

B Y T . A L L A N T U R N E R

Ode To  
“THE  
UNKNOWN  
GOD”

*An examination of modern-day idolatry*

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## An Introduction

"You are My witnesses," says the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, And besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, And there was no foreign god among you; Therefore you are My witnesses," Says the LORD, "that I am God. Indeed before the day was, I am He; And there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?" (Isaiah 43:10-13, NKJV)

Some years ago I had a written debate with a very capable brother on the subject of God's foreknowledge. During this discussion, my opponent used several human analogies in an effort to prove God could not know the future, contingent, free will choices of His creatures. They were the "master of chess" God and "God as novelist or playwright." In his master of chess analogy, his point was: "God does not need foreknowlwdge of the contingent free will choices and actions of men in order to bring His purpose to pass." He argued that "a master of chess would not need foreknowledge of a novice's moves in order to decisively defeat him." He then applied this analogy to God by arguing, "So it is with God and men." When using the God as novelist or playwright analogy, his point was that if God already knew the future, then it would have to be because He had already written it.

I pointed out to my opponent that the problem with all such analogies is the inherent assumption, even when one is unconscious of it, that God is just a man of larger proportions — something the Bible categorically denies (cf. Numbers 23:19 and Romans 11:33). My objection to such reasoning was twofold: (1) the obvious effort to make God in the image of man, something Romans 1:23 clearly identifies as idolatry; and (2) God's foreknowledge cannot be legitimately compared with man's writing of a novel or play because God's foreknowledge, contrary to that of the the novelist/playwright, need not be any more manipulative than omnipotence, an attribute my opponent readily admitted God could use to carry out His will without stomping all over the free moral agency of His creatures.

However, and this was a point that greatly offended my opponent, there is, in reality, little

difference between the theologian's constructs (viz., God as a novelist or playwright analogies) and the pagan's idols — they are all substitutes of God. Further, when one insists on playing around on the slippery slopes of higher anthropomorphism he ought not to be so surprised when he falls victim of his own dubious assumptions. To this line of reasoning, my opponent said: "I am accused of an 'obvious effort to make God in the image of man,' and, therefore, of idolatry. This is a mighty serious charge to bring against a brother." I think I can understand how he must have felt, but I was obligated to show that ideas do, in fact, have consequences (cf. Proverbs 23:7). At issue was not whether I had made a serious charge against a brother, but whether the charge was true. Now, like then, I do not believe this brother knowingly involved himself in idolatry. However, he engaged in it when he superimposed man's imperfections and inabilities onto God. This, after all, is what idolatry is.

I refer to this incident not because I wish to embarrass or be unkind to my opponent in that debate, but because I think it serves to illustrate a weakness we Christians have when it comes to the subject of idolatry. It seems we have a tendency to think idolatry is something that only affects heathens. However, the tendency to idolatry is as prevalent today as it ever was. The Bible makes it clear that idols are not just concrete images found on pagan altars, but they can exist as false concepts in the hearts and minds of well-educated moderns, as well.

In the New Testament, the apostle John warned Christians to keep themselves from idols (cf. 1 John 5:21). The apostle Paul wrote that Christians are to flee idolatry (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:14). Are these warnings to all Christians throughout all time, or are they, as some claim,

just warnings to Gentile Christians who were surrounded by pagan idolatry? Well, doesn't the Bible teach that all Christians are susceptible to covetousness? It certainly does. And doesn't this same Bible clearly teach that covetousness is, in fact, idolatry (cf. Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5)? If so, then the Bible teaches that idolatry can affect modern "civilized" Christians, just as it did the ancients, and that we moderns must continue to be careful not to become entangled in its snare.

The true and living God, the One who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, is a jealous God. As such, He demands that we have no other gods before Him (cf. Exodus 20:1-2). Therefore, when we study Jehovah's revelation of Himself in the Bible, we must work very hard not to misunderstand what He says. If we do misunderstand — or worse yet, misrepresent — Him in any way, we could easily be entangled in idolatry. For example, I have heard people say, "The God I worship could never send anyone to hell for an eternity." They go on to say that their God is a God of love, not wrath; mercy, not vengeance. I believe most Christians will recognize the idolatrous nature of such thinking, for it is clear that people who talk like this have created a god (i.e., a theological construct or idol) who is much different from the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. Consequently, all Christians, especially gospel preachers, must be very careful to understand correctly, and teach accurately, the magnificent attributes and character-

istics of the Almighty God, Jehovah Elohim. When a preacher says that it is impossible for God to foreknow the future — unless He has acted to cause it to happen — because it hasn't happened yet, he is portraying, even though unintentionally, a god quite different from the One who has identified Himself in the Bible. And as I pointed out in the aforementioned debate, this is nothing less than idolatry.

The fact that my opponent in that debate thought my mentioning of idolatry to be too harsh in a discussion between Christians is, I am convinced, indicative of a general misunderstanding of the far-reaching significance of idolatry. Idolatry is not just something that pagans engage in; it is something Christians can, and do, participate in as well. Therefore, an examination of idolatry — *what* it is and *how* it affects us — is a study that can be extremely helpful. Our plan for doing so is as follows:

- First, we'll take a little closer look at the one true God who has revealed Himself in the Bible.
- Then, we'll examine idolatry itself.
- Finally, we'll consider some of the idols we moderns have constructed for ourselves.

The study will be challenging, even taxing, but when we're through, I think you'll agree with me it was worth the effort.

## God With A Capital "G"

"You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3)

**W**hen I mention God with a capital "G," I'm referring to that one state of being God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4), consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — a state that is like no other: self-existent, eternal, infinite, and immutable. A proper understanding of this God is absolutely necessary. In fact, salvation and true worship are not possible without the proper knowledge of *who* and *what* God is. I know this is true because when Jesus prayed for His disciples, He said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). In other words, one's eternal destiny depends upon knowing God, the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ. This means that the study of God and Christ cannot be ignored by those who want to go to heaven. In addition, other passages inform us that the Holy Spirit is to be included in this intimate, knowledgeable relationship (cf. Acts 5:32). Consequently, it should not seem strange that upon a confession of one's faith in Christ Jesus, a penitent believer is baptized into a relationship with the entire Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 28:19). All who enter into this relationship are said to "Know the Lord,...from the least to the greatest" (Hebrews 8:11). And finally, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire," He will be "taking vengeance on those who do not know God" (2 Thessalonians 1:7,8).

True worship, which is the only kind that is pleasing to God, must be in both spirit and in truth (cf. John 4:24). This means that true worship must not just be with the right attitude or spirit, but it must be intelligent and knowledgeable as well. For example, although there were many reasons why the Samaritan woman's worship was not acceptable to God, the primary reason was stated by Jesus, when He said, "You worship that which you do not know" (John 4:22). In the same manner, the Athenians vainly worshipped at the altar "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." The Bible makes it clear that this kind of worship is unacceptable because it is "worship without knowing" (Acts 17:23b).

It is sad that modern society knows very little about the one true God. According to Langdon Gilkey, in his book, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, the prevailing picture of God, among those in our culture who still believe in Him, is that of "a large, powerful, kindly elder statesman who treats us much as a doting grandfather might do, with occasional moods of needed judgment but with a balance of indulgence" (p. 81). Add to this the fact that many Christians, reflecting the ignorance of God so prevalent in our day, are, like the ancient Athenians, attempting to worship an "UNKNOWN GOD," and you have the potential for a major apostasy brewing in our midst.

If what I am reading in the religious papers can be trusted, and if preachers and elders I have spoken with have a sense of what is happening in their midst, then too few Christians today study their Bibles on a daily basis. It would be my guess that fewer still have ever engaged in a private study of the nature and person of God. If this is true, then many Christians know very little about God's attributes and characteristics. Such ignorance is, according to an inspired apostle, a "shame" (1 Corinthians 15:34). Just as a lack of knowledge about God made the Corinthians susceptible to false teaching about the resurrection, many Christians today, knowing little about the nature of God, are vulnerable to vain philosophy and empty deceit (cf. Colossians 2:8).

Having, therefore, placed this study in its proper perspective, it is now time to turn our attention to a study of God the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of the world.

### God Is...

The Psalmist said, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1), and the apostle Paul declared, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

With these scriptures in mind, it is interesting to note that, down through the ages, men

who were not even associated with the Bible have looked at God's magnificent creation and have understood there must be a Creator. This realization is called "the teleological argument for God," and is the argument from design, inferring an intelligent designer of the universe, just like one infers that a product (viz., a watch) has a producer (viz., a watchmaker). If someone were to show us a watch, telling us that no one made it, but that it was the result of an explosion that had taken place accidentally in a scrap metal factory, we would think that person was either "pulling our leg" or mighty foolish. Why, then, should it be any different when we think about the greatest product ever created? In fact, the Bible says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

According to Plato, one of the things that makes one believe in the Creator is the argument "from the order of the motion of the stars, and of all things under the dominion of the mind that ordered the universe" (Plato, *Laws*). According to him, there had to be a "maker and father of all." In addition, Aristotle, based upon his observation of the creation, concluded there had to be a First Unmoved Mover who is God, a living, intelligent, incorporeal, eternal, and most good being who is the source of the order in the universe (cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysica* and *On Philosophy*).

In making note of the observations of these two men, I wish to make it clear that I am not advocating their philosophies. Instead, I am simply pointing out that the greatest minds of antiquity understood the force of the teleological argument. As the Bible so plainly says, man is "without excuse" for not knowing that God is (cf. Romans 1:20).

#### ...Self-Existent

The God who has revealed Himself in nature and gradually, verse by verse, step by step, makes Himself known in His special revelation, the Bible, is a necessary being who depends on nothing else or anyone else for His existence. In fact, everything else depends on Him. This means that God, ontologically speaking (i.e. having to do with the *being* of God), is self-existent. This is the meaning of the name "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14). It derives from the Hebrew verb "to be" and means "He who is." It is this self-existence that is the primary point of difference between God and His creation. Therefore, in calling Himself "I AM," God is arguing ontologically that His being is uncaused. He is saying that He is; always has been; and always will be. In other words, God's being is not de-

rived from anything, and is not dependent upon anything; He just exists.

There are three New Testament passages that convey this same idea. In Romans 1:23, God is identified as being "incorruptible." In 1 Timothy 6:16, it is said that God "alone possesses immortality." And in John 5:26, it is taught that only God "has life in Himself." When God's self-existent nature begins to be comprehended by finite creatures, they feel the need to humble themselves before the totally independent and incorruptible I AM.

#### ...Eternal

If God is self-existent, and this is what the Bible says, then He must also be eternal. In fact, belief in the Eternal is an essential part of the Christian's faith (cf. Hebrews 11:6). And although it is true that the creature will one day put on immortality and live forever (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:53,54), this is not the immortality that God possesses. God, contrary to His creation, is immortal by nature. In other words, only God *has always* existed and *will always* exist. How can this be? How can a being have no beginning and no end? How can it be that a being always was and always will be? Because, as we have already pointed out, God *alone* is self-existent, and a logical consequence of this self-existence is eternalness.

For the creature, immortality is a gift; however, for God, immortality is the essence of His nature. As finite creatures, our minds are controlled and limited by time. Consequently, it is impossible for us to fully understand the eternalness of God's nature. So, as we stand before Him in awe, we reverently say, along with the apostle Paul: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" And surely we join with Moses in saying that the "eternal God" is our refuge, "and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

God, then, has a unique existence. In addition to being self-existent and eternal, He is not limited by anything outside of Himself.

#### ...Infinite

This kind of existence is referred to as being infinite, which means *subject to no limitation or external determination* (i.e., unbounded). But one needs to be careful with this word. As Jack Cottrell points out in his book, *God The Creator*, when referring to God as infinite, this term is not to be understood in its physical or mathematical sense, as if God were infinitely large, or as if He extended infinitely into space (p. 241).

To say that God is infinite, is to say that He is not subject to the built-in limitations of a created being.

#### ...Omnipresent

God's infinitude is to be defined by His self-existence, eternalness and omni-characteristics, which are omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The God who is eternal, and therefore not limited by time, is omnipresent, and not limited by space (cf. Psalm 139:7-10; Proverbs 15:3; Jeremiah 23:23,24). He is universally present to all of space at all times. Even so, this does not mean that He is dispersed throughout the infinite reaches of space, so that every part of space has at least a little part of God. God is not present *in* all space; He is, instead, present *to* all of space. This means that the unlimited God in His whole being is present at every point of our space. But perhaps a better way to express this is to say that all space is immediately present before God.

With this in mind, it must be understood that God's omnipresence does not prevent Him from manifesting Himself in a localized place. In fact, although His ontological being is present to all of space equally, He has, at various times, entered space at specific points and become present in it for a specific purpose. These "theophanies," as they are called, most often involved redemption. For example, the pillar of cloud bearing the glory of God that appeared before the Israelites (cf. Exodus 33:9; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10ff) is but one example of such a case. Of course, the most dramatic incident of God entering time and space was the incarnation itself (cf. John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16). Consequently, Jesus was called Immanuel, or "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). But, in entering time and space, God, in His self-existent, eternal and infinite Being, did not cease to be omnipresent. He was, in fact, still present to every point of space, holding everything together by the "word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3; cf. Colossians 1:17). In fact, it is evident that the omnipresence of "God with us" is the subject of John 3:13, which says, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of God who is in heaven." If omnipresence is not under discussion in this passage, then pray tell me what is? Remember, these words were being spoken by God Himself while enfleshed here on this earth. Another example of God interjecting Himself into time and space would be the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1-4), as well as His indwelling of the body of every Christian (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19). "Mind-boggling," you say. Yes, but such is the magnificent nature of the great I AM.

#### ...Omniscient

When one considers passages like Isaiah 46:9-10; Psalm 147:5; Romans 11:33; and 1 John 3:20, one comes to appreciate the fact that there never was a time when the self-existent, eternal and infinite God of all creation knew less or more than He does right now. God, because of who He is, never learns and never forgets. This characteristic is called omniscience. Omniscience is not anything like the knowledge man possesses. Man, by his very nature, cannot know some things. God, on the other hand, knows all things, and does so because He is "He who is" (Exodus 3:14).

Nevertheless, some are willing to argue that there are things that even an all-knowing God cannot know. These argue that the future free will acts of men and women cannot be known by God because they have not yet happened. God, according to this position, cannot know what cannot be known, and the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women cannot be known. But can this be true? What is it that the self-existent, eternal and infinite God cannot know? There is, of course, absolutely nothing that such a being could not know, for He transcends the flow of time and sees the past, present and future in a kind of eternal now.

Only a being with the infinite characteristics and attributes of God could be all-knowing. Consequently, it is omniscience that God uses to challenge those who claim to be gods, but who are, in fact, no gods (cf. Isaiah 42:8,9; 43:3-7; 44:7,8; 45:20,21; 48:3-7). Surely, praise, honor and eternal glory belong to the one and only true God, who said, "I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isaiah 46:9,10).

#### ...Omnipotent

Since God is self-existent, eternal, omnipresent and omniscient, it comes as no surprise to us that He is also omnipotent or all-powerful. In fact, if God is infinite in His relationship to time, space and knowledge, it only follows that He is omnipotent as well. In the New Testament, this truth is taught in Matthew 19:26 and Revelation 19:6. In the Old Testament, when God appeared to Abraham, He said, "I am God Almighty" (Genesis 17:1). In Jeremiah 32:27, God says: "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?" For God, of course, "nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:37). Finally, God's omnipotence is grounded in the fact of creation: "Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You" (Jeremiah 32:17).

