

# Who God Is

By Todd Pruitt

*God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.*

*- The Westminster Shorter Catechism*

There are no more important questions than “Who is God and what is He like?” These are the “soulish” questions; the great questions. The soul cries out for the Who and Why of his existence. Science deals with the How questions. How does gravity work? How is DNA encoded? Those are important questions and we are thankful for the ones who help us find the answers. But however interesting and helpful scientific discoveries can be they cannot substitute for answers to the deeper questions. Our problem is that sin has left us unwilling to pursue the God who made us for Himself (Rom 1:18ff). In the fifth century Augustine observed, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” In his book Bridge Building Alister McGrath writes:

Augustine captured the idea perfectly when he spoke of a ‘loving memory’ of God. It is a *memory* of God, in that it is grounded in the doctrines of creation and redemption, which affirm that we have partially *lost* something through sin – and are somehow made aware of that loss through God’s grace. It is a *loving* memory, in that it is experienced as a sense of divine nostalgia, of spiritual wistfulness. There is a thirst to have more of that which we already have only in part (p. 21).

There is not room to say all that could be said about God. Neither is there enough time in this life to know all there is to know about God. But this is not to say that God is hopelessly shrouded in mystery. Indeed, God has made a great deal known about Himself through the Scriptures and the revelation of His Son. What is more, God enthusiastically calls us to know Him as the highest expression of a life of faith (Jeremiah 24:7; Hebrews 8:8-12), as the true nature of eternal life (John 17:3), as life’s highest achievement (Philippians 3:8-11), and as the only ground for boasting (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

God has revealed much about Himself in creation. However, the most essential knowledge of God had to be revealed by use of words. God’s special, that is, redemptive revelation began with knowledge of His name. In Western culture names are little more than labels. However, in Scripture, names serve to give us information about the person named. Indeed, in the Bible, names were connected to existence. This explains why Israel was so blessed to know the name of God and why the Psalms so often exult in that name.

The name God revealed to Moses, the name Israel knew as most precious and holy was *Yahweh* which is a Hebrew idiom meaning *I am who I am* or *I will be who I will be*. It denotes self-existence, self-determination, and self-sufficiency – qualities God alone can truly claim. God also calls Himself simply, yet profoundly, “The Lord” (*Elohim*). In establishing His covenant with the people of Israel Yahweh said of Himself, “the Lord,

whose name is Jealous” (Exodus 34:14). God insists on sole allegiance from His people. God gives to His people various other names by which to address Him; each one revealing something essential about His nature. But in each case it is God who is defining Himself to us and not the other way around.

There are certain truths that are essential to our understanding of God as He reveals Himself to us in Scripture: *He is one, He is Trinity, He is perfect, He is holy, and He is good* in all He is and all He does.

### **God is One**

The *shema*, the very first confession of faith given to the people of God affirms His unity or oneness: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). This simple confession immediately set the people of God apart from the other nations, most of whom worshiped a plurality of gods (polytheism). In stark contrast, the God of Israel claimed supremacy over all things, not just a mountain or a river or the sun. God is not divided and His unified rule extends over all creation of which He is the sole Creator. But not only does God’s unity affirm His sole supremacy, it also affirms His singleness of essence. He is the only being in the universe that is truly self-sufficient, worthy of worship, and creator and judge of all there is.

### **God is Trinity**

The biblical revelation of God as Trinity in no way contradicts its revelation of His unity. Confessing that Jesus is Lord or honoring the Holy Spirit is not to affirm a plurality of gods but is, rather, a submission to the biblical revelation that God is one in essence and yet three in person. This is not a contradiction for God does not contradict Himself. Is it “knowledge to wonderful for me”? Perhaps, for what human mind can fully comprehend the nature of the eternal God? Yet, the Bible does bring clarity to the doctrine of the Trinity. Scripture teaches that God is one. Yet God is also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity explains how this can be true.

Throughout history the doctrine of the Trinity has been attacked or distorted by heretics. *Modalism* is the heresy that God does not eternally exist as three persons but is revealed down through the ages in three different modes: first as Father, then as Son, and finally as Holy Spirit. Another heresy promoted by Arius in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century denied the deity of Christ and promoted the idea that the Son was merely an emanation from the Father. The problem with these and other heresies of course is that Scripture clearly teaches the perpetuity of each person of the Trinity.

