that God is eternal naturally follows from His self-existence. Psalm 102:24b-27 states:

...your years go on through all generations. In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded..But you remain the same, and your years will never end.

Psalm 102:12 adds: "But you, O LORD, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations." In addition, a number of New Testament passages also indicate God's eternal nature (John 1:1; 5:26; 8:58; Colossians 1:16).

3. *Personal*

Many scriptures indicate that God is personal in nature. He is self-conscious and has will, feelings, can choose, and can relate to other personal beings.⁷ He has a name (Yahweh: Exodus 3:14, 20:7), and His actions are also indicative of personality. As Thiessen points out, God possesses psychological characteristics of personality:⁸ intellect (Genesis 18:19; Acts 15:18), sensibility (Genesis 6:6; Psalm 103:8-14) and volition (Genesis 3:15; John 6:38). Furthermore, God acts in a personal way: He speaks (Genesis 1:3), sees (Genesis 11:5), hears (Psalm 94:9), grieves (Genesis 6:6), gets angry (Deuteronomy 1:37), gets jealous (Exodus 20:5), and is compassionate (Psalm 111:4).

Note also that human personality demands a personal creator – if the effect is personal then the cause must also be personal.⁹

Furthermore, the existence of such things as faith, obedience, love, joy, trust and volition have no basis and are unexplainable apart from the existence of a personal creator God.¹⁰

4. *Triune*

The doctrine of the Trinity (i.e. One God, but three Persons) is a central element of Historic Christianity, and the Council of Constantinople (381) formulated the definitive statement

⁵ Berkhof, 58.

⁶ Tozer, 49.

⁷ Erickson, 295.

⁸ H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 77.

⁹ Berkhof, 64-65.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 65.

which made explicit the beliefs already held implicitly by the church.¹¹ Indeed, this is one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity.¹²

Although the words “trinity” and “triune” are never used anywhere in scripture, and the doctrine is never explicitly taught anywhere in scripture, there are many verses which strongly indicate that God is, indeed, triune.

Not only is the Father presented as God (Matthew 6:26-32; Isaiah 9:6; Malachi 2:10; John 6:27; 45-46; 13:3; 16:27-28; 20:17; Romans 15:6; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 15:24; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 4:6; Philippians 2:11; Colossians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:1), Jesus is also equated with God (2 Peter 1:1; Titus 2:13; John 1, John 8:58; Matthew 26:63-65). Furthermore, in John 20:28, Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for calling Him God, nor did he rebuke His disciples for worshipping Him (cf. Luke 4:8), unlike the angel in Revelation 19:10; 22:8-10).¹³ In addition, the Spirit is also equated with God (1 Corinthians 3:16; 12:4-11). Indeed, Acts 5:3-4 equates lying to the Spirit to lying to God. The Spirit also convicts (John 16:8-11) and regenerates (John 3:8) just as God does.

In addition, the personality of God implies a plurality of persons:

Personality does not develop nor exist in isolation, but only in association with other persons. Hence it is not possible to conceive of personality in God apart from an association of equal persons in Him.¹⁴

Further evidence of the Trinity can be seen in the use of the plural form of “God” (Heb. *elohim*) in passages such as Genesis 1:26; 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8. Although most interpret these instances as *plurals of majesty*, G. A. F. Knight has argued that this is a modern imposition on the text, since none of the kings of Israel and Judah are ever referred to in the plural. Knight suggested that such plurals should be taken in the same way as *mayim* (waters) and *shamayim* (heavens) – the plural noun represents multiple individual elements making up a single mass.¹⁵ In the same way that the ocean is comprised of multiple water droplets, so also the three persons of the Trinity constitute one God. M. J. Erickson suggests that the idea of the Trinity is analogous to the concept of a universal and its particulars. In other words, three persons make up the God-head in the same way that multiple individual humans make up humanity.¹⁶ Note, however, that while the persons of Trinity can be distinguished numerically as persons, they are indistinguishable and inseparable in their essence, substance and being.¹⁷ God is not composite, nor is He divisible in any sense.¹⁸

Modalists,¹⁹ on the other hand, hold that although there is one God, He has various names, roles, or activities. The names do not imply any real distinctions, but are merely used in different situations and at different times.²⁰ However, the scriptures which describe all three persons manifesting themselves together (e.g. the baptism of Jesus, Matthew 3:16-17) present a major problem for this view. Indeed, when God acts, all three persons are involved in some

¹¹ Erickson, 361.