**...Immutable**

Given the nature of God, there is no chance that He can ever be anything other than what He is. This can be inferred from His self-existent, eternal and infinite nature. His nature or essence cannot change, but is eternally the same, incorruptible (cf. Romans 1:23) and immortal (cf. 1 Timothy 6:16). In other words, He is unchangeable or immutable (cf. Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). What does this mean? It means that the Self-Existent One cannot be *not* self-existent; it means that the Eternal One cannot be *not* eternal; it means that the Infinite One cannot be *not* infinite; *et cetera*. God, ontologically speaking (i.e., by the nature of His being), cannot be anything else; if He were, He would not be God.

Included in God's unchangeable or immutable nature are His moral attributes, for His moral character is no less a part of His essence than are His power and wisdom. What this means is that God has always been, and always will be, the holy, righteous and gracious God that He is right this moment. His goodness has not been developed, and will never be altered. From everlasting to everlasting, He is the same in character, infallible and immutable (cf. Numbers 23:19).

Of course, it must be kept in mind that the immutability of God's nature does not mean that He cannot interact with His creation. In fact, the Bible teaches that the Almighty has agreed to, and does, interact with His creation in time. Such interaction is genuine and not pretended. God has agreed to be influenced by His creation. Whether or not I can explain this in view of God's immutable nature is not the point. I cannot even understand it; how, then, can I explain it? In truth, it is not my responsibility to explain it; it is, instead, my responsibility to believe, teach and defend it. If I had to be able to understand and explain everything about God, especially those things He has not chosen to reveal to me, before I could believe in Him, I and every other finite creature could have no choice but to remain in unbelief. The Aristotelian, or classical, view of God as "the Unmoved Mover," who is, in turn, unrelated to the world, impassive and unconcerned is, in my opinion, as ridiculous as it is un-Biblical. As such, it reflects idolatry, pure and simple.

As I've said, it is not possible that the essence of God could be anything other than what it *has been, is and always will be*. If this essence were to change, then God would no longer be God. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to make distinctions between God, His essence and His attributes. "I AM THAT I AM" or "He who is"

(Exodus 3:14) exists as a *self-existent* (cf. Romans 1:23; 1 Timothy 6:16; John 5:26), *eternal* (cf. Deuteronomy 33:27), *infinite* (cf. Psalm 139:7-10; Isaiah 46:9,10; Jeremiah 32:27), *immutable* (cf. Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17) *Spirit* (cf. John 4:24).

If God ceased to be any of these, He could not be God. In other words, God's essence (i.e., that which makes Him what He is) could not be anything other than what it is; and that which makes God what He is, of course, is His attributes. Therefore, it is never correct to think of God apart from His essence or attributes. Namely, God does not have an essence; He is His essence, and He does not have attributes; He is His attributes.

For example, the Bible tells us that God is love (cf. 1 John 4:8,16). It informs us that God's love is *great* (cf. Ephesians 2:4), *eternal* (cf. Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 1:4,5), *infinite* (cf. Ephesians 3:18,19) and *dependable* (cf. Romans 8:35-39).

If the theme of the Bible is man's redemption, then the central word of the Bible is love. In fact, the Bible tells us that the motivation for the scheme of redemption is God's love for His creation. How much did God love His creation? He loved it so much that He was willing to give His only begotten Son so that it could be redeemed (cf. John 3:16; 1 John 4:9). But, what kind of love would do such a thing? To understand this, we must realize that God's love for mankind is a distinctive kind of love called *agape* (pronounced ah-gah-pay). And what is *agape*? Primarily, it is good will toward others. It is deep, tender, and warm concern for the happiness and well-being of another; it is charity toward those in need.

Therefore, when the Bible says, "God loves us," it means He really cares about us and always does what is best for us. God's love is different from other kinds of love in that it seeks to give and not to get; it seeks to satisfy not some need of the lover, but rather the need of the one who is loved. This is what God is, i.e., this is His nature. Strip from Him His love and we no longer have the God who has revealed Himself to His creatures. Strip from Him His love and what remains is something similar to the gods of the pagans, which are "idols for their own destruction" (Hosea 8:4).

However, what the Bible does not say about the essence or nature of God is just as important as what it does say. For instance, although the Bible teaches that God is His attributes and characteristics, it does not teach that any particular attribute of God is God; i.e., the Bible is not saying, and has never said, that "Love is



God." On the contrary, what the Bible teaches is that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). Clearly, then, the Bible instructs us that God is His attributes and characteristics, and anyone who believes the Bible believes this. Consequently, God *is, has been, and always will be* who and what He is at this exact moment.

...Triune

In the one state of being God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; Romans 3:30; 1 Corinthians 8:4), there are three distinctly different personalities: the Father, the Son (or Word) and the Holy Spirit. Each one of these personalities shares fully the one essence, nature, or state of being God. Everything involved in being Deity is possessed by each of these personalities. In other words, the Bible teaches there is one, and only one, God; but it just as plainly teaches that the Father is God (cf. John 6:27; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 2:11), the Son is God (cf. John 10:30; 20:28), and the Holy Spirit is God (cf. Acts 5:3,4). Even so, it must be understood that although the Bible says that God is three persons in one essence (cf. Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14), it does not teach "Tritheism" (i.e., three Gods). As Roy Lanier, Sr. wrote in his book, *The Timeless Trinity*:

We do not affirm that one God is three Gods; we affirm that there is but one infinite Spirit Being, but within that one Spirit essence there are three personal distinctions, each of which may be, and is, called God; each capable of loving and being loved by the others; each having a distinct, but not separate, part to play in the creation and salvation of man (p. 46).

I think it wise to caution that, when thinking of God, it is possible to use "person" or "personality" in a wrong sense. If we are not precise in our thinking, we might conclude that the three persons or personalities that are God are just like human persons or personalities, except more complex. This would be a common, but serious, mistake. Human personalities are totally different from each other, and their relationships are often inharmonious and completely external (i.e., they do not partake of the same essence). On the other hand, the three personalities that are God partake of one essence and are always harmonious. In other words, we must not try to think of divine personality within the limits of human personality, as if God were but a more complex image of the human person. To do so would be idolatry, pure and simple (cf. Romans 1:23). Consequently, one must not press too far the concept of personhood when applied to God. What, then, are we saying when we

speak of God in three persons?

As has already been pointed out, divine personality is the archetype of human personality; it is not the other way around. If this is true, then there must be some similarities between divine personality and human personality, and, in fact, there are. As Paul taught the Athenians, "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising" (Acts 17:29). In other words, we are not lifeless, impersonal matter, and neither is God. The Bible teaches that God is Spirit, and therefore we who are His offspring have a spiritual nature. The Bible teaches that God is personal, and we who are His offspring partake of personhood. In his excellent book, *What The Bible Says About God The Creator*, Jack Cottrell, on page 237, points out four elements that are characteristic of personhood:

- rational consciousness,
- self-consciousness,
- self-determination, and
- the capacity to have relationships with other persons.

These characteristics are, in fact, a very intricate part of the portrait God paints of Himself in the Bible, from beginning to end. Based on Scripture *alone*, no one would ever doubt God's personhood.

If then the self-existent, eternal, infinite, and immutable Spirit has three personalities, and this is what the Bible teaches, then the Father, Son and Holy Spirit partake of personhood. As such, each enjoys rational consciousness, self-consciousness, self-determination, and relationships with other persons. This means that the Father is conscious of Himself as an individual person apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit and *vice versa*. It means that the Father, of His own free will, decided to send His Son into this world for the redemption of mankind. It means that the Son, of His own free will, responded positively to His Father's decision when He came to this earth and experienced death for fallen humanity. Finally, it means that the Holy Spirit, of His own volition, came to this earth to do the bidding of the Father and the Son. And although it must be understood that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were, and are, all involved in man's redemption, nevertheless, each person in the Godhead had work to do that was unique only to Him (cf. 1 Peter 1:1,2). When one reads the Bible, these truths are clear. (By clear, I do not mean that I think it is easy for finite creatures to understand how this *threeness* is rooted in the divine essence. On the contrary, by clear, I simply mean that the doctrine of the triune na-

ture of God is explicitly taught in the Bible.)

Theologians speak of the "economic Trinity" and the "ontological Trinity." These are constructs that attempt to define God. The so-called economic Trinity refers to the "division of labor" that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and concerns itself principally with the different works done by the three persons of the Godhead in relation to the scheme of redemption. For example, the Bible depicts God the Father as foreknowing and choosing the plan whereby man could be redeemed (cf. Romans 8:29). In His role (or work), the Father is never portrayed as being the One sent. On the contrary, the Father sends the Son and the Spirit (cf. John 5:37; 14:26; 20:21). In turn, the Holy Spirit is involved in the work of sanctification (cf. 1 Peter 1:1,2), and He is also the agent of inspiration (cf. John 16:13; 2 Peter 1:21). In this connection, it is interesting to note that it is *only* blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and not against the Father or Son, that is unforgivable (cf. Matthew 12:31,32). From this, one can clearly see that the three persons of the Godhead are truly distinct. It is, of course, the works of Jesus, the Son of God, which receive most of the attention in the New Testament. This is because it is He who "became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). It was only the Son who experienced death for us. It was only the Son who was resurrected from the dead, taken bodily into heaven, and seated at the Father's right hand. It is only the Son who is the High Priest and Mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14).

Therefore, the Bible teaches that, when it comes to the scheme of redemption, there are works done by the Father that are not done by the Son or the Spirit; there are works done by the Son that are not done by the Father or the Spirit; and there are works done by the Spirit that are not done by the Father or the Son. It is this Bible-based division of labor or economic Trinity that sheds some light on the so-called ontological Trinity (i.e., how the three persons of the Godhead are related within their own being, totally apart from any manifestations or works directed outside themselves). Discerning a threeness in the external manifestations and works of God is not too taxing, but when one turns his attention to the ontological Trinity, things begin to get a lot harder. For instance, are the appellations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternal distinctions within the Trinity, or are they derived from the various works of God in the scheme of redemption? Particularly, from the standpoint of the Scriptures, is the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ authentic? For

example, Alexander Campbell taught that Jesus Christ pre-existed as the Divine *Logos* or Word of God (cf. John 1:1), but that His Sonship began with the incarnation. According to Campbell, the entire "relation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit began to be" during the days of Augustus Caesar (*The Christian System*, pp. 9-10). Personally, I am not certain that the eternal Sonship of Christ is Biblical, and, furthermore, I do not really see what difference it makes. There are several explicit references to the Deity of Christ in the Bible; consequently, His Deity (or equality with God) does not depend on an eternal Sonship relation.

But how, then, do we explain the ontological Trinity? Personally, I do not think we can with any large degree of specificity. When we do try, we seem to fail, and fail miserably. Furthermore, many attempts to explain or depict the ontological Trinity (i.e., three in One) actually incline toward idolatry (cf. Romans 1:22,23), which is something we should be seeking to avoid with a passion. We must always remember that God is not a man; therefore, He cannot ultimately be explained or understood by trying to compare Him with finite creatures. And although it is absolutely impossible for three finite creatures to consist of the same essence, nevertheless, God, who is three Divine persons, and Who is identified in the economy of redemption as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is also, and at the same time, one self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable Spirit Being.

There can be no doubt that the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity transcends the limits of our finite knowledge. By reason *alone*, and by this I mean reason unaided by divine revelation, we cannot figure out the ontological Trinity. But by concentrating on the economic Trinity revealed to us in the Bible, we can know what the Triune God wants us to know about Himself. Consequently, I agree with professor B.B. Warfield, who concluded, "When we have said these three things, then — that there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person — we have enunciated the doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness" ("The Biblical Doctrine Of The Trinity," in B.B. Warfield, ed., *Biblical And Theological Studies*, pp. 22-59).

Mythology is filled with numerous triads, but there is only one Triune God. And if it had not been for the scheme of redemption, we would know very little of His threeness. In fact, although there are allusions in the Old Testament that the Godhead consists of more than one person, if Scripture had not depicted Jesus

of Nazareth as God incarnate, and the Holy Spirit as Deity, the question of the Trinity would have never arisen. This means that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are the fundamental proof of the doctrine of the Trinity. This means that if the pre-existent Jesus (i.e., the Word or Divine *Logos* of John 1:1) actually divested Himself of His Godhood and Divinity, so that the "fullness of the Godhead" did not dwell in His earthly body (cf. Colossians 2:9), as some are currently teaching, then the Triune God, who has identified Himself as a self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable Spirit, ceased to exist as He had existed, at least for a period of time. Therefore, one can readily see that the current controversy over the Deity of Christ being manifested in churches of Christ is not a "tempest in a teapot" issue; but is, instead, an issue that strikes at the very core of the gospel. With this in mind, it is now time to turn our attention to the Biblical truth that there never was a time when the Divine *Logos* was not God with a capital "G."

*Jesus is God.* This is the basic meaning of the incarnation. In John 1:1, the Holy Spirit teaches that not only was the Word (i.e., the *Logos*) in the beginning *with* God, but the Word *was* God. In verses 14-34 of the same book, we learn that the *Logos* became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And in this book that was written so that men would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing might have life in His name, Thomas, speaking of Jesus, exclaims, after seeing Him in His resurrected body, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). There are, of course, other passages that directly speak of Jesus as God, but since they are all disputed by some, I have chosen not to mention them here. Nevertheless, the passages cited serve to demonstrate, to those who are willing to believe the Bible, that Jesus is, in fact, God.

Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews, telling us what God had prophesied about Jesus, writes, "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'" (Hebrews 1:8). Also, he clearly identifies Jesus as the Jehovah and Elohim of Psalm 102:25-27, who eternally existed before He created the heavens and earth (cf. Hebrews 1:10) and who remains eternally the same (cf. Hebrews 1:11,12), and, therefore, in the person of Jesus Christ is "the same yester-

day, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). To see in Hebrews 13:8, as some do, only a reference to the faithfulness of Jesus, and not a reference to His immutability, is a serious mistake. In fact, Jesus Christ's faithfulness is grounded in His changelessness. In other words, because He does not change ontologically (i.e., because He has always been the fullness of God that He is at this very moment), He has been, is, and always will be, completely and totally reliable. It is only in this sense that Jesus could identify Himself as the "I AM THAT I AM" or "He who is" of Exodus 3:14 (cf. John 8:58). When Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM," He used the aorist tense to describe Abraham's existence, but the timeless present tense to describe His own existence, and thereby identified Himself as the self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable God with a capital "G." Well has it been said: "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Psalm 90:1,2).

As difficult as it may be for finite creatures to even begin to comprehend, when the Divine *Logos*, or Son of God, became flesh (cf. John 1:14), or, as the Bible says elsewhere, came in the likeness of man (cf. Philippians 2:8), or was manifested in the flesh (cf. 1 Timothy 3:16), He did not divest, give up, or have stripped from Him, His Deity. Within the man Jesus of Nazareth dwelt, and continues to dwell (for such is the meaning of the present tense), all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (cf. Colossians 2:9). In fact, from a Biblical standpoint, the historical Jesus is never understood apart from His embodiment as the self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable God in time and space. And although it is true that a God divested of His Deity would still continue to exist, in truth, He would no longer be what He had been and, therefore, could not call Himself "I AM THAT I AM."