In Genesis 1:26 God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* own image.” This was not a conversation between God and the angels because man is not made in the image of angels. It can only be a reference to an inter-Trinitarian conversation between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Other passages that suggest this same plurality are Genesis 11:7 (“Come, let *us* go down, and there confuse their language”) and Isaiah 6:8 (“Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?”). There are also instances of the New Testament writers quoting Old Testament references to God and applying them to Jesus. For instance Hebrews 1:8 refers to Jesus when quoting Psalm 45:6 (“Your throne, O God, is for ever

and ever”). Then there is the case of *Elohim*, one of God’s chosen names. It is often translated “Lord.” What is peculiar about the word *Elohim* however is that it is a plural noun used to reference a single God.

In the account of Jesus’ baptism we see all three persons of the Trinity functioning at once: the Son is present in human flesh, the Father speaks from heaven in affirmation of the Son, and the Spirit descends upon the Son (Mark 1:9-11). In addition, Jesus prescribed that believers ought to be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Interestingly, Jesus uses “name,” a singular noun, to describe three persons.

The Trinity has often been explained by comparisons to inanimate objects like the leaves of a three leaf clover or the three parts of an egg (shell, white, yolk). But these are unhelpful at best. God’s Trinitarian nature is more properly understood relationally. He exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; eternally distinct yet one. God is the flawless expression of what we can only hint at in our relationships: perfect self-giving love and uninterrupted unity.

#### *God The Father (Matt 6:8ff; 7:21; Gal 1:1)*

The writers of Scripture use the word “God” at times to refer to the Trinity as a whole and at other times to refer to God the Father specifically. The Father is not simply the precursor to the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is a distinct person in the Trinitarian Godhead. Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus relating to, and in close communion with His Father. It is impossible to believe, based upon the gospel accounts alone, that the Father is simply another mode of God later to be replaced by the mode of God the Son. The gospels, indeed the entire New Testament, give clear and univocal support to the truth that the Father and the Son are the same in nature and essence but distinct in personhood. The Father seems to be the willful person of the Godhead. Jesus said that He came to do the will of the Father (John. 6:38). When Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane He ultimately abandoned Himself to the Father’s will (Matt. 26:39).

#### *God The Son (Jn 1:1-18; Rom 9:5; Col 2:9 Heb 1:8-10)*

Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He did not become God, nor is He a creation of or emanation from God. Jesus did not begin life as an ordinary man who was later “adopted” by God because of His exemplary life. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John1:1). Through the miracles of incarnation and virgin birth, the eternal Son took on flesh, literally becoming a man, without sacrificing His Godhood.

Yet, Jesus maintained a distinction between Himself and the Father. He prayed to the Father, He worshiped the Father, He submitted to the Father’s will all the while claiming unity and equality with the Father. He makes exclusive claims to deity by exercising rights reserved for God alone such as forgiving sins (John 14:6, Mark 2:5-7). Indeed, Jesus was accused of blasphemy for claiming to be God (John 5:18). He said, “If you have seen me you have seen the Father” (John 14:9), and “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

As the God-man Jesus is understood to have three “offices”: Prophet, Priest, and King. Jesus the Prophet declares the words of God to His people just as the prophets had done before Him. But Jesus the prophet functioned in a way his predecessors could not. He was the very Word of God made flesh. He declared the terrifying law of God bringing sinners to despair. What is more, Jesus declared in word and deed God’s great gospel of free grace to all who would believe.

As our great High Priest Jesus is the complete and perfect mediator between God and man (I Tim 2:5). The priest was one who would make peace between Holy God and His sinful people through the divinely instituted sacrificial system. Jesus is the ultimate peace maker between God and His people (Heb 7:25). The law which He proclaimed He would also obey perfectly on behalf of those who believe. His priestly role was most masterfully displayed through his atoning death on the cross in the place of sinners (Heb 9:26). Christ continues to act as our great High Priest by faithfully interceding for all the saints of God (Heb 7:25).