¹² *Ibid*, 347.

¹³ As Tozer (36) points out, during His life on Earth, Jesus veiled His deity – He did not void it.

¹⁴ Berkhof, 85.

¹⁵ See Erickson, 353-354.

¹⁶ Erickson, 361.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 362.

¹⁸ Berkhof, 62.

¹⁹ Eg. Noetus of Smyrna and Sabellius.

²⁰ See Erickson, 360.

way.²¹ See for example the creation (Genesis 1:1-2; Colossians 1:16), incarnation (Luke 1:35), Christ's baptism (Matthew 3:16-17), atonement (Hebrews 9:14), resurrection (Acts 2:32, John 10:17-18, Romans 1:4) and salvation (1 Peter 1:2).

In the final analysis, the concept of the Trinity is not a real contradiction, but an apparent one. A contradiction only exists if something is A and not A at the same time. The way in which God is three is different from the way in which God is one. Indeed, the council of Constantinople believed that there is three *hypostases* (persons) in one *ousia* (substance). As Tozer writes: "The fact that it cannot be satisfactorily explained, instead of being against it, is in its favour. Such a truth had to be revealed; no one could have imagined it."²²

5. Immanent and Transcendent

Erickson defines immanence as "God's presence and activity within nature, human nature and history."²³ The Spirit of God lives among us (Haggai 2:5; John 14-16; Matthew 28:18-20), and, as Job 34:14-15 indicates, mankind would perish if God withdrew His Spirit and breath.²⁴ Note also the role of Christ in the creation and maintenance of the universe (Colossians 1:17). In fact, God fills the universe (Jeremiah 23:24). Furthermore, God desires that we seek Him and reach out to Him since He is not far away (Acts 17:27-28). Indeed, "For in him we live and move and have our being."

Immanence does not necessarily imply that God achieves His purpose directly – He may use natural means as well as miracles, and He may even use non-Christians.²⁵

Transcendence, on the other hand, implies that "God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity."²⁶ God is "exalted far above"²⁷ the created universe, so far above that human thought cannot imagine it." God is as high above an archangel as He is above a caterpillar. In effect, the gulf between God and Man is infinite.²⁸

The great disparity between God and Man due to God's transcendence extends to His thoughts and His ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), His holiness and purity (Isaiah 6:1-5; 57:15) and His metaphysical nature (Psalm 113:5-6). Indeed, He is external to all of His creation, including time.

In addition, God transcends all moral notions since ultimately He is the final cause of morality. Indeed, goodness, truth and value are not decided by human opinion, but by the character of God.²⁹

²¹ Tozer, 37.

²² Ibid, 38.

²³ Erickson, 329.

²⁴ See also Psalm 104:29-30.

²⁵ Erickson, 337.

²⁶ Ibid, 338.

²⁷ Not in a spatial sense, but rather, as a reference to life.

²⁸ Tozer, 94-96.

²⁹ Erickson, 343.

6. *Finite and Infinite*

Erickson contends that God is unlimitable: “The infinity of God...speaks of a limitless being.”³⁰ But in what respect is God infinite or unlimited? Tozer considers God’s infinitude to be the most difficult concept to grasp,³¹ but defines it as God knowing no bounds – whatever.³² Similarly, L. Berkhof understands it as freedom from all limitations.³³

However, a God who is infinite in every respect cannot be described. Indeed, such a God would have no “definite” attributes and characteristics which could be described. Therefore, it seems that God is only infinite in regard to the extent of His finite attributes – He is not infinite in regard to His nature or personality. God is specific and He has definition – He is not everything. Thus, God’s understanding is immeasurable (Psalm 147:5), and He is infinitely loving, infinitely good, infinitely merciful, infinitely gracious, infinitely patient etc.

7. *Immutable*

God does not change. Indeed, as Tozer correctly points out, the concept of a growing or evolving God is not found in the scriptures.³⁴

Note, however, that immutability does not necessarily imply that God is sterile or static, but rather, that He is stable. Erickson writes:

He is active and dynamic, but in a way that is stable and consistent with his nature. What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfil his commitments. The believer can rely on that (Lam 3:22-23; 1 John 1:9).³⁵

Note also that both God’s perfection and the fact that He stands outside of time, make it logically impossible for Him to change. A perfect God can never improve or decline, and without time there can be no change in His state.