Now, with a concept of the true God firmly imprinted in our minds, it is time to turn our attention to the substitutes for God (viz., idols) that men invent.

## Idolatry: A Category Of Unbelief

"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12, NKJV).

**A**n idol is a substitute for God. It is the exchanging of the truth of God for a lie (cf. Romans 1:25a). All idols belong either to *nature* or *history*. There are no other areas to which man can turn in order to find a substitute god, for all creation ultimately falls into these two groupings. Consequently, idols that are not artifacts of the natural world are constructs of the social world (or history). As such, they serve no other purpose than to facilitate the worshiping and serving of the creature rather than the Creator (cf. Romans 1:25b).

Furthermore, idolatry may be seen as a category depicting unbelief that is highly sophisticated, drawing together the complexities of motivation found in psychology, sociology and demonology. Of these, demonology is the most familiar, and most obvious. As this aspect of idolatry has been given extensive treatment over the years, I will not spend time with it here. Suffice it to say that the Bible teaches there is an unseen spiritual dynamic at work behind idolatry (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:19-22), and although this is an important theme in the Bible, it is often neglected and misunderstood by many Christians (cf. Ephesians 6:10-18). However, in this study, I want to concentrate especially on the psychological and sociological aspects of idolatry.

In Genesis 1:27-28, the Bible says God created man in His own image. (This, incidentally, is why every attempt to make God in man's image is idolatry.) By virtue of his creation in the image of God, man lives out his life in two directions: (1) upward toward God, as he trusts Him as his Sustainer and Creator, and (2) downward in dominion over the rest of creation. Trusting in God, man is to subdue and exercise dominion over the earth and its creatures. This is the way God made us, and deep down inside us all, this is the way we are. In other words, these upward and downward directions of our lives are part of our psychological nature. When we understand this truth, we will be in a much better position to recognize idolatry in all its various manifestations. But before we can proceed any further, it must be made clear that something happened

that sorely affected man's psychological nature.

Genesis, chapter 3, records the rebellion of Adam and Eve, along with the awful consequences of that rebellion. As a result, the world is no longer a safe place to live. Our plans to cash in on the good life are constantly being frustrated by disease, accident, theft, bankruptcy, rust, decay and, finally, death. Every graveyard stands as proof that instead of us subduing the earth, the earth now subdues us. The trust we place in this world is regularly betrayed as we pursue our illusions with extravagant expectation that are seldom, if ever, fulfilled. Finally, forced to live in an environment marred by sin, we are no longer strangers to anxiety and disappointment.

Sin did not eliminate the built-in psychological drive to worship God and exercise dominion over the rest of creation. It did, however, pervert it. Satan's seduction of Eve, and subsequently Adam, was through the "lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes," and "the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). Thinking "the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6), Mother Eve believed the Tempter's lie which said she could successfully be her own God, deciding good and evil (cf. Genesis 3:5). As a result, she erected in her own heart an idol to SELF. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived. Instead, he chose to follow his wife's lead (cf. Genesis 3:6a, 17), erecting in his heart an idol of his WIFE. In the fall of these two people who were the prototype of the entire human race, the centrality of God was replaced with egocentricity. In short, the world no longer began and ended with God; instead, it ended with themselves.

As we think about the nature of Eve's rebellion, it helps us in our study of this subject. Her rebellion happened, at least in part, below the level of her own perception, in that she was, as the Bible says, "deceived" (1 Timothy 2:14 and 2 Corinthians 11:3). This demonstrates that idolatry is not always as overt as some seem to think. It also alerts us to the deadly danger of self-deception that lurks in all forms of idolatry.

Because of his psychological nature, man is going to worship something, even if it is himself, as he tries to subdue or exercise control over creation. Therefore, when he engages in God-avoidance, rebelling against the Lord's moral precepts, the Bible makes it clear that he will inevitably turn to idols (cf. Romans 1:18-32). He will not just eliminate knowledge of the true God from his thinking, he erects substitute gods in His place. The Bible calls these substitutes "idols." Noting this, G. K. Chesterton observed that when we "cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing, we worship anything." In other words, when we refuse to worship the true God, we are busy building the shrines and temples of the substitute gods.

Although the Christian rightly rejects the Calvinistic doctrine of inherited depravity, he must nevertheless recognize that our acquired, sin-sick natures predispose us to act independently from God (i.e., to be laws unto ourselves). Exercising our own autonomy, we do exactly what we want to do without considering His Word. And, if we had not been originally created to be in a personal relationship with God, we could have dismissed once and for all the whole religious dimension of life and lived happily ever after, eating, drinking and being merry (cf. Luke 12:19; 1 Corinthians 15:32a). But made, as we are, in the image of God, and having an innate psychological need to worship and exercise faith in Him, we, when we manage to pervert ourselves with sin, try to deny our guilt feelings by eliminating in our minds the true concept of God, which in turn creates a vacuum in our hearts.

We then try to fill this vacuum with idols. As I've already mentioned, we do this by inflating things in nature and history to religious proportions. Therefore, an idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero — anything that can substitute for God. It can be riches, pleasure, fame, power, et cetera. An idol can be things that, in and of themselves, are good, like work, recreation, family, et cetera, but when used incorrectly, cause us to disobey God out of our loyalty to them. An idol can be something as seemingly harmless as wanting to be well-liked, a perfectly legitimate and natural desire, if wanting to be liked means we never risk disapproval or criticism. Even something as good as foreign evangelism can be an idol, if the one engaged in it is willing to circumvent Bible authority to get the job done, or if he should be so presumptuous as to make his work the litmus test for foreign evangelism.

Idolatry always involves one in self-cen-

teredness, self-inflation and self-deception. It starts with the counterfeiting of God, for it is only with a counterfeit god that one can remain the center of his life and the autonomous architect of his own future. Then, when such rebellion is complete, some thing or person is idolatrously inflated to fill the God-shaped vacuum left in the heart. Of course, the idol, whatever it may be, is not the real thing. It is only a counterfeit — a lie that promises the blessings of the so-called "good life;" but in the end, produces a debased and reprobate mind that spawns even more sin and degradation (cf. Romans 1:24ff).

In his fallen and sin-sick condition, man no longer trusts God; but as Chesterton pointed out, this does not mean he no longer trusts in anything. In order to authenticate his life and feel secure about himself, fallen man still feels the need to trust in something, whether it be a thing, idea, institution, or another person. This trust, divorced as it is from a proper faith in God Almighty, is perverted into overdependence on a thing, an idea, an institution, or another person, even when these things continually betray his trust. Nevertheless, out of his desperate need for authentication and safety, he desperately clings to his idols. In conjunction with this, the God-given, and therefore legitimate, need to subdue and exercise dominion over the creation is perverted by fallen man into domination, something quite different from what God originally intended. To enjoy the "good-life," sin-sick man thinks he must manipulate and dominate those around about him. This inevitably involves the controlling of certain key variables (often people) in his life and surroundings. All this (both overdependence and dominion) is engaged in to assuage the anxiety created by fallen man's perverted psychological needs — needs that are, in turn, derived from the God-given needs to trust in God and exercise dominion over the rest of creation.

#### **Idols Always Come In Pairs**

Because this duality (viz., to trust in God and subdue creation) is so deeply imprinted in the human psyche, idols seem to always come in pairs. An idol, remember, is a counterfeit of the true God. It does not just substitute God's existence, but it can also exist as a counterfeiting of His attributes and characteristics. With this understood, it should be realized that God's transcendence can be made into one idol and His immanence into another. In their book, *No God But God*, Os Guinness and John Seel call these two counterfeits "the faraway idol" and "the nearby idol." These designations are not so much spatial as they are psychological. The far-

away idol, who is intangible and therefore always inaccessible, serves as an overarching idea that gives meaning to all of life. On the other hand, the nearby idol, who is much more accessible and tangible, allows the idolater to manipulate his world so he can get what he wants. This construct is classic to idolatry, and is not just the key to understanding idolatry, but is essential to understanding the occult, as well. We'll explore this nearby idol first.

#### **The Nearby Idol**

When one has alienated himself from God, the nearby idol is a substitute for God's immanence. Because he is no longer dependent upon the blessings of his Creator to help him exercise stewardship over his environment, the idolater seeks a sense of well-being through control. The nearby idol, whatever the idolater conceives it to be, permits him to exercise this control. It is, of course, a delusion.

This is illustrated in the rebellion of the Jews who fled into Egypt contrary to the Lord's command (cf. Jeremiah 44:1-30). It had been their custom, even when they were back in Judah (cf. Jeremiah 7:18), "to burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her" (Jeremiah 44:17). Of course, they were not doing this for nothing. In fact, they were deluded into thinking they were being blessed by their manipulation, through their sacrifices, of this counterfeit god (cf. Jeremiah 44:18). They were wrong, of course. It was actually God who had been blessing them due to His longsufferingness. Finally, though, they started to experience God's punishment for their idolatry. However, it just so happened that this punishment coincided with the Jews ceasing to sacrifice to their false god. In turn, they mistakenly came to think they were no longer enjoying blessings because they had quit offering cakes to their idol, the queen of heaven. Grossly deluded, they believed their nearby idol allowed them to experience a certain leverage over the important forces that control life. Consequently, they were convinced that their fertility goddess was able to give them good crops, more livestock, and more male children. This nearby idol was all they needed to enjoy the good life, they mistakenly thought, but their devotion to this counterfeit god ultimately caused them to be consumed by the famine and sword of God's wrath (cf. Jeremiah 44:27).

Although idolatry can't really deliver, polytheists/occultists believe that their rituals and sacrifices permit them to tap into, or connect with, invisible powers that will allow them to exercise control over the visible (or natural) world in which they live. To these devotees, the nearby idol, whatever it might be, is a means to some

desired end, and to accomplish this end, they are willing to genuflect to their substitutes gods and goddesses.

#### **America's Carpet God**

The nearby idol for many Americans is Carpet. "And what," you might ask, "is Carpet?" Carpet represents the comfortable home with its decorations, color combinations, furniture, appliances, and video/audio systems. Carpet is the "nice home" so many Americans think is essential if one is to experience the "good life." A multitude of Americans have bowed to Carpet. In doing so, they have demonstrated that they will sacrifice anything they have for the comfort Carpet promises. For example, think of the millions of "latchkey" children who come home to empty houses every school day who must fend for themselves because mommy and daddy are too busy sacrificing to Carpet. These children are, in reality, a blessing from the true God, who has, in turn, obligated the parents with certain responsibilities. Consumed with Carpet, multitudes of American parents ignore their God-given obligations to their children, but who cares? Unfortunately, not even some who call themselves Christians. Yes, they shudder at the thought of ancient Israelites sacrificing their children to Molech (cf. Jeremiah 32:25), but then they turn right around and leave their children in the hands of perfect strangers or, worse yet, they cause them to fend for themselves while they both go off to work so they can obediently worship at Carpet's totem. It is most unfortunate that while the divinely ordained family structure is being offered up on Carpet's altar, many Christians just don't seem to care. Worse yet, some Christians are themselves worshipping in the shrine of this cruel and ogerish god. Like all idols, Carpet promises much, but is unable to deliver on anything of real value. The messages of the idols are all lies, and Carpet's message is no different. It promises safety and comfort from the troubles of life, but when trials and tribulations finally come, and they will, the Carpet god is completely powerless. Carpet cannot comfort us when we lose a loved one; it cannot be our friend when we are alone; it cannot help us when we are dying. Nevertheless, many believe Carpet's lies and, in turn, sacrifice everything, even their children, to worship at its altar. The Bible, which pulls no punches, says that covetousness, which is personified in Carpet, is idolatry (cf. Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5).

When we consider the nearby idols to which men bow, it is not hard to see the devastating effect they are having on our society. However, it is now time to turn our attention to the faraway idol.

### The Faraway Idol

The faraway idol, which is a substitute for God's transcendence, is usually not very well defined. It is fashioned to give some overarching and ultimate meaning to life. Man, of course, was originally created to trust in God, but in his fallen condition, he creates a force or idea (an idol) that rules the universe in God's stead. When we listen, we can hear people saying that they believe there must be something, or someone, ultimately responsible for the way things are. Ask them what this is, and they are unable to describe him, her or it with any specificity. This, then, is the faraway idol.

Some say their god, because he is a loving god, could not send people to hell for an eternity. Again, this is a faraway idol, a construct that takes the place of the Sovereign of the universe who has said that He will, in fact, consign the disobedient to hell if they reject His gracious offer to save them through the blood of Jesus Christ. The true God is, of course, a God of love (cf. 1 John 4:8), but the creator of this false god has made Love his faraway idol — the standard by which everything is to be judged.

A point of clarification needs to be made here. For the purpose of this study, I will continue to talk about the faraway idol, even though the faraway idol is not normally thought of by its adherents as an idol. This is because we normally think of an idol as something tangible, and the faraway idol is neither tangible nor visible. The following excerpt from the Roman author Cicero is an example of this kind of thinking:

When we behold the heavens, when we contemplate the celestial bodies, can we fail of conviction? Must we not acknowledge that there is a Divinity, a perfect being, a ruling intelligence, which governs, a God who is everywhere and directs all by his power? Anybody who doubts that may as well deny there is a sun that lights.... For this reason, with us as well as with other nations, the worship of the gods and holy exercises of religion increase in purity and extent every day (a quote from Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:279).

As we can see, the polytheism of Cicero's day embraced the faraway idol, which was a single transcendent "ruling intelligence," as well as the many nearby idols ("gods"), who were associated in the minds of their adherents with the different functions in the tangible, visible world. This clearly reflects the two levels of religious allegiances I've been discussing — the nearby idol, which is more accessible and which is di-

rected toward power and control, and the faraway idol, which is far more inaccessible, but which provides meaning or legitimacy. Both of these (the faraway idol and the nearby idol) are representative of a universal trait that runs through all idolatry. And as idolatry is but the attempt to counterfeit the true God, it ought not to surprise us to hear Him asking His people in Jeremiah 23:23, "Am I a God near at hand...and not a God afar off?"

We can observe this faraway/nearby paradigm in the Canaanite pantheon. According to these people, "El the Benign," the Creator/Father/King, was the chief deity. As such, his mildly benevolent persona served, in the background, as the overarching presence in their religion. But even so, he was not thought to be nearly as effective in delivering concrete help as Baal, who was described in cult texts as one of the sons of Dagon, the national god of the Philistines. Baal became the Canaanites' fertility god, representing the powers of rain, fullness of life, and fertility. By the use of magic, incantations, rituals and priestcraft, they believed they could exercise control over the forces of nature. Their worship of this nearby god was orgiastic and sensual (cf. 1 Kings 14:22-24). Obviously, then, it was a religion enthusiastically pursued by its adherents. The Bible called the things these idolaters practiced "abominations," and those who practiced them "perverted persons." But it was not just that Baal worship authorized sexual license, although this was a powerful incentive, there was a much higher logic to it that this. The fertility gods and goddesses were thought to be voyeuristic. Consequently, it was believed that it was only through the sexual activity of humans that the fertility gods and goddesses were stimulated to lust after and pursue one another. Seduced by the human sexual activity they observed to engage in sexual intercourse themselves, they produced, it was believed, fertility on earth.