In His third office as eternal King, Jesus reigns from His throne at the Father’s right hand. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that Christ executes his office as King by, “subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.” In His first coming Jesus came to us as a baby. He was the sacrificial Lamb of God who would die for sinners. In His second coming Jesus will one day return to earth to judge the enemies of God and receive His own. “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:16).

*God The Holy Spirit (Mk 3:29; Jn 15:26; I Cor 6:19ff; II Cor 3:17ff)*

Following Jesus’ resurrection He announced to the disciples that He would be leaving them to return to His Father. But Jesus assuaged the disciple’s anxiety over the possibility of losing Him by promising to send them another “comforter” (John 14:16-17; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). The word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit is *Paraclete* which can mean counselor, comforter, advocate, and helper. Bolstering the doctrine of the Trinity, “Paraclete” is clearly referencing a person, not an impersonal force or nameless power sent out from God. The Holy Spirit is a person whom Jesus is sending as a comforter, counselor, ally, and gift-giver for God’s people. Also supporting the truth that the Holy Spirit is a person of the God-head and not simply a force are the passages that warn against lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4) and grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30). How does one lie to or grieve an impersonal force?

We cannot know God apart from his Trinitarian nature. He is the Father who creates, the Son who redeems at his Father’s behest, and the Spirit sent by the Son to form and fill the church. However, even though there seem to be times when the persons of the Godhead function in unique ways, Scripture also shows us that there is perfect sharing of function, authority, and honor within the Trinity. God in three persons accomplishes our salvation and shapes our spirituality. There is simply no Christianity without the Trinity.

## God is Perfect

God has made Himself knowable by revealing to us certain of His attributes or perfections through His perfect Word. God's attributes can be divided into two broad categories: communicable and incommunicable. God's communicable attributes are those that can be reflected (although imperfectly) in the lives of His people. On the other hand, the incommunicable attributes are those that only God can possess. They are unique to His "Godness."

Many attempts have been made to compile a comprehensive list of God's attributes based upon the revelation of Scripture. In the end, that may not be entirely possible. However, there are certain attributes of God that Scripture makes plain:

### *God's Incommunicable Attributes*

- Independence – God is entirely self-sufficient. He needs nothing outside of Himself.
- Unchangeableness – God does not "grow" or improve as other living beings.
- Timelessness – God is eternal. He is not bound by time.
- Gracious – God saves His people wholly by His own initiative and unmerited favor.
- Omnipresence – God is not bound by spatial dimensions. He is always present everywhere.
- Omniscience – God has perfect knowledge of all that was, is, and all that will come to pass.
- Omnipotence – God's power is limitless but qualified by his other attributes.
- Sovereignty – God rules over all creation.

### *God's Communicable Attributes*

- Spiritual – God's being is perfect and not bound by physical frailties and constraints.
- Holy – God is entirely separate from all that is sinful.
- Wise – God always knows and chooses what is best.
- Faithful – God always does what He says.
- Truthful – God never lies and everything He says is the final standard for truth.
- Merciful – God is kind and often turns away from His righteous anger.
- Love – God gives Himself fully for the good of others.
- Good – God is the ultimate standard of goodness and all He does is worthy of approval.
- Just – God is the standard of what is right and always does what is right.
- Wrath – God's wrath is the justifiable response of His holiness toward man's sin.
- Will – God possesses the power of volition and whatever He determines will come to pass.
- Beauty – God is the ultimate expression of all that is desirable and good.

It is vital in our understanding of God to know that all His perfections exist in indivisible unity that is, God cannot be divided up by want of our own preferences. For instance, when someone says, "My God wouldn't send anyone to hell because my God is a God of love," they are seeking to separate the love of God from His other perfections like justice and holiness. Their god is nothing more than an idol of their own making. What results from this idolatry is a largely sentimental rather than a biblical understanding of God. But God is indivisible. His love cannot be fully grasped without any reference to His other perfections.

One effect that comes from trying to divide God along the lines of His attributes is a disastrous misunderstanding of the atonement. The cross must be seen as an equal expression of God's love and justice. If, through the cross, God is all love and no justice

then Christ has not been a propitiation for us and our sin has not truly been dealt with. If, on the other hand, the cross is all justice and no love then God would have killed sinners instead of His Son. The only thing that preserves the cross as both the necessary judgment of sin and the lavish expression of love is the unity of all God's perfections, specifically His love and justice.