Thus, not only does God’s knowledge and plans (Psalm 33:11), moral principles and will (Psalm 102:26-28), not change,³⁶ neither does He have mood swings, nor do His affections and enthusiasm fade in intensity (James 1:17), nor does His abhorrence of sin change (Malachi 3:1-6).³⁷ Although there may be changes around Him and changes in His relationships, God does not change in His Being.³⁸

But what about passages indicating God repenting (Genesis 6:6)? Erickson argues that they are anthropomorphisms or anthroposophisms. That is, they are descriptions of God’s thoughts and actions in human terms and from human perspective.³⁹

³⁰ Ibid, 298-299.

³¹ Tozer, 63.

³² Ibid, 64.

³³ Berkhof, 59.

³⁴ Tozer, 69.

³⁵ Erickson, 305.

³⁶ Berkhof, 58.

³⁷ Tozer, 75.

³⁸ Berkhof, 59.

³⁹ Erickson, 304.

8. *Omnipresent*

The term “omnipresence” is borrowed from Latin. It is a compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *praesens*, meaning “here.” Thus, God is always here, close to everything, next to everyone.⁴⁰ This means that God is unlimited with respect to space. As Wayne Grudem puts it, “God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.”⁴¹

A. W. Tozer posits that fewer truths are so clearly taught in scripture.⁴² Indeed, the scriptures teach that even though the highest heavens cannot contain God (1 Kings 8:27), He is still nearby when we pray, unlike other Gods, which don’t even exist (Deuteronomy 4:7). Yet, God is not just nearby, He is in fact everywhere! He fills heaven and earth and no-one can hide from Him. There are no secret places where He is excluded (Jeremiah 23:23-24). The Psalmist summarises this truth beautifully:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (Psalm 139:7-10, NIV).

9. *Omniscient*

Again, the term “omniscience” is borrowed from Latin. It is also a compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *scientia*, meaning “knowledge.” Grudem explains it in this way: “God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and external act.”⁴³ Or, as Tozer describes it, God knows “every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn.”⁴⁴ In other words, God is infinite in regard to knowledge. He knows Himself and all other things perfectly (Job 37:16), whether they be actual or merely possible, throughout all of time (Isaiah 46:10; 1 John 3:20b). He knows things immediately, simultaneously, exhaustively and truly.⁴⁵ Since God knows all things perfectly, He knows nothing better than any other thing.⁴⁶ Tozer adds that God knows instantly and effectively

all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven and hell.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Tozer, 100.

⁴¹ W. A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994) 173.

⁴² Tozer, 100.

⁴³ Grudem, 190.

⁴⁴ Tozer, 77-78.

⁴⁵ Thiessen, 81.

⁴⁶ Tozer, 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

10. Omnipotent

As with the other *omni* terms, “omnipotence” is a Latin compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *potens*, meaning “power.” Grudem defines it in this way: “God’s omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will.”⁴⁸

Omnipotence implies the possession of all power, and unlimited power. An omniscient God can do anything He pleases (Job 42:2) and is never exhausted. His power is unlimited in regard to both its extent and its magnitude. What is impossible for man *is* possible for God (Matthew 19:26). Nothing is too hard for Him (Jeremiah 32:17). Furthermore, anything can be done as easily as anything else, and all acts are done effortlessly.⁴⁹

Note also that the possession of omnipotence does not demand its exercise: “God can do what he wills to do, but he does not necessarily will to do anything.” In other words, God has power over His power.⁵⁰

III. THE MORAL ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

1. Holy and Righteous

Holiness and righteousness are basic and central characteristics of the God of the Bible. Indeed, Erickson writes: “God’s perfection is the standard for our moral character and the motivation for religious practice. The whole moral code follows from his holiness”⁵¹ (cf. Leviticus 11:44-45; 1 Peter 1:16).

There are, in fact, two aspects to God’s holiness.⁵² The first relates to God’s uniqueness, in that He is separate from all creation. This is clearly indicated by the Hebrew word for “holy,” *qadash*, refers to something that has been “withheld from ordinary use” and “treated with special care.”⁵³ The second aspect of God’s holiness is His absolute moral purity: He is untouched and unstained by any form of evil (Hebrews 1:13; James 1:13; Leviticus 11:44-45).