### Paul's Mar's Hill Address

In his famous Mar's Hill address, delivered in the great city and seat of learning that was Athens, the apostle Paul systematically refuted the nearby and faraway idols with four alternating strokes, replacing them each time with the truth of God's transcendence and immanence. The points he makes, which are found in Acts 17, may be summarized as follows:

- First, he teaches that the one true God is not a faraway idol that is unknowable (verse 23).
- Then, he refutes their nearby idols by pointing out that God does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor does

He need man's help in anything (verses 24-25).

- Next, he assaults the faraway idol by teaching the truth that God, although transcendent, is not far from any of us, for it is "In Him we live and move and have our being" (verses 27-28).
- Finally, he negates the nearby idol again by arguing that if we are truly God's offspring, then it makes absolutely no sense to think He can somehow derive His being from us. In other words, the one true God is not made of gold, silver or stone, and fashioned by human design (verse 29).

It seems clear that Paul directed his criticisms of the Athenians to the classic dual-nature of their idolatry. They had counterfeited the true God's transcendence with their faraway idol, "THE UNKNOWN GOD," and His immanence with the many nearby idols in their pantheon. With each criticism of their idolatry, Paul did not hesitate to make positive affirmations about the one true God. According to him, and this is consistent with everything else written in the Bible, the true God, although He is transcendent, is also very knowable (verse 23), in that He has revealed Himself to us in the holy Scriptures. Once he's made this point, he then proceeds to tell the Athenians about this one true God who is knowable. As the Creator, He is Lord of heaven and earth (verse 24). Consequently, He gives life to all people (verse 25). He made "From one blood" all nations that live on the earth, and He wants them to seek after, and find, Him (verses 26-27). Finally, He is, as the Creator, our source, in that we derive our existence from Him, not the other way around (verse 29).

As Paul argues, the one true God is, and all at the same time, both transcendent and immanent (i.e., He is both "far off" and "at hand" [cf. Jeremiah 23:23]). In doing so, he conveys the ultimate moral challenge of this one true God, namely, "God...now commands all men everywhere to repent" (verse 30). And why is this? Because He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained (verse 31). And who is this man? He is Jesus of Nazareth, in whom dwells "all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). In fact, it is the incarnation of Jesus Christ that serves as the final blow to the dual-idolatry pattern that has plagued man down through the ages. The divine Logos, who was Himself the transcendent God of creation (cf. John 1:1), became a man (cf. John 1:14), the epitome of immanence, and did it all without ceasing to be God. In other words, "No one has

ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13). The God of the Bible, the only true and living God, is a God who is "at hand," as well as "afar off" (Jeremiah 23:23).

Unfortunately, and even though they ought to know better, some New Testament Christians fall victim to idolatry's dual pattern as they try to formulate their various Christologies. This is demonstrated in the classic heresies of Arianism, which denies the Lord's divine nature, and Docetism, which denies His human nature. By failing to appreciate the full meaning of the Immanuel (or "God with us") of Isaiah 7:14, both of these *isms* fall far short of the truth revealed in the Bible. Yes, and there must be no mistake about it, Jesus was a man, and His need for resurrection is proof of this. But, He was not just a man, as some among us are claiming, and His resurrection is proof of this, as well. If He were not a man, He could not have died and then been in need of resurrection. On the other hand, if He had not been "God manifested in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16), as He claimed to be, then the "one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:6) would certainly have not validated Jesus' claim by resurrecting Him from the dead (cf. Acts 17:31). Thus, any effort to separate the Lord's transcendence and immanence (i.e., His deity and humanity) will lead one down the path to self-sufficiency and idolatry.

The Jesus who is "a man, just a man, just an ordinary man like you and me" is an idol constructed by those among us who believe it may still be possible for a mere man to live perfectly and, therefore, earn his salvation. But such self-sufficiency is impossible, not because man does not have the capacity not to sin (*viz.*, free will), he does; it's impossible because man wrongly exercises his free will. It is just here that some become confused, so please pay close attention as I say this once more. Man is a free will creature, and because he is, he does not have to sin. We are not made, contrary to Calvinistic doctrine, morally flawed or depraved. However, the rebellious story of mankind is that although we do not have to sin, we do — we always have and we always will.

The only man who ever lived perfectly here in this life was Jesus. Even so, He suffered and died. Why? Because, in His suffering and death, the Lord paid the penalty for the sins of all mankind. In doing so, He made it possible for all who had sinned, and this includes all of us, to be reconciled to God through obedience to Him. All of us — every last one of us — have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (cf. Romans 3:23). So, when Jesus "died for all," it was be-



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cause "all died" (2 Corinthians 5:14). This means that all human beings who reach the age of accountability will sin. It also means that even after being saved from our past sins by obedience to the gospel, Christians did not live perfectly without sin (cf. 1 John 1:10). Consequently, the perfectionists among us who believe it is actually, as opposed to theoretically, possible for one to live without sinning, and have created a mere-man Jesus to prove it, teach a self-sufficiency that is anti-Bible, and worship an idol that is both anti-God and "antichrist" (1 John 2:22). It is my sincere prayer that these false teachers will come to their senses in a pigsty moment (cf. Luke 15:17), repent, and adhere to John's warning to keep themselves from

idols (cf. 1 John 5:21).

As we can see, idolatry is still an ever present problem for New Testament Christians. We must not allow ourselves to be tricked into thinking that idolatry is a sin reserved just for pagans — it's not. Today, as in times past, the dark and dynamic forces behind idolatry (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:20) have arrayed themselves against us (cf. Ephesians 6:12). But drunk with the wine of modernity, many who make up the Lord's church in the 21st century believe the war is over, and that it has actually been over for almost two thousand years now. This sort of thinking, as I hope to point out in the next section, has had devastating consequences for churches of Christ.

## The Sham Gods Of Orthotalksy

"For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14, NKJV).

No, it's not misspelled. "Orthotalksy" is a made-up word. It describes that which takes place when our concepts about God are wrong, but we continue to give lip-service to the "traditional," "correct," "accepted," or "orthodox" ways of talking about Him. For example, even though a brother erroneously comes to the conclusion that God is no longer actively involved in His creation, he will still give lip-service to being a firm believer in God's providence. Another brother, although he has concluded there are some things God simply cannot know, will, at the same time, continue to pay homage to His "all-knowingness." Yet another, while claiming to believe in the omnipotence of God, may teach that God's plan to redeem man through His Son, Jesus, could have failed. This is orthotalksy. Its immediate advantage is that it permits one to remain in the comfortable surroundings of "brotherhood soundness" while, at the same time, advocating new and radically false ideas about God.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, "sham" means:

1. Something false or empty that is purported to be genuine; a spurious imitation.
2. The quality of deceitfulness; empty pretense.
3. One who assumes a false character; an impostor.

Therefore, a sham god is not God at all. All sham gods are idols, and those who construct them are, quite simply, idolaters. This is true whether one is a pagan idolater involved in the construction of pagan images, or a brother involved in advancing the theological and philosophical concepts of modern-day theology.

There are other kinds of idolatry than those associated with the worship of pagan gods. A child of God who allows himself to get caught up in covetousness or greed is, according to the Bible, an idolater (Colossians 3:5). Further, in the first chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul makes it clear that changing "the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man" is idolatry. This is true whether it be an actual graven image or a theological construct.

This means that any one of us can be guilty of idolatry, and this is especially true of preachers. When one preaches, teaches, and writes about God and His Word, he must be willing to have what he says subjected to honest and fair criticism. Only a false teacher would object to this process. Of course, the standard for such criticism is not what I or anyone else might think. The spiritual benchmark for everything we believe and teach is the Bible — it alone is the objective standard.

Therefore, a religious discussion (debate) should not be some frivolous academic exercise designed to entertain an audience. Nor is it designed to simply fill up space in some religious publication. It is, instead, a very serious undertaking designed to defend God and His word. Therefore, a debate, contrary to what some seem to think, is not a vehicle to showcase one's debating skills. The thing to be displayed in a religious debate should be either the truth or error of a particular position. If this is not the motive, then any such exercise would not be worth the time it takes to conduct it, or in the case of a written debate, the paper on which it is written.

When one undertakes to expound the attributes and characteristics of Almighty God, he is treading on hallowed ground. We must approach any such undertaking with extreme reverence for the One we seek to clarify. Like Moses, we must take off our shoes, realizing we are standing on holy ground. A debate of God's word is the weightiest of matters.

To further impress us with the seriousness of these matters, the Bible makes it clear that the Bible teacher is under a stricter than normal judgment (James 3:1). Therefore, when we preach, teach, and write about God, we must do so carefully and reverently.

It is my firm belief that there is nothing more important than knowing the one true God! Our eternal destiny depends upon it (John 17:3). Therefore, Bible teachers are involved in a most sobering endeavor. The task is to accurately communicate God and His Word. If, for whatever reason, we impose limits on the infinite

God, we are engaged in idolatry. When we begin to think of God as a man, albeit a man of larger proportions, there ought to be no doubt that we are engaged in idolatry.

The God who has revealed Himself both in nature and the Scriptures is not a creature; that is, He is not a man (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29). He is not limited, as are His creatures, by anything outside of Himself. Consequently, He is nothing like the sham gods of paganism, nor the gelded God of modern theology.

In the space that follows, your attention will be directed to:

- The God Who Doesn't Do Anything,
- The God Who Doesn't Know Anything,
- The God Who Can Fail,
- The God Who Can Quit Being God.

My intent is to expose these sham gods and the orthotalksy associated with them. In doing so, I will do my best to carefully, reverently and honorably defend the ontological integrity of Almighty God. Realizing that I am limited in my understanding of God's Word, I expect, and even invite, criticism. I assure you that all serious criticism will be taken to heart. If it can be show from the Scriptures that I am wrong, I would want my correction to be as public as my teaching. With this in mind, it is my prayer that God will bless us as we continue our study of this critical issue.

## The God Who Doesn't Do Anything

Many of the pagan religions had a concept of a supreme creator-god, the one who brought the world into existence but, for one reason or another, was no longer actively involved in his creation. Even the Greek gods and goddesses who supposedly dwelt on Mt. Olympus were basically alienated from man and very rarely became involved with him. Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" was totally uninterested in, and indifferent to, affairs on this earthly plane. Without thought of human affairs, Epicurus' gods dwelt in undisturbed bliss in the alleged void between the universes, eating, drinking and speaking Greek.

17th- and 18th-century Deism, although not classified as pagan, is the classic example of the world's inclination toward the idea of an absentee (or "faraway") God or gods. According to Deists, the Creator set the universe into motion and endowed it with everything necessary (i.e., "natural laws") for it to continue indefinitely. As such, our universe was thought to be the perfect

perpetual motion machine. Since creation, the God of the Deists has not interfered with the natural laws He set in motion at the beginning. In his description of Deism, R. H. Tawney wrote: "...God has been thrust into the frigid altitudes of infinite space. There is a limited monarchy in heaven, as well as on earth. Providence was the spectator of the curious machine which it had constructed and set in motion, but the operation of which it was neither able nor willing to control..." (*The Acquisitive Society*, 1924, p. 13).

Thomas "The Age of Reason" Paine, Thomas "Nature and Nature's God" Jefferson, and Benjamin "God helps those who help themselves" Franklin, to mention just three of our "Founding Fathers," fully imbibed the Deistic concept of God. Although religion was important to these men, it was, unfortunately, the rationalistic religion of nature. It was Paine who said, "My own mind is my church." Franklin went a step further and advocated a public religion that would promote good citizenship and morality, but would not meddle in affairs confined solely to the realm of reason (e.g., science and politics).

It seems clear that these ideas reflected the views of Voltaire, who said: "The only book that should be read is the great book of nature. The sole religion is to worship God and to be an honorable man. This pure and everlasting religion cannot possibly produce harm" (From Andre Maurois' introduction to *Candide*, 1959, p. 6). Thomas Jefferson's "Nature" and "Nature's God," mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, was, contrary to what some have thought, a reflection of Deist, not Christian, concepts — concepts which, once divorced from any idea of a Creator, would eventually develop into the secular humanism so prevalent in modern-day America.

The Deistic world view developed, in part, because of Newtonian physics, which at the time was a fairly new scientific theory. Newton's theory made it easy to think of the world as a great machine (viz., a clock) preset to run with amazing regularity. This new way of thinking played right into the hands of the Deists. In his description of Deism, Augustus H. Strong said, "God builds a house, shuts himself out, locks the door, and then ties his own hands in order to make sure of never using the key" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes in 1, 1907, p. 15).

What this meant was that, according to Deists, reason *alone* (i.e., reason unaided by special or supernatural revelation) would provide the ultimate solution to every problem. Unaided by any outside influence, man was the answer to his own problem. Eventually, this kind of think-

ing would come to be reflected in *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, which said, "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves."

This "clock-work" universe was a powerful influence in the development of American culture. Because we came to believe that nature is totally self-contained, we learned the necessity of being self-sufficient. As Americans who had, quite ironically, learned from our Puritan forefathers the necessity of hard work, we hunkered down and learned the lesson of self-sufficiency quite well. Supposing that the only two elements that keep the world going are natural law and human reason, we came to believe that "man can attack and overcome by education and technical means, and good will, all the evils of life" (E. Graham Waring, editor, *Deism and Natural Religion*, p. xiii).

Understandably, Calvinism, the then prevalent "Christian" way of thinking, suffered immensely under this new way of thinking. "The Calvinistic idea that man had absolutely nothing to do with his own salvation made little sense to the frontiersman, who knew only too well that his temporal salvation was in his own hands" (William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture: 1765-1840*, preface).

This new paradigm served us well. Realizing our own potential, and knowing our need to save ourselves, we pursued the improvement of our predicament with a passion that has yet to be surpassed. We improved our knowledge of our surroundings and discovered cures for diseases that had plagued mankind down through the centuries. Collectively and individually, we improved our lot. We invented machines that helped us grow in industrial might. Having conquered the work-a-day world, we then turned our attention to home and leisure and created gadgets that made life so much more comfortable than it had been before. Slowly, but surely, we developed into the masters of our own destiny. As such, we have become a nation of technological giants. Yes, there are those in other nations who make more money than we do, but no one actually lives better than Americans. But in the process of becoming technological giants, we evolved into a nation of moral and intellectual pygmies.

Today, hardly anyone wants to think and know. Instead, we desire to feel and experience. Therefore, that which reinforces our "feelings" about the rightness of our religion is not doctrine, which demands thinking, but sentiment, which only craves feelings. Even the goal of modern "Christianity" is not to change the hearer's mind, as much as it is to change his feelings. One such "sentiment" making the "Chris-

tian" circuit that aptly demonstrates this point is the idea that in order to heal emotionally we must first learn to forgive God for all the hurt we have experienced in our lives. Why? Because a God who is not omnipotent, like an imperfect parent, ought to be forgiven for His shortcomings. From a biblical standpoint, such thinking is obviously wrong. But modern Christendom, which has thrown sound biblical doctrine overboard, no longer cares what people think about Bible doctrine. What it wants to know is how they feel: What do you *feel* is your problem? What do you *feel* should be the most important thing in your life? How do you *feel* about this, that and the other? Such has aptly been called "the religion of Dr. Feelgood," and there is no doubt that it is the religion of American Christendom.

