

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

WE TALK A LOT ABOUT GOD. Some of it is good talk and some of it isn't. Sometimes the way we use the name of God is not just disrespectful but downright blasphemous. The Greeks declared that the greatest activity of man was to think. From the Christian perspective, the greatest thinking anyone could do is to think about God. That is the greatest activity of man.

As we begin to study the things that people *incorrectly* say to God and about God, we need to think about the true nature and character of God. It is very important that we spend some time here, because this is where the cults step away from sound doctrine and go off on their many tangents from the truth. Most of them break down on the doctrine of God.

A.W. Tozer said in his classic work *The Knowledge of the Holy*, "Worship is pure or base as one entertains high or low thoughts of God." He also said that "we tend, by some secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God." What you think about God will directly affect how you live as well as how you worship. The sad thing is that too many people have too small a concept of God, an inadequate view of God.

Tozer continued, "An inadequate view of God is actually idolatry. To worship God or to worship anything less than what God has revealed Himself to be is idolatry." And this fits what we have seen throughout the world: Millions of people bowing before little

stone images of their gods. Were we to make a statue of Buddha that was a hundred times the size of the largest Buddha in the world, it would still be a little idol compared to the God who created the whole universe.

God from Man's Viewpoint

There are many humanists and philosophers today who seek to study God from man's viewpoint. We have the study of the *philosophy* of religion, the *sociology* of religion, the *anthropology* of religion, and the *psychology* of religion. Man, beginning with the image of himself as the model, seeks to define what God is like. But man, beginning from himself, can only arrive at a very small and warped concept of God.

This is where we end up in many of our aberrational theologies, such as pantheism, deism, and a variety of other concepts. J.B. Phillips wrote the book *Your God Is Too Small* because he felt that too many people have an entirely inadequate view of God. The reasonable question to ask is "What has God revealed to us about Himself?"

If we look at it merely from man's viewpoint, we will run into the danger that C.S. Lewis, the late professor at Oxford and Cambridge universities, talked about. Lewis told the story of a wise barnacle that was sitting down at the bottom of the ocean attached to his rock. One day, in a moment of mystical enlightenment, he got a glimpse of what man was like. So he gathered around him his barnacle disciples and began to expound upon the nature of man. He said, "Man has no shell, man is not attached to a rock, and man is not surrounded by water."

As time went on, a few of the barnacles got some idea of what man was like. They soon began to rationalize that, since man had no shell, he must be a shapeless blob of jelly. Since man was not attached to a rock, it was quite obvious that he had no location where he lived. And since man was not surrounded by water, as they were, it was reasonable to assume that man did not eat, since he had nothing to float food to him.

The barnacles therefore concluded that man was far less active and important than barnacles were. From their viewpoint, from their environment and nature, they had extrapolated an extremely limited and warped concept of man.

We have the same danger as the barnacles if we begin with ourselves, limited to a finite, three-dimensional, naturalistic worldview. If we use this basis, it is most probable that we too, like many of the cults today, will end up with an extremely limited and warped concept of God, one which is far less than who He really is.

Just as the barnacles could never know what man was like unless man chose to break into their environment and personally reveal himself to the barnacles, so too man cannot know what God is like unless God chooses to personally reveal Himself to us. This is what God did, both in His inspired Word, the Bible, and through the incarnation, when God broke into human history and became a man.

What we must do in our study of God is to see *what God has revealed to us concerning His nature*. God has given us the Scriptures for one purpose: to reveal His nature and character to us. As we go through the Scriptures we see God revealing Himself to us. If we read the book of Jonah, we see God's universal love for mankind and His desire to bring mankind to a relationship with Him. In the book of Genesis, we read about God's creation and also about God's judgment. The book of Hosea tells us about God's overwhelming compassion and love for mankind. In the book of Amos, we read about God's righteousness. In Micah we read about God's justice. In Isaiah we read about His holiness and His redemptive love. In the book of John, we discover that God loved us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for us, to redeem us from the curse of sin. As we go throughout the Scriptures, *God reveals to us who He is and how we can know Him*.

Now let's look briefly at God's personal revelation to us concerning His nature, so that we might have an accurate concept of what God is like. Rather than worshiping something less than who

God really is, we can then lift up God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture.

God Is Spirit

We first discover that the Bible declares that God is spirit with life and personality. Jesus tells us in John 4:24 that "God is spirit." Now the logical question is "What is a spirit?" In Luke 24:37-39, after Jesus was raised from the dead, His astonished disciples thought He was a spirit. Jesus told them, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost [spirit] does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When He asked His disciples who they thought He was, He again opened a window so they could see the true nature of God.

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:15-17).

This is not something man had to wait until New Testament days to discover about God. In Deuteronomy 4:12 we find this: "Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice." They heard the sound of words, but saw no form—only a voice.

God's declaration of Himself and His very nature continues in verse 15:

You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully.

The Word continues with God's warning to any who would corrupt His very nature:

...so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the

ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven (Deuteronomy 4:16-19).

God spoke to Moses out of the fire; Moses heard only a voice. There was no man standing there in the flames, but God, who says He is spirit, was there.

God Is Living