Holiness is emphasised throughout the Bible. For example, God’s holiness is manifested in His moral law, His speaking to a person’s conscience, and the ceremonial law given to Moses.⁵⁴

God’s righteousness, on the other hand, relates to His just application of His law. Erickson defines it as “God’s holiness applied to his relationships to other beings.”⁵⁵ God delights in righteousness (Jeremiah 9:24), and He only does, and only commands others to do, what is right according to his own law (Genesis 18:25).

⁴⁸ Grudem, 216.

⁴⁹ Tozer, 92.

⁵⁰ Thiessen, 82.

⁵¹ Erickson, 312.

⁵² *Ibid*, 311.

⁵³ W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971).

⁵⁴ Berkhof, 74.

⁵⁵ Erickson, 313.

2. *Just*

Justice is “giving every man his due, in treating him according to his deserts.” The inherent righteousness of God is the ultimate basis upon which His justice manifests itself.⁵⁶ In other words, God respects each individual’s choices, and rewards them in accordance with their choices and actions, and no favouritism or partiality is shown.

God’s application of justice also involves vengeance (Psalm 94:1-3), and acting in a “fair” way and doing what is inherently right (Genesis 18:25)

Note also, that justice is part of God’s nature – it is not a standard that exists outside of God to which He must conform⁵⁷ (Psalm 97:2) .

3. *Truthful and Faithful*

God is also truthful and faithful. Berkhof defines truthfulness as “that perfection of His Being by virtue of which He fully answers to the idea of the Godhead, is perfectly reliable in His revelation, and sees things as they really are.”⁵⁸ Indeed, Jesus Himself is the truth (John 14:6; 1 John 5:20), and so are the very words of God (John 17:17).

Because God is truthful, He cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), and therefore everything He says is absolutely true.

Faithfulness, on the other hand, implies that God keeps His promises. Again, the faithfulness of God is testified to throughout scripture (Deuteronomy 7:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:18-22; 2 Timothy 2:13).

Note that faithfulness follows logically from immutability, because if God does not change then He cannot be unfaithful, since that would imply that God has, in some way, changed.⁵⁹

4. *Loving*

In 1 John 4:8-10, John makes it clear that love comes from and originates with God. In addition, he states that “God *is* love,” and thus indicates that love is an essential and central attribute of God. Indeed, if a person does not demonstrate *true* love they do not truly know God. Furthermore, John adds that Christ’s sacrifice epitomises the greatness and intensity of God’s love (cf. John 3:16), and the apostle Paul concurs (Romans 5:6-8).

Love is not just a woolly feeling or emotional state, but rather, results in practical action:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

⁵⁶ Berkhof, 75.

⁵⁷ Tozer, 116.

⁵⁸ Berkhof, 69.

⁵⁹ Tozer, 106.

5. *Merciful and Gracious*

Mercy and grace are closely related concepts. Berkhof understands mercy as “the unmerited goodness or love of God to those who have forfeited it, and are by nature under a sentence of condemnation” and “the goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their deserts.”⁶⁰ In other words, God withholds the judgement and condemnation we actually deserve. Erickson expresses it in this way: “God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity.”⁶¹ In other words, God performs undeserved favours for His people.

God’s mercy is not a temporary thing or mood, but an attribute of God’s Being. God has always been gracious and merciful – as shown throughout the Old Testament⁶² (cf. Luke 1:50).

Grace, on the other hand, involves God imputing merit “where none previously existed and declares no debt to be where one had been before...Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving.”⁶³ Indeed, grace is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8) which has been “lavished” upon us (Ephesians 1:7-8), and brings us salvation (Titus 2:11). Paul’s words to Titus nicely summarise the state of affairs:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

IV. CONCLUSION

Our God is truly an awesome God (Deuteronomy 7:21; Daniel 9:4). He can never be fully understood, and He is certainly not limited to our understanding of Him.⁶⁴

The essential nature and character of God is summarised succinctly by God Himself in Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

Indeed, when we look closely at God’s revelation of Himself and contemplate His greatness and awesomeness, we can only do as Moses did (Exodus 34:8).

⁶⁰ Berkhof, 71-72.

⁶¹ Erickson, 320-321.

⁶² Tozer, 121, 127.

⁶³ Ibid, 124.

⁶⁴ Erickson, 344.