This is the philosophical and theological environment in which we currently live. It appears that many of us who are members of Christ's church have not immunized ourselves from such. In fact, some of us have allowed such thinking to affect our minds. Having been taught that the age of miracles is over, some of us feel very comfortable with the materialistic rationalism now so prevalent in our society. Such comfortableness is a serious mistake that reflects a critical misunderstanding of God's Word. Yes, the Bible teaches that the miracles (i.e., "signs" and "wonders") that were so essential to the initial confirmation of God's Word (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3-4) are no longer necessary (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12). Yes, the "perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25) has been "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and, therefore, does not need to be continually confirmed or verified by miracles. However, and herein lies the crux of the matter, God, who is, by His very nature, supernatural, is still very much involved in this world (cf. Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:3). Standing above and apart from our experiences (i.e., that which we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell), there is a supernatural dynamic at work. Unlike the sham gods of heathenism, Jehovah remains both interested and active in His creation.

Therefore, the idea of providence, the concept of a God who is active in His creation, is an important tenet of New Testament Christianity. In fact, the concept is so indigenous to a biblical world view that I have never known a Christian to actually deny it. What I have heard them do, however, is to describe God's providence in such a way as to, in essence, deny it. For example, I know of brethren who will *not* pray for the healing of those who have been classified as terminally ill. To do so, they think, would be asking

God to perform a miracle, and God, they are quick to tell us, does not work that way today. When you ask these brethren if they believe in the providence of God, they say, "Of course!" What, then, do they mean when they say, "God's providence?" They mean, "God working in the natural world through natural means." This, of course, seems to be nothing more than Thomas Jefferson's "Nature" and "Nature's God." Therefore, when one of these brethren speaks of God's providence, while at the same time circumscribing this providence to nature, he is engaged in orthotalksy, whether he realizes it or not.

Teaching what the Bible says about the "chastening of the Lord" (Hebrews 12:5) meets with a great deal of resistance in many churches today. Why? "Because," we are told, "God simply does not work that way today." What way? "Well, you know, miracles; He no longer works miracles today." So? "Well, if He were actually in the business of chastening anyone today, He would be interjecting Himself into the world, which, by definition, would be a supernatural act, something He has said in His Word that He would not be doing in this age." But where in His Word has God ever taught such a doctrine? Unfortunately, it's about this time in the dialog that someone usually begins to get upset.

The Scriptures say:

My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons (Hebrews 12:5-8).

In other words, the Bible teaches that the Lord is actively involved in disciplining His children. How He does this, I cannot be sure, but there is nothing in the Bible that teaches me that it must be done "only in and through the Word," as many seem to think. Furthermore, anyone who gives lip-service to God's providence — in this case, special providence — but denies He is involved in the chastening of His sons, is engaged in orthotalksy.

After doing some writing on the activity of Satan and his demonic horde, a preacher contacted me about what he thought to be problems with what I had written. His position, which has been widely read in the brotherhood, is that Satan, since his defeat by Jesus Christ, is locked away in prison and has no immediate input into the struggle currently taking place between the

kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Satan's only influence on the world, according to this brother, is residual. His agents are not demons, but men and women who have been influenced to do evil by the false teachings that have filtered down through the ages. According to this brother, the "doctrines of demons," that some were going to fall prey to in the "latter times" (1 Timothy 4:1), were not doctrines taught *by* demons; they were, instead, false doctrines *about* demons, who were, in reality, nothing more than the figments of man's imagination.

Although it is true that Satan has been defeated by our Lord and is, consequently, limited in what he can do, he is still very much a part of the battle raging here on planet Earth. The Bible makes it clear that this defeated enemy is still a formidable foe, who goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). In other words, the Bible identifies Satan as the "Lame-Duck" ruler of this world who remains active (although curtailed) between the "D-Day" of the cross and the "V-Day" of the Lord's Second Coming. When I asked my brother about this verse, he said it was just a metaphor and was not meant to be taken literally. Acknowledging that the passage was speaking of the Devil metaphorically, I asked him if he thought the metaphor accurately depicted his position that Satan is locked away in a prison somewhere and is unable to have any direct influence on the world in which we live. In reply, he just repeated that the passage was a metaphor and not to be taken literally. To me, it sounded like this brother was saying 1 Peter 5:8 is no longer valid.

In contrast to the idea that Satan is no longer active, the Bible teaches that we must guard our minds against Satan's onslaughts. It teaches that the Devil can both blind (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) and corrupt our minds through deception (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:3). In opposition to the wisdom that comes from above, we are told there is the wisdom that comes from below — a wisdom that is earthly, sensual, and devilish (cf. James 3:15). Those exhibiting this kind of wisdom are "walking according to the prince of this world" (Ephesians 2:2-3). So, even when I grant that the immediate cause of much of this is residual, as my esteemed brother correctly teaches, this in no way prevents Satan from being directly (personally) or indirectly (through his angels, demons, evil spirits or human agents) involved in deluding and blinding mankind to the Truth. And although it is absolutely true that none of this can happen without our cooperation, it does, in fact, happen. How do I know? The Bible

tells me so.

But this is not all. The Bible teaches that if we do not love the truth, God will permit us to be deluded (cf. 2 Thessalonians 7-12). The one who has God's permission to do this deluding is the "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2). Therefore, we are instructed to put on the "whole armor of God" so that we will be able to stand against "all the wiles" of the Devil (cf. Ephesians 6:11). Incidentally, the very context of Ephesians 6 is, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (v. 12). This is not just theological fiddle-faddle, as some seem to think. This is, instead, the clear and emphatic teaching of God's Word. This is why the Scriptures instruct us to "gird up the loins of [our] mind[s]" (1 Peter 1:13). Unfortunately, too many of us think and act like there is no real battle going on today. But make no mistake about it, there is a real battle going on today, and the object of this battle is our minds.

When I asked my brother why the Holy Spirit would have spent so much time warning us about something that could not, according to his belief, happen anyway, he insisted, quite emphatically, that Satan was not able to put ideas into our minds today. When I asked, Why not?, he first argued that it would be a violation of our free wills. So, I pointed out to him that Satan put something into the mind of Judas without violating his free will (John 13:2). He then argued that if Satan were permitted to do this today, then he would be exercising more power than God. How was this?, I asked. "Well," he said, "God works only in and through the Word today, and if Satan can put things into our minds, then he is exercising more power than God." (Although this quote may not be word for word, it accurately represents the essence of what this brother said.)

I assured my brother that although I understood the Bible to be teaching that no one can be saved apart from his obedience to the gospel, I do not believe it teaches that God is limited to working "only in and through the Word," whether it be in conversion, or anywhere else. "Well," he said, "name something God does today apart from His Word." I then spent a few moments trying to assure him that I did not want to denigrate the Word of God in any sense. Nevertheless, I told him, I believe there is nothing in the Bible that teaches that God's providence (whether general or special) must take place "only in and through the Word." In conjunction with this, I pointed out that if wisdom

came "only in and through the Word," then the command in James 1:5-7 is grossly misleading. In this passage, we are asked to pray for wisdom, which the Lord will then give to those who ask in faith. Contextually, this wisdom is not limited to a study of God's Word, which, I pointed out, does provide wisdom, but encompasses that which is received directly from God in response to our prayers. But according to my brother, this is simply not so. He contended, unflinchingly, that because we no longer live in the miraculous age, God has *limited* His actions to the Word. Therefore, he argued if Satan could directly influence our minds today, then he would definitely be more powerful than God. The conclusion of the matter, as far as the aforementioned brother is concerned, is that God is limited to working "only in and through the Word" today. Any other conclusion, he believes, leads us into the deluded fallacies of Pentecostalism.

Brethren, the Scriptures teach that we are engaged in a great spiritual battle against a mighty host of spiritual wickedness. That there are more than a few among us who do not understand this is indicative of the degree to which we have absorbed the spirit of this age. It seems that some of us have become 21st century Sadducees, believing neither in angels nor spirits (cf. Acts 23:8), and "knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

Yes, Pentecostalism is certainly filled to the brim with "deluded fallacies." But as wrong as Pentecostalism is, at least Pentecostals believe in a God who is still actively involved in His creation. That so many of God's people no longer believe that He is, is in my opinion a grievous error that plagues the modern church, and reflects the teachings of the modified neo-Deists who stand in our pulpits today and preach both an absentee God and a watered down Gospel

Some, no doubt, will be terribly troubled by what I'm saying. Others will detect in what I have written an "uncouth and impertinent stridency." In fact, one dear brother, who I greatly respect for his work's sake, said I sounded like I had a chip on my shoulder. Well, he may be right, but I think he may be wrong about just what that "chip" is. I plead guilty to feeling under tremendous pressure concerning these things. I attribute this to a zeal for the Lord's house (cf. John 2:17), a reverent fear of "He Who Is" (Proverbs 9:10; Isaiah 8:13), and a genuine love of the Truth (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:10). Of course, I pray that I am right about this. If I know my own heart, and I know the heart can be a terribly deceptive place, I am not trying to "get even" with anyone. As I have al-

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ready said, I believe preaching to be valuable work. Therefore, I am not anti-preacher or anti-preaching. Nevertheless, I am convinced that many Christians today wrongly believe what they believe, not because they have learned it from the Bible, but because they have learned it by listening to the modified neo-Deists in our pulpits. Let me be frank. At issue is not whether the things I am saying are deemed by some to be rude and discordant — at issue is this: Is what I am saying true?

When a knowledgeable Buddhist is first introduced to Christianity, the first thing that would strike him as novel about Jehovah is *not* that He is a God of love or that He is a God of self-sacrifice. Instead, he would be struck with the idea that Jehovah is a God who *actively participates* in the world. As was previously pointed out, many religions and classic philosophies picture a God who is absent from the world rather than active in it. But this is not so when it comes to the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. As Jesus said in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now." That is, there never has been a time when God was not actively involved in His creation.

Unfortunately, many Christians believe, along with the Deists, that God created the universe, set the natural laws in motion, and now sits back and lets the whole thing run on its own. In fairness to these Christians, and in contrast to the Deists, it ought to be pointed out that they believe the Lord has, on various occasions, interjected Himself into His creation. In other words, they believe the Creator has from time to time acted in, and upon, His creation. Primarily, they believe this participation was for the express purpose of effecting man's redemption. Therefore, they do not believe that God cannot be active in His creation. Instead, they believe that Jehovah is not, by His own choice, at this time, actively involved in the world. I believe I know how and why they have come to these conclusions. I am even sympathetic. Even so, I do not think their conclusions are consistent with the truths taught in the Bible. (Incidentally, anyone who has kept up with the wranglings between Old Earth and Young Earth creationists in recent years should now understand why so many Christians are getting caught up in Old Earth creationism, which is not much more than modified neo-Deism.)

The scope of this study does not permit us to enter into a detailed study of the providence of God, or as I now prefer to call it, "the hand of God" (1 Peter 5:6). Nevertheless, the nature of this study compels me to mention some things. I do not, for instance, deny the reality of what we

call the "laws of nature." These laws (e.g., gravity, motion, physics, chemistry, and thermodynamics) are well-established and very much a part of our ordered universe. It seems to me that the actual existence of these laws cannot be intelligently denied. But, when we speak of these laws of nature, are we talking about purely descriptive devices, or are we talking about things that actually explain why things happen? In other words, do the natural laws only describe the way things happen or do they actually explain why things happen the way they do? I believe a correct understanding of natural laws must combine both of these concepts. The next question ought to be: Why should there be such laws in the first place? All of us, I am sure, answer this question the same way: Because God created them! Yes, this is certainly true, and even a Deist could answer this way, but the crucial question is: Is there more to this? I answer by saying, yes there is, and it is at this point that I begin to part company with my modified neo-Deist brethren.

The Bible teaches that not only did God create the natural laws, and then set them in motion, but He also keeps them in motion (cf. Acts 17:28; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). This means that God's work with reference to the natural laws was not over when He finished creating the universe. Even now, He continues to uphold all things by the "word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3). That is to say, "In Him all things consist," or "hold together" (Colossians 1:17).

This means that "in Him" the atomic particles cling to their positions around their nuclei. It means that "in Him" molecules cohere to form elements. "In Him" the elements form various substances and bodies. "In Him" the gravitational pull of the earth causes us to stick to its surface. "In Him" the planets revolve around the sun. "In Him" our galaxy holds together as a clump of stars rushing with great speed through the massive expanse of the universe. And what does all this mean? It means that God continues to preserve the whole universe, preventing it from slipping back into nonexistence or nothingness. It means that even the most fundamental physical law of the universe, the first law of thermodynamics (i.e., the law of energy conservation) remains in force as a direct result of God's providence. This means the creation is totally and continuously dependent upon the power of God for its existence (i.e., "in Him we live, and move, and have our being," [Acts 17:28a]).

Finally, although Jehovah must never be thought of as the theologian's "god of the gaps," it just may be that the quirkiness that seems to be taking place on the subatomic level (we're

talking quantum physics here), namely, "effects without causes," is nothing other than the "hand of God" supernaturally holding all things together by "the word of His power." I am not saying it *is*, mind you. What I am saying is that it *could be*. It is certainly not inconsistent with what the Bible teaches concerning God's providential care. (Incidentally, the fact that Colossians 1:17 and Hebrews 1:3 specifically mention God the Son should not be interpreted to mean that the Father and Holy Spirit are no longer involved in the work of providence. On the contrary, these passages simply include the Son in this work and, thereby, serve to affirm His true identity as God.)

In concluding this part of our study, let me restate my position as succinctly as I know how. The God of the Bible is not an absentee God. He is not uninvolved in His creation. He is now, has been in the past, and will continue to be in the future, actively "upholding all things by the word of His power." While He has bestowed a degree of autonomy upon His creation, even providing the crowning glory of His creation with free moral agency, He, nevertheless, reserves for Himself the final decision as to whether a particular event occurs or not. Because "He is who He is" (Exodus 3:14), Jehovah can allow something to happen in association with His natural laws, or He can intervene to prevent it. By manipulating, limiting, or even overriding these laws, He can cause another event — one that would not have "normally" taken place — to occur instead.

On certain occasions, and for His own purposes, He has even granted this ability to Satan (cf. Job 1:12-19). Among other things, Satan, with God's permission, caused the great wind that destroyed Job's family. In Job 2:7, this arch enemy of all mankind is identified as the one who "smote" Job. What does all this mean? The ramifications reach far beyond the scope of this study. But of this one thing I am certain: God is the absolute Sovereign — i.e., Ruler, King, Authority — over all creation (cf. Daniel 4:32-34; 5:21; Psalm 103:19; 145:1-21; Ephesians 1:20-22; Jude 25). As Sovereign, He retains the right to intervene in and overrule any, or all, of His natural laws.

One day, all the universe — and this includes the laws of nature — will be dissolved by God (2 Peter 3:10-13). That which was brought into existence and is currently maintained by the "word of His power" shall be demolished by this same power. It is only the Eternal One, the One who was, is, and shall be, who has the capacity to be the Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer of the universe. In all eternity, only He is present.

Accordingly, the one and only true God in no way resembles the absentee, do-nothing gods of either heathenism or modern theology. The idea that the laws of nature are so "fixed" as to leave no room for divine intervention is completely foreign to the pages of the Bible. Therefore, when a Christian claims to believe in the providence of God, but then limits this providence to the natural processes alone, he is genuflecting to the sham gods of orthodoxy.