### **God is Holy**

"The Lord our God is holy!" (Ps 99:9). Holiness occupies a special place among the attributes of God. It means that He is entirely separate from all that is sinful and impure. God's holiness made the atonement necessary because "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). There is a close connection between God's holiness and his glory. His moral perfections and complete "otherness" demand to be honored and announced throughout creation. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3).

God's holiness inspires fear and trembling on the part of man. When Moses glimpsed the glory of God in the burning bush he was commanded to remove his shoes because the ground upon which he was standing was holy (Ex 3:5). Consider Isaiah when he saw God high and lifted up in the temple. When the angels began to sing "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts" Isaiah decried his own lost-ness and moral bankruptcy. It is unavoidable. There is no place for our sin and guilt to hide in the burning light of God's holiness.

Holiness is included among God's communicable attributes because he means to produce holiness in his people. We will not be holy in the same sense that God is. God's holiness is a part of his eternal character. On the other hand, our holiness comes to us from outside ourselves. This is what happens in sanctification. It is when God daily makes his people more holy through means such as Scripture, Christ's compelling love, the Holy Spirit's conviction, prayer, Christian fellowship, and Fatherly discipline.

### **God is Good**

"O give thanks to the Lord for he is good" (Ps 106:1). Goodness is special among God's attributes for the same reason holiness is special. That is, God's goodness casts a shadow across all his other attributes. So, in His sovereignty, wisdom, omnipotence, and justice God is always good. Even in His wrath God's goodness is unimpeachable. It is not uncommon, however, to question the goodness of God. In fact, in man's wranglings over the question of why bad things happen, it is either God's power or His goodness that is held in question. But man is not the ultimate standard for what is good. Indeed, the Bible makes clear pronouncements concerning the goodness of man. Jesus said, "No one is good but God alone" (Luke 18:19).

Only God is truly, perfectly good. Therefore, only God is able to be the unerring standard for what qualifies as good. Likewise, all that God does is good. "Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). We are promised that God will not withhold what is good from "those who walk uprightly" (Ps 84:11). Jesus teaches that our heavenly Father will give "good things to

those who ask him” (Matt 7:11). Even when God disciplines his children he is doing good to them (Heb 12:10).

Wayne Grudem writes that God’s goodness means that all he does is worthy of approval (Bible Doctrine, 90). I find this to be a very helpful qualification. One day we will do much more than give begrudging assent to God’s goodness. We will wholeheartedly approve of all that he did. In the end, there will be no question that God is truly good and that he has not withheld what is good from the upright (Ps 84:11).

**\* *On Glorifying God...***

Glory has been called “deity in manifestation” (J.I. Packer). Glory is the effusive excellence of God made visible. God makes his glory known throughout all that he has made. The angels sang in the hearing of the prophet, “The whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3). Glory is essential to the nature of God and cannot be separated from him any more than light can be separated from the sun. The great Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, “God’s very life lies in His glory. This glory can receive no addition, because it is infinite; it is that which God is most tender of, and which He will not part with” (A Body of Divinity, 6).

God is jealous for His glory. He said through the prophet, “My glory I will not share with another” (Isa 48:11). God does share abundant blessings with his children. He gives us myriad sources of beauty to enjoy. He blesses us with other people to be loved by and to love. God shares gifts with His people for the building up of the church. He shares His love. He even shares His power. What God will not share, indeed what He must not share, is His glory.

The theologians of the Westminster Assembly (17<sup>th</sup> c) had it right when they began the Shorter Catechism with this question:

*Q: What is man’s chief end?*

*A: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.*

This idea is heresy to man’s religion of self-preoccupation. The kind of god that man naturally prefers is one who will make much of man. A God who glories in Himself and calls upon all He has made to give Him glory is simply not deemed worthy of worship by sinful man.

However, all that God does he does for his glory. He created the earth and all that is in it for his glory. He set man and woman in the garden and permitted them to sin for his glory. God brings blessing and calamity for his glory. Every time we ask God “Why?” we can be sure that the ultimate answer is “For My own glory child.” When God gives us pleasant circumstances it is so we might praise Him. When God sets us on the path of heart break it is so that we might praise Him as we discover that he is better by far than his blessings.