## The God Who Doesn't Know The Future

The world is filled with the sham gods of religion, science, and philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), the son of an Anglican vicar, and a professor at both Cambridge and Harvard, was well-known for his work in the philosophy of science and mathematics, and eventually became the systematizer of a way of thinking that has come to be known as "Process philosophy." This philosophy, also known as Panentheism, teaches that God, who is both relative and mutable, grows or develops along with His creation. This philosophy eventually evolved into what is today known as "Process theology," which, according to its proponents, is "the most important development in Christian thought since the first century" (Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology*, 1987, in the Introduction). The reason this movement is so popular today is that it provides us sophisticated moderns with an intellectually and emotionally satisfying reinterpretation of Christianity that seems to be in complete agreement with so many of the ways of thinking that became acceptable in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Chief among Whitehead's followers is Charles Hartshorne, who summarized his dissatisfaction with classical theism in a book entitled *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. In addition to the idea of omnipotence, he singled out the "mistakes" of God's perfection, omniscience, love, and immutability. Hartshorne thinks Greek and Roman philosophy has had too much influence on classical theism. His desire, therefore, is to rid us of these encumbrances and replace them with a truly enlightened and modern view of biblical faith. As we observe the changes some of our own brethren are making in their reinterpretations of God's characteristics and attributes, it is relevant to note that Hartshorne affirms divine omniscience, but then redefines it in a radically different way than we normally think of the word. Omniscience, ac-



cording to Hartshorne, is the ability to "know all that exists." But because future, contingent, free will choices have not happened yet, they do not exist, and if they do not exist, they cannot be known even by an omniscient God. Hartshorne calls this "temporal omniscience." This is exactly the idea that some brethren are currently defending. I have suspected for some time that the various concepts some of my brethren are defending and teaching reflect a study of Process philosophy more than they do the Word of God. If I am right, this will become more obvious as time goes on.

Process theology, according to those who have critiqued it, is a total capitulation to paganism. "Take any essential Christian belief," these critics say, "and one will find that the process theologians supplant it with an alien belief" (Nash, *op. cit.*). Is God the Sovereign of the universe? Is He the personal, omnipotent, and all-knowing Creator of the universe? Is Jesus Christ the eternal, divine Son of God whose incarnation, death, and resurrection were necessary in order to redeem fallen man? Is faith in Christ the only foundation for human forgiveness? To these, and many other questions, the official Process answer is "No."

Just how many of our brethren have read after Whitehead and Hartshorne, I have no way of knowing. But this is what I do know. The books of those who have been influenced by Whitehead, Hartshorne, *et al.*, have found their way into the libraries of our brethren. One example would be *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will*. The author of this book, Richard Rice, believes that God's knowledge is "constantly increasing" (1985, pp. 30,39). According to Rice, God does not have *actual* foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women. He teaches that God's prophetic utterances are nothing more than predictions based upon His perfect knowledge of the past and infinite knowledge of the present, or His omnipotence, which He uses to make things happen, or a combination of both of these (Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 75ff). It has not gone unnoticed that Rice's book is being recommended by some brethren as the definitive answer to the question associated with the alleged "incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and man's free will." I'll have more to say about this further along in this study, but now I want to address the idea of God's all-knowingness.

Psalms 147:5 says that God's knowledge is infinite. Infinite in this verse is the Hebrew *micpar* and means the same thing it does in English. Now, if God's understanding is infinite (having no boundaries or limits), and under-

standing is predicated on knowledge, then it follows necessarily that God's knowledge is also infinite. Of course, such infinite knowledge would, in fact, be "unsearchable" by finite creatures, and this is exactly what Romans 11:33 says. In other words, God "knows all things" (1 John 3:20). Notice that the Bible does not say God has the *capacity* to know all things, which He certainly does; instead, the argument is that God *actually* "knows all things." Now, if God knows all things, what is it that He does not know? Remember, the Great Intelligence of the universe is writing to His intelligent creatures and expects us to be able to understand what He's saying. Accordingly, not only does He teach us through direct statements and approved examples, but He also expects us to make necessary conclusions. So, by direct statement the Bible teaches that God "knows all things" (1 John 3:20), and the necessary conclusion is that there is not anything God does not know — and this includes the *then, now, and not yet!*

This seems plain enough. The Bible teaches in no uncertain terms that there is not anything God does not know. This includes even those things that modern science tells us cannot be known. For example, in quantum physics there is an axiom known as *Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle* which says that one cannot know the exact position and the exact speed of any atomic particle at the same time. This means that if we calculate the speed of an electron, we cannot know its position. On the other hand, if we calculate the electron's position, then we cannot know its speed. To do both is a practical and theoretical impossibility. Even so, what is quite impossible for man to discern is clearly known by God. In fact, God does not just know the location and speed of a particular atomic particle, He actually knows the position and speed of all atomic particles that make up the universe.

Again, the Bible teaches in no uncertain terms that there is not anything God does not know. But some say that this is not true. As has been previously mentioned, there are those who believe there are some things God just cannot know, particularly the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women. On the other hand, there are those who believe that God has the capacity to know all things, but, for reasons known only to Him, chooses not to know some of these things. This, I think, is pretty much the orthodox view of churches of Christ. Unlike those previously mentioned, who advocate their position primarily for philosophical reasons, those who advocate this position do so only because the Bible seems to be saying that there are

things God did not know (cf. Genesis 18:21 and 22:12), and, as they are accustomed to saying, the Bible does not contradict itself. I shall be answering the arguments presented by both of these arguments, but I will answer the latter group first.

True, the Bible does not contradict itself. Therefore, if the Bible teaches that there is not anything God does not know, then passages like Genesis 18 and 22 — which are the proof-texts of those who believe God does not know some things — must be interpreted in light of this truth. In fact, a fundamental rule of Bible interpretation says that we must understand Scripture in its normal sense unless a literal interpretation contradicts other clear teaching found in God's Word. This is the error one makes in thinking Genesis 18 and 22 negate the all-knowingness of God. Nevertheless, it is argued by these brethren that just as God being all-powerful does not mean He has to be doing everything He has the capacity to do, being all-knowing does not mean God must know everything He has the capacity to know. What to many sounds like incontestable logic is, in fact, a *non sequitur*, an argument that does not logically follow its premise. True, being all-powerful, by definition, does not mean one has to be engaged in doing all things; but knowing all things, by definition, does mean "knowing all things." Being all-powerful infers ability only, while being all-knowing infers not just ability, but the actual knowledge itself. In other words, the God of the Bible is not claiming that He could know all things; He's claiming He does know all things.

Those who wrongly believe Genesis 18 and 22 to be teaching that God has chosen not to know some things ignore the plain teaching of these scriptures by their literal interpretation of these passages. Of course, fairness compels me to admit that it is equally possible for one to argue that I am doing the same thing. My task, therefore, is to demonstrate the actual accord that exists between two seemingly contradictory teachings — (1) God knows all things; (2) God does not know some things — and do it in a way that does no damage to the integrity of the Scriptures. What follows is my explanation of what appears, at first, to be a dilemma.

In Genesis 18:21, we are dealing with an unusual circumstance. God, who is omnipresent, which means His ontological being is present to all of space equally, has, on occasion, entered space at specific points and become present in it for a specific purpose. The theologians call these "theophanies." This seems to be the case in Genesis 18:21. In verse 1 of the chapter, it says, "Then the LORD appeared to

him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day." In verse 2, it mentions "three men." Whether these three men are manifestations of the triune nature of God, or whether the other two were angels, is not clear. What seems clear is that this is, in fact, a theophany. In entering the time-space continuum, God, who is infinite ontologically, willingly, and somehow, without ceasing to be who He is, allowed Himself to be subject to the finite. It's mind-boggling, I know, but, nevertheless, this appears to be the clear import of Scripture. Now, let's look at the passage in question with my interpretation of it:

I, [who have somehow subjected Myself to the time-space continuum] will go down [not from heaven, but down the way geographically] **now** [not in eternity, but right now at this moment, subject to time and space] and see [i.e., learn experientially in time and space] whether they have done [and, more importantly, continue to do "now"] altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me [in eternity, not limited by time and space]; and if not [i.e., if they are no longer doing what I knew they were doing before I allowed Myself to be subject to time and space], I [God subject to time and space] will know [experientially] (verse 21).

Notice that I have emphasized the word "now" by putting it in bold letters. This is because I believe this word to be the key to understanding this passage. God, who ontologically knows the past, present, and future, contextualizes His knowing to the "now" of the time-space continuum. Are we really supposed to think that the self-existent, eternal, infinite Spirit who is God did not really know everything that had been happening in Sodom and Gomorrah? 1 John 3:20 makes it absolutely clear that God is greater than our heart (he knows our heart as well as every other heart) and knows all things. No, whatever Genesis 18:21 means must be understood by the context, and the context clearly indicates a theophany. Therefore, the theophany must be taken into consideration when trying to understand this passage. When I debated the brother in the Foreknowledge of God debate mentioned at the beginning of this study, he did take the position that God cannot know the future, but even so, he at least admitted that God knew the past and present perfectly. My opponent's position is bad enough, I think, but now some are wanting me to believe that the all-knowing God does not even know the past and present perfectly. True, this is the only conclu-

sion one may come to if this passage is to be understood literally and apart from its "now" context. Therefore, I know this conclusion is not, and cannot be, true!

I now ask you to turn your attention to what I consider the more difficult passage. In Genesis 22:12, the angel of the Lord says to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for **now** I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Although the "angel of the Lord" is involved in this episode, the unusual circumstances associated with a theophany are not a part of the context. Furthermore, as we have already observed, the Bible teaches us that the self-existent, eternal, and infinite Spirit who is God "knows all things." So, again, citing a fundamental principle of hermeneutics, this passage cannot be interpreted in a way that would negate this truth.

Now, in connection with all this, it is interesting to note *what* the self-existent, eternal, infinite Spirit who is God knew about Abraham before He ever "tested" him. In Genesis 18:17-19, the Lord said:

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.

In other words, God knew that Abraham would pass the "tests" of faith, which included the one mentioned in this passage. To disregard this information, as well as the truth about God's "all-knowingness," is to make a serious mistake when trying to understand this passage. Yes, taken literally, the passage does appear to be teaching that God learned something about Abraham that He had not previously known. But, if God really does know all things, and the Bible says He does, and if He knew Abraham would pass all "tests," and the Bible says He did, then Genesis 22:12 cannot be teaching us what it seems to be teaching. (I admit to feeling a little uncomfortable when making this kind of statement. Nevertheless, I am confident that this is the correct way to think about this passage. The apostle Paul was not the only inspired writer who wrote things difficult to understand, which, if we are not careful, can be twisted to teach something completely contrary to truth [cf. 2 Peter 3:16]. Our responsibility is to be diligent to present ourselves approved to God,

as workers who do not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth [2 Timothy 2:15]. This is not always easy, but if we work hard at it, then we, like Abraham, will also pass the "test.")

I think the answer to understanding Genesis 22:12 is found in places like Deuteronomy 29 and 30, where God promises to give life or death and blessings or cursings, depending upon one's obedience to His Word. Do what is right and one is blessed; do what is wrong and one is cursed. This is, in fact, a principle taught many places in the Bible. Although we do not expect to hear the voice of the "angel of the Lord" today, nevertheless, this principle is still true: If we serve the Lord faithfully, He will bless us; if we disobey Him, He will curse us.

God is all-knowing. This is what the Bible clearly teaches. This means that He has infallible remembrance of the past, infinite consciousness of the present, and complete foreknowledge of the future. Even so, He has agreed to deal with us in the time-space continuum. In the passage cited, you will notice that I have once again emphasized the word "now." This is because I believe the key to understanding this passage, like the key to understanding Genesis 18:21, is the "now" context. In the "now" of Abraham's time and space, the voice of the angel of the Lord could be heard audibly, and God is acknowledging His blessing on, or appreciation of, Abraham at a very critical time and place in his "walk of faith." It should not go unnoticed that the word "know" in this passage is sometimes translated "to recognize, admit, acknowledge, confess, declare, or tell." So, in harmony with the rest of Scripture, and without doing any violence to the words of this passage, Genesis 22:12 is not teaching that the all-knowing God of the universe did not really know whether Abraham would pass this critical test. Instead, He is acknowledging His appreciation of Abraham's faithfulness to Him. In other words, He is declaring, "Abraham, I have been testing you...and you have passed the test!"

This question seems to bother many Christians. How, they wonder, can God treat us like we are saved **now**, if He really knows we are going to be lost later? This kind of thinking, of course, projects onto God our own human incapacities. Again, we need to be reminded that God is "not a man" (cf. Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29) and, as such, is not subject to human limitations. If we all really believed this, then this problem would never arise in the minds of some. Whether these folks are consciously aware of it or not, they have conceived in their minds a sham god who suffers from finite limitations

while hypocritically verbalizing their faith in the omni-characteristics of Almighty God. Hence, the god these people worship is pagan, and the language they speak is orthotalksy.

The God of the Bible has agreed to deal with us exactly where we are in the time-space continuum — namely, if we do what is right, He blesses us; but if we do what is wrong, He curses us. As was pointed out in the previous section, this principle is taught many places in God's Word. This means that God does repent and He does relent as He deals with His free moral agents. (It must be understood that this repenting and relenting has nothing to do with His specific irrevocable decisions — decisions in which intercession or repentance will not change, cf. Ezekiel 24:13-14.) When one obeys the gospel and is added to the church by Christ Himself, he has been saved from his past sins (Acts 2:47) and has access to the spiritual blessings available only "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). As such, he or she is adopted by God as His own child, with all the privileges associated with such status (Romans 8:14-17). Even if this individual will eventually fall from grace (cf. Galatians 5:4) and have his or her name removed from the Book of Life (cf. Revelation 3:5; 22:19), God can, and does, deal with this person in a perfectly righteous way. What one will eventually do, or not do, does not prohibit God from interacting with His creatures exactly the way He said He would. Surely, one ought to be willing to listen to God's own testimony on this. In Jeremiah 42, God set forth two options for the people: (1) Do what is right and I will bless you (verses 10-12); (2) Do what is wrong and I will curse you (verses 13-18). In Ezekiel 33:11-19, the Lord said:

Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel? Therefore you, O son of man, say to the children of your people: The righteousness of the righteous man shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression; as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall because of it in the day that he turns from his wickedness; nor shall the righteous be able to live because of his righteousness in the day that he sins. When I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, but he trusts in his own righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteous works shall be remembered; but because of the iniquity that he has committed, he

shall die. Again, when I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has stolen, and walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right; he shall surely live. Yet the children of your people say, 'The way of the LORD is not fair.' But it is their way which is not fair! When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it.

This, then, is what God has agreed to do, and through faith we can be sure He does it. Doubt this, and we doubt the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.

Before leaving this section, we need to look at one more point. God knew that Judas would betray His Son (cf. Psalm 41:9; Acts 2:23). Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him (cf. John 6:70-71). All this was before Judas acted to betray Jesus. Is there anything in Scripture that indicates this knowledge caused our Lord to treat Judas any differently than he would have if Judas was not going to be the one who would betray Him? In other words, did Jesus behave unfairly with Judas or mistreat him in any way? Of course not! Now, if God could deal fairly with Judas, who would betray His only begotten Son, then there should be no doubt that He can deal fairly with us in the time-space continuum. If we do what is right, we can be sure He will bless us. On the other hand, if we do evil, we can be certain He will curse us.

There are those among us who believe that God's foreknowledge and man's free will are incompatible. They believe this incompatibility is "axiomatic," or self-evident, truth. Consequently, they feel compelled to make a choice between God's foreknowledge or man's free will. Wishing to preserve the biblical concept of man's free moral agency, they conclude that God does not have foreknowledge of man's future, contingent, free will acts. These brethren are making a serious mistake — a mistake that has caused them to erect a sham god who cannot know the future. When expounding their position, these brethren immerse themselves in the shibboleths of orthotalksy.

Contrary to what these brethren think, the Bible teaches that God has foreknowledge of

man's future, contingent, free will acts. For example, just before he died, Moses was told by God of the coming apostasy of the Israelites (cf. Deuteronomy 31:16-21). God was not just declaring what He planned to do, but was making it clear what human beings would be doing in the future of their own free wills. In addition, the Bible teaches that man has free will (Deuteronomy 30:19, etc.) Therefore, the Bible teaches both God's foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of His creatures and man's free will.

Furthermore, it is not true that God's foreknowledge and man's free will are irreconcilable. This is the figment of some philosopher's imagination. Unfortunately, John Calvin fell victim to this thinking and instead of opting for man's free will, he chose to believe in God's foreknowledge. According to Calvin, man just does not have free will. Today, Calvinism is one of the most prevalent false doctrines in Christendom. Calvin's God knows all that is going to happen in the future because He is the one who has decreed everything that will happen. According to this false doctrine, man simply does what God has decided He will do. Some, we are told, have been predestined for heaven; others have been predestined for hell. All of this, according to Calvin, was completely independent of any decision on man's part. This, in a nutshell, is the soul of Calvinism. The entire theological system, of course, is quite detailed and very complicated. It may surprise some to learn that it is also very logical. But this is true only if one accepts Calvin's starting premise — namely, it is axiomatic that God's foreknowledge and man's free will are totally inconsistent.

Parenthetically, I have always considered it ironic, and perhaps even a little cynical, that brethren who disagree with me concerning my teaching that God's omniscience includes the sum total of things past, present, and future have always felt the necessity to warn me about what they think are my Calvinistic predispositions, and all this while they, themselves, are advancing Calvin's major premise. What am I talking about? Well, look at it. Brethren who believe God either *chooses* not to know some things or *cannot* know some things take these positions in order to preserve man's free moral agency, which they conclude is in jeopardy if God truly has foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men. In other words, accepting Calvin's premise, they then argue the flip-side of the same theological coin. I, on the other hand, totally reject Calvinism, including his beginning premise, which is more than I can say for some of my brethren. Even so, I have

never considered these brethren to be proto-, neo-, or crypto-Calvinists. Accordingly, it would be helpful if some would find out just what Calvinism is before haphazardly hurtling about their uninformed recriminations. Brethren, it is nothing short of sinful to fling about accusations without a shred of evidence. If someone is teaching false doctrine, there must be proof. If we don't have the proof, then we had better not make the charge. A charge without proof is, in essence, bearing false witness (cf. Romans 13:9). It should be obvious that I am not against speaking out against false teaching or teachers. What I am against is the ungodly way it is *sometimes* done. In fact, I am absolutely dismayed at the shoddy and underhanded way some brethren conduct themselves in controversy. No one, not even a false teacher, must ever be charged with anything that cannot be proven. The fact that this sort of behavior is becoming all too commonplace in our brotherhood is a shame and disgrace!

Calvin was wrong, and so are my brethren who believe God's foreknowledge and man's free will are incompatible. Frankly, fairness and integrity demand that those who believe this alleged incompatibility to be self-evident are under obligation to prove it, not just assume it. In truth, this supposed incompatibility has never been proven, and it never will be. Even so, some persist in arguing that if God actually knows the future before it happens, then it is *certain* to happen; thus, the freedom and contingency of the future are totally shattered. They then advance the idea that the certainty of future events and actions make them *fixed*, and if they are "fixed," then man can do nothing other than what has been certain or fixed from eternity. Now, if one accepts this line of reasoning, and I certainly don't, then he has but two choices: (1) he becomes a Calvinist or some other kind of determinist or (2) he denies God's foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will acts of His creatures.

Many contemporary theologians have opted for the latter. Among these are Richard Rice, whom we mentioned earlier, and Richard Swinburne, who wrote: "If God is omniscient then he foreknows all future human actions. If God foreknows anything, then it will necessarily come to pass. But if a human action will necessarily come to pass, then it cannot be free" (*The Coherence of Theism*, 1977, p. 167). Believing, though, that man is free, Swinburne proposes a "modified account of omniscience" (p. 172ff.). This is the same thing Rice has done. Together, they argue in favor of God's all-knowingness, but excluding from this all-knowingness any and

all "future, contingent, free will choices." God's omniscience, they insist, includes all there is to know, but this does not include future free will acts because these acts are simply not knowable. I mentioned this in an earlier section, but have repeated it here for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, Rice and Swinburne, along with some of my brethren, have become so enamored with man-made philosophies that they have, as a result, created a sham god who is much different than the one true God of the Bible. Questioned about their obvious idolatry, they have tried to protect their theological creation by masquerading him behind the cover of orthotalksy.

If we accept their major premises, then man-made philosophies do, indeed, sound very logical and, therefore, correct. Yes, God does foreknow the future and, therefore, the future He foreknows is going to happen. Yes, one can argue that the future is, indeed, "fixed." But the path these folks have chosen at this point leads away from scriptural truths. Yes, the future acts of men and women are "fixed" all right, but not in any *causative* sense. In other words, they are "fixed" not because of God's foreknowledge, but because this is the way free moral agents, exercising their free will choices, will choose to act in the future, and God, simply because He is who He is, foreknows them. This view, contrary to those of Rice, Swinburne, *et al.*, is totally consistent with what the Bible says about the complete compatibility of God's foreknowledge and man's free will. Regrettably, some are more swayed by the think-sos of men than the truths taught in God's Word.

## The God Who Can Fail

For those who believe in a God who is omnipotent, it may sound very strange to hear someone teaching that God can fail. Of course, this is exactly the idea being formulated by Process theologians and some New Testament Christians. I first heard this idea being actively expressed by brethren almost twenty years ago. Who and where are not important to this study. Suffice it to say, this can be thoroughly documented. In all fairness, let me say that I do not believe any of these people, and this includes the process folks, advocate their position out of animosity toward the one true God. The problem, once again, is the free will issue. It is unfortunate that something so wonderful (*viz.*, free moral agency) can be so misused by the evil one. Even so, we have learned by now that the devil is a master at perverting things that, in and of themselves, are wonderful and good. Actually,

God's gracious gift of free will, which is the key to understanding so much that transpires between God and His creatures, is sorely misunderstood by many people. Consequently, before proceeding further, permit me to make a needed observation or two.

If man is truly free, if only in a limited sense, then God's power is limited. For instance, God cannot (unless you hold the determinist view) force someone to obey the gospel. Why? Because man has free will, and if man has free will, then God, no matter how powerful He is, cannot make (in a determinist sense) a free moral agent obey Him. If this is true (and again, only a determinist would deny it), then there are some things an all-powerful God cannot do. But, please, don't panic. This truth is not quite the breeding ground for error that you might think. Any self-imposed limitation that God might place upon Himself is not actually a limitation at all, ontologically speaking. For example, the Bible makes it clear that God cannot lie (*cf.* Titus 1:2). Does this impinge on His omnipotence? No, God is still omnipotent — that is, He can accomplish (make happen) anything He purposes to accomplish (make happen) — even though He cannot lie. Further, the things God cannot do are not limitations imposed upon Him from outside of Himself. If they were, of course, then they would negate His omnipotence. God is limited only by the necessity of being *He Who Is Who He Is* and the free exercise of His own will; neither of which abrogate His all-powerfulness. That He has freely chosen to be limited by the free moral agency of His creatures — the very creation of which necessitated omnipotence — does not nullify His omnipotence. In fact, it serves only to enhance and glorify it. Indeed, we join with the heavenly host in saying: "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!" (Revelation 19:6).

Rice, Swinburne, *et al.*, argue that because His creatures have free will, God does not have foreknowledge of their future, contingent, free will choices. (It has already been demonstrated that this idea is not only contrary to the Scriptures, but is nothing more than an unproved philosophical assumption.) If this is true, they argue, then God is limited in what He can do. He can, for instance, determine to redeem fallen man, He can even implement the plan, but He cannot actually know whether the plan will be successful because of the free moral agency of those who are the objects of the plan. I know of several well-known gospel preachers who teach this. Specifically, they teach that God's plan to redeem man through His Son, Jesus Christ, could have failed. Quite frankly, the first time I heard one of these "God-can't-know-what-can't-

be-known-therefore-God-could-have-failed"

brothers teach this doctrine, I was shocked. I have now heard it articulated enough that I am not quite as shocked as I was at the beginning. Even so, I am still troubled every time I hear this erroneous argument expressed.

In essence, this doctrine teaches that Jesus Christ was not *the* plan, as the Bible teaches, but was, instead, *a* plan. If the Son would have failed in His mission to redeem fallen man, then according to these brethren, the Father would have had to implement some other strategy to salvage His original Scheme of Redemption. But what other strategy? If Jesus would have failed in His mission, then God in the flesh would have failed. As the whole undertaking was, in fact, the Father's plan, then He, too, would have failed. Okay, let's indulge this theological delusion for a moment so that we can discover its inescapable conclusion. Speculating, one might say that even though the Father and Son were unable to effect man's salvation, maybe the Holy Spirit would be able to come up with a plan to redeem man. But, by this time, the Godhead (viz., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) would have been corrupted by sin and failure. Ergo, the triune God, the one who revealed Himself to us in the Bible, would no longer exist — He would have decayed, or disintegrated, or whatever happens to a sham god of this sort. Brethren, this sort of theological gibberish cannot be right. But unfortunately, not only do some preachers believe and preach this, they are even considered to be the epitome of true wisdom and orthodoxy by some.

The Scheme of Redemption was "predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). Does this sound like a plan that could fail? Certainly not! Nevertheless, the plan would be no mean undertaking. It would ultimately take the sacrifice of the heavenly Father's only begotten Son (cf. John 3:16-18), the divine *Logos* (cf. John 1:1), who would sooner or later have to leave heaven, take upon Himself the mantle of flesh (cf. John 1:14), and finally shed His blood on the cruel cross of Calvary for the remission of our sins (cf. Matthew 26:28). As such, this was not simply *a* plan — it was, instead, *the* plan. It was the plan that would work because God's foreknowledge would allow Him to not just design a plan that *could*, under certain circumstances, work, but it would also allow Him to carry out the plan with absolutely impeccable precision (cf. Acts 2:23). As the result of this perfect plan, the heavenly Father would be able to "bring many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:9-10). This plan could not,

and would not, fail. How can I be so sure? Because, it was God's plan, the One who said:

Remember the former things of old, for 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 times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it (Isaiah 46:9-11).

Does this sound like a God who could fail? Again, in Proverbs 19:21, the Scriptures say: "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the Lord's counsel — that will stand."

The Scheme of Redemption originated in, and will eventually culminate in, eternity:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Hence, in the mind of God, and this is a mind that knows the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women, the Scheme of Redemption is a "done deal." Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am not talking about a done deal the way the Calvinists contend. Although the Greek word *proorizo*, translated in the KJV as "predestinate," does mean, according to *Strong's Greek and Hebrew Lexicon*, to "pre-determine," "decide beforehand," or "foreordain," this does not mean that God in eternity made a choice of those He would save independent of anything they would do of their own free wills. Rather, God ordained or decreed in eternity (i.e., He predestined) that those who were going to be saved would have to be conformed to the image of His Son (cf. Romans 8:29). This means that God did not choose individuals to be saved *unconditionally*, as Calvinism teaches. Instead, based upon His foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of His creatures, God predestined (i.e., determined beforehand) those who would be saved *conditionally* (i.e., the condition being conformity to His Son's image). This is what the apostle Paul was writing about when he said: "...just as He [the Father] chose us in Him [Jesus Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having

predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ephesians 1:4-5). Again, does this sound like a plan that could have failed?

Acts 2:23 is the key to understanding the dichotomy that some think exists between foreknowledge and free will. It demonstrates how God works through His foreknowledge and is the perfect illustration of why God cannot fail. The passage says: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." This passage does not teach that God's foreknowledge depends upon His determinate counsel, as determinists, and some of my brethren, teach. What this passage really says is that the death of Jesus happened the way it did because of God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge. Both of these factors were involved in Jesus' death on the cross. On the one hand, God determined that Jesus would become the propitiation for the sins of the world. On the other hand, the details of how this would be accomplished were planned in connection with God's foreknowledge of the historical situation and the character and free will choices of men like Judas and the other actors in this real-life drama. In Acts 4:28, the Bible says, "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." Therefore, if man is truly a free moral agent, and the Bible says he is, then God's foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women is the only way He could have carried out His predetermined plan without destroying man's free will.

The Bible says that the same foreknowledge that allowed God to know His plan for redeeming fallen man would not fail (cf. Acts 2:23) is the same foreknowledge that allowed Him to know that "many sons" would, in fact, be brought to glory (Hebrews 2:10). I believe the "glory" in this verse is equivalent to the "glory" of 2 Corinthians 3:18, and is, therefore, the eternal glory that we, if we remain faithful, will one day share with our glorified Lord in heaven (cf. Romans 8:18-23; 2 Corinthians 4:17-5:5; Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 3:4; 1 Peter 5:1-4,10). Now, if God does not have actual foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men, as some are claiming, then how could He possibly have known that there would be any sons who would be brought to Glory? But God actually speaks of "many sons" (Hebrews 2:10) and "many brethren" (Romans

8:29), the mentioning of which speaks conclusively regarding His actual foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men and women. The immediate context of these two passages makes this a *necessary conclusion*, which is as binding as any *direct statement* or *approved example* derived from God's Word.

If God does not have actual foreknowledge of the future, contingent, free will choices of men, if He is truly a God who can fail, then He is nothing more than a sham God whose claim of superiority over the false gods of paganism (cf. Isaiah 41:21-29) is nothing but deception and fraud, all of which makes Him but little more than the two-faced, impotent, and very finite Wizard of Oz. "No," a thousand times "No," such a God could not be YHWH, the Almighty God, the I Am that I Am, the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the universe! As the true God said in Isaiah 40:28-31:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

The God of the Bible does not — indeed, He cannot — fail! Anyone who thinks He can is wrong. Furthermore, anyone who thinks He can, while giving lip-service to His omnipotence and omniscience is engaged in orthotalksy. Remember, idols are not just found on pagan altars, but in the hearts and minds of well-educated men and women as well.

## The God Who Can Cease Being God

The ruckus taking place in the church today over the Deity of Jesus is all the evidence needed to prove that some Christians actually believe that God can cease being God. That there are brethren who believe that the *Divine Logos*, in order to become a man (cf. John 1:1,14), divested Himself of His Divinity and Godhood cannot be doubted. Although one who had publicly espoused this idea has now acknowledged his error, nevertheless, there are numerous others who still believe it. It is my



firm conviction that this issue is the most serious threat to the integrity of Christianity that has occurred in the modern era. Consequently, it has troubled me greatly that many Christians consider the whole controversy over the Deity of Jesus to be a preacher squabble about a subject that is just not all that important. Brethren, Jesus said, "If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24). When He said this, He was not arguing for His humanity. On the contrary, He was saying that if one did not believe in His Deity, he could not go to heaven. The apostle John identifies this as the spirit of antichrist (cf. 1 John 4:3). Therefore, the question over the Deity of Jesus is not a "tempest in a teapot" issue. Where you and I will spend eternity depends upon getting this question right!

For Christianity to be what it is, there are two cardinal tenets that cannot be tampered with: (1) the Incarnation of God's Son, and (2) the triune nature of the Godhead. If Jesus Christ is, in fact, the eternal, divine Word of God the Father, and if the unity of God is taken seriously (cf. John 1:1), then a plurality of persons within the Godhead is a fact that cannot be denied. In fact, if it had not been for the Incarnation, the truth about the triune nature of God would have never arisen. Hence, the truth about the Deity of Jesus and the Godhead are necessarily interconnected doctrines of the Christian faith. If one were to refute either of these doctrines, then Christianity would be shown to be nothing more than an elaborately devised sham. So, when one, for whatever reason, begins to argue that God the Son divested His Godhood and Divinity and became just a man, he has become, whether he thinks so or not, an enemy of the faith. Undoubtedly, an intrinsically human Jesus is nothing more than a sham god. When those who have created this gelded god then turn around and proclaim to believe in his Deity, they are engaged in orthotalksy.

Those among us who argue for a totally human Jesus (with Deity divested) are reflecting the influence of process theology, which proudly asserts that the classical two-natures doctrine of Jesus presupposes concepts that are outdated, absurd, and totally irrelevant to the modern way of thinking. According to the Processians, Jesus as the God-man is a concept that must go, because it is not possible for the sophisticated, enlightened mind to believe the impossibly absurd idea that two entities (God and man) can occupy the same space at the same time. In other words, when viewed as substances, Deity cannot possibly unite with humanity without creating the displacement of one substance by the other. One can be God, or one can be man, but one cannot

be both God and man simultaneously. Processians love to talk about the "havoc" wreaked by the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was both fully God and fully man at the same time. This is, of course, precisely the same idea being expressed by some brethren today, who scoff at the idea that Jesus could be 100% God and 100% man without being a 200% monstrosity. Therefore, when I listen to or read after these brethren, I want to ask, "Will the real Processians among us please stand up?"

Given the nature of God, there is no chance that He can ever be anything other than what He is. This can be inferred from His self-existent, eternal, and infinite nature. His nature or essence cannot change, but is eternally the same, incorruptible (cf. Romans 1:23) and immortal (cf. 1 Timothy 6:16). In other words, He is unchangeable or immutable (cf. Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). What does this mean? It means that the Self-Existent One cannot be not self-existent; it means that the Eternal One cannot be not eternal; it means that the Infinite One cannot be not infinite; *et cetera*. God, ontologically speaking (i.e., by the nature of His being), cannot be anything else; if He were, He would not be God.

Included in God's unchangeable or immutable nature are His moral attributes, for His moral character is no less a part of His essence than are His power and wisdom. What this means is that God has always been, and always will be, the holy, righteous and gracious God that He is right this moment. His goodness has not been developed, and will never be altered. From everlasting to everlasting, He is the same in character, infallible and immutable (cf. Numbers 23:19).

Of course, it must be kept in mind that the immutability of God's nature does not mean that He cannot interact with His creation. As was pointed out previously, the Bible teaches that the Almighty has agreed to, and does, interact with His creation in the **now** of time. Such interaction is genuine and not pretended. God has agreed to be influenced by His creation. Whether or not I can explain this in view of God's immutable nature is not the point. I cannot even understand it; how, then, can I explain it? In truth, it is not my responsibility to explain it; it is, instead, my responsibility to believe, teach, and defend it. If I had to be able to understand and explain everything about God, especially those things He has not chosen to reveal to me, before I could believe in Him, I and every other finite creature could have no choice but to remain in unbelief.

It is not possible that the essence of God

could be anything other than what it has been, is, and always will be. If this essence were to change, then God would no longer be God. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to make distinctions between God, His essence and His attributes. "I Am that I Am" or "He who is" (Exodus 3:14) exists as a self-existent (cf. Romans 1:23; 1 Timothy 6:16; John 5:26), eternal (cf. Deuteronomy 33:27), infinite (cf. Psalm 139:7-10; Isaiah 46:9,10; Jeremiah 32:27), immutable (cf. Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17) Spirit (cf. John 4:24). If He ceased to be any of these, He could not be God. God's essence (i.e., that which makes Him what He is) could not be anything other than what it is; and that which makes God what He is, of course, is His attributes. Therefore, it is never correct to think of God apart from His essence or attributes. This means that God does not have an essence; He is His essence, and He does not have attributes; He is His attributes.

For example, the Bible tells us that God is love (cf. 1 John 4:8,16). It informs us that God's love is great (cf. Ephesians 2:4), eternal (cf. Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 1:4,5), infinite (cf. Ephesians 3:18,19), and dependable (cf. Romans 8:35-39). If the theme of the Bible is man's redemption, then the central word of the Bible is love. In fact, the Bible tells us that the motivation for the scheme of redemption is God's love for His creation. How much did God love His creation? He loved it so much that He was willing to give His only begotten Son so that it could be redeemed (cf. John 3:16; 1 John 4:9). But what kind of love would do such a thing? To understand this, we must realize that God's love for mankind is a distinctive kind of love called *agape*. And what is *agape*? Primarily, *agape* is good will toward others. It is deep, tender, and warm concern for the happiness and well-being of another; it is charity toward those in need.

When the Bible says, "God loves us," it means that He really cares about us and always does what is best for us. God's love is different from other kinds of love in that it seeks to give and not to get; it seeks to satisfy not some need of the lover, but rather the need of the one who is loved. This is what God is, that is, this is His nature. Strip from God His love and we no longer have the God who has revealed Himself to His creatures. Strip from Him His love and what remains is something very similar to the gods of the pagans.

Finally, what the Bible does not say about the essence or nature of God is just as important as what it does say. For instance, although the Bible teaches that God is His attributes and characteristics, it does not teach that any par-

ticular attribute of God is God. In other words, the Bible is not saying, and has never said, that "Love is God." On the contrary, the Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). Clearly, then, the Bible instructs us that God is His attributes and characteristics. Anyone who believes the Bible, believes this. Consequently, God is, has been, and always will be who and what He is at this exact moment.

Jesus is God. This is the basic meaning of the incarnation. In John 1:1, the Holy Spirit teaches that not only was the Word (i.e., the *Divine Logos*) in the beginning with God, but the Word was God. In verses 14-34, we learn that the Logos became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In a book written so that men would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing might have life in His name, Thomas, speaking of Jesus, exclaims, after seeing Him in His resurrected body, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). There are, of course, other passages that directly speak of Jesus as God, but since they are all disputed by some, I have chosen not to mention them here. Nevertheless, the cited passages serve to demonstrate, to those who are willing to believe the Bible, that Jesus is, in fact, God.

Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews, telling us what God had prophesied about Jesus, writes, "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'" (Hebrews 1:8). He also clearly identifies Jesus as the Jehovah and Elohim of Psalm 102:25-27, who eternally existed before He created the heavens and earth (cf. Hebrews 1:10) and who remains eternally the same (cf. Hebrews 1:11,12), and, therefore, in the person of Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). To see in Hebrews 13:8 only a reference to the faithfulness of Jesus, and not a reference to His immutability, is a serious mistake. In fact, Jesus Christ's faithfulness is grounded in His changelessness. Because He does not change ontologically (i.e., because He has always been the fullness of God that He is at this very moment), He has been, is, and always will be, completely and totally reliable. It is only in this sense that Jesus could identify Himself as the "I Am that I Am" or "He who is" of Exodus 3:14 (cf. John 8:58). When Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I Am," He used the aorist tense to describe Abraham's existence and the timeless present tense to describe His own existence, and thereby identified Himself as the self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable God with a capital "G."

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains

Ode To "THE UNKNOWN GOD"

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were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God (Psalm 90:1,2).

As difficult as it may be for finite creatures to even begin to comprehend (the Bible calls it a mystery in 1 Timothy 3:16), when the *Divine Logos*, or Son of God, became flesh (cf. John 1:14), or came in the likeness of man (cf. Philipians 2:8), or was manifested in the flesh (cf. 1 Timothy 3:16), He did not divest, give up, or have stripped from Him, His Deity. Within the man Jesus of Nazareth dwelt, and continues to dwell (for such is the meaning of the present tense), all (not some of) the fullness of the God-head bodily (cf. Colossians 2:9). From a Biblical standpoint, the historical Jesus is never understood apart from His embodiment as the self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable God in time and space. One might argue that a God divested of His Deity would still continue to exist; but, if He did, He would no longer be what He had been and, therefore, would not be entitled to call Himself "I Am that I Am."

When Jesus identified Himself with the enduring 'I' of Exodus 3:14 (cf. John 8:58), He

was not just claiming to have been God previously. Instead, He was claiming to be the eternal 'I.' To those who rejected His Deity, He said:

Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. You judge according to the flesh...[some translations say, 'by human standards'] (John 8:14-15).

Brethren are creating a sham god and engaging in orthotalksy because they are trying to rely on their human understanding. Reason *alone*, unaided by divine revelation, provides a knowledge of God that is, at its best, only partial, and, at its worst, frequently in error (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6-14). Philosophy simply does not lend itself to an adequate understanding of God's hidden character and purposes (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:21-25). God — *who* He is and *what* He is — is not understood on the basis of human speculation, but by the explicit teachings of the God-breathed Word. In other words, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11).

## Some Concluding Remarks

"But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (2 Peter 2:1-2).

**A**ccording to Ecclesiastes 12:13, the whole duty of man is to fear the Creator of the universe and keep His commandments. This is not something just for those who are in covenant relationship with God through Christ, but for all mankind. The Creator has natural dominion over us even before He has authority over us by consent when we are converted. Why? Because, quite frankly, He is the Creator/Sovereign of the universe — He's the Creator and we are the creatures; He's the Potter and we are the clay! Consequently, He has the authority to make demands upon us and we are under obligation to obey His commands. Apart from this understanding there are no real ethical norms (i.e., What should I do?) or obligations (i.e., Why should I do it?); no such things as absolute norms of conduct — no such things as moral absolutes. This, we learn in Romans 1:18-32, is why those who wanted to satisfy their own lusts chose not to retain in their minds the proper concept of God as Creator/Sovereign. They did not "glorify" God, nor were they "thankful" (Romans 1:21), therefore, they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

True religion (i.e., man made in the image of God, cf. Genesis 1:26-27) and false religion (i.e., God created in the image of man, cf. Romans 1:22-23) are complete opposites. The antagonism between these two is constant. Consequently, the apostle Paul warned, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). In this passage we can clearly see the antagonism between the "tradition of men" and "basic principles of this world" and the teaching of Christ. As Jesus said elsewhere, there are only two sources for religion — God or man (cf. Matthew 21:23-27).

In 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, Paul wrote: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." Making use of military metaphors, the apostle is contrasting vain philosophy (viz., man-made religion) with the truth revealed in the Bible (viz., God-breathed or inspired religion). He is contrasting the secular world view with the Biblical world view. Our weapons, he tells us, are not carnal. In other words, they are not "according to the tradition of men" nor are they "according to the basic principles of the world." Even so, they are mighty "in God" for the pulling down of "strongholds." These "strongholds," according to Paul, are philosophies, arguments, reasonings, concepts, ideas, and every man-made *ism* (i.e., "every high thing") that exalts itself against the "knowledge of God." Primarily, this knowledge of God is derived from just one source: the Bible.

In the very first verse of the Bible, we are told: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In this simple and uncomplicated sentence are concepts with the most profound implications. If one believes this sentence to be divinely inspired truth, then it completely destroys the "strongholds" of atheism, polytheism, materialism, and pantheism. Genesis 1:1 says the atheist is definitely wrong when he says there is no God, because Elohim (the name used to identify God in this verse and one that suggests His triune nature) identifies Himself as the Creator. This one true God (viz., the one and only state of being divine, which the Bible tells us is shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is contrasted with all the false gods of polytheism. Furthermore, materialism, a theory that says physical matter is the only fundamental reality and that all being, processes, and phenomena can be explained as manifestations or results

of matter, is thoroughly defeated by the divinely revealed truth of Creation. The heavens and the earth, with all the matter contained therein, were simply spoken into existence by Almighty God. Finally, the transcendent God identified in Genesis 1:1, the One who had, and continues to have, an existence apart from His Creation, is contrasted with the pantheistic concept that teaches God consists of the forces and laws of the universe. In other words, instead of the Biblical concept of a God who is different from His Creation, the pantheist sees God and the Creation as being One. Specifically, such a pantheistic belief is identified as "Monism" (viz., "All is One").

The Christian must not ignore Paul's warning about the doctrines of men or vain philosophy. According to Paul, vain philosophy is a brigand that, if we are not careful, will take us captive and steal from us our spiritual possessions. Deception, long the technique of those who would cheat us and steal our physical possessions, is the major device of all man-made philosophy. Promising everything, it delivers nothing; and claiming to be one thing, it turns out to be something else entirely!

Unfortunately, many Christians, living at the dawn of the twenty-first century, have either forgotten Paul's warning or no longer believe it. For whatever reasons, Christians, because of their ignorance, have been seduced into thinking that man-made philosophies are religiously neutral. Seemingly unaware of the paradigm of idolatry, they have become enchanted by the smorgasbord of secular thought that obscures the way, perverts the truth, and totally wrecks one's spiritual life. These must be reminded that it was Jesus who said: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). What this means is that apart from the way, there is no going; apart from the truth there is no knowing; and apart from the life, there is no spiritual living. This, quite frankly, is why the apostle Paul said that "every thought" must be brought "into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

In Colossians 3:17, Paul wrote that everything one does in "word or deed" is to be done "in the name of the Lord" (i.e., by the Lord's authority). But how can one's actions be correct if one is not thinking properly? And how can one be thinking properly if one has not brought

"every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"? Therefore, it is clear the Lord calls upon His disciples to out-think, out-live, and out-die the pagans and humanists around about them.

All man-made philosophies are destined for total defeat. It is, therefore, ludicrous that Christians, who have been "called out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9), would want to return again to the "weak and beggarly elements" of this world, symbolized in the Bible as spiritual darkness (cf. Galatians 4:9; Ephesians 4:17-20; Colossians 1:9-14).

Today, our theological chickens are coming home to roost. Many in churches of Christ are in the process of creating idols for their own destruction (cf. Hosea 8:4). If they don't repent, they will be destroyed for their ignorance of God's Word (cf. Hosea 4:6). As the Lord's own unique and special people, poised, as we are, at the beginning of the 21st century, we will either reject, resist and repent of these destructive heresies, or we will be "cut off." As free moral agents, the choice is ours. None of us are immune. Therefore, self-examination is not out of order for anyone, even the devoutest Christians. Remember, whatever is on the throne, whatever controls one's life is his idol. It may be "mammon" (Matthew 6:24); it may be personal pleasure (cf. Philippians 3:19); it may be one's work or family; it may be drugs; it may be "omnipotent," "infallible" science; it may be just SELF (cf. Daniel 5:23). Whatever it is, it must be abandoned.

Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods (Joshua 24:14-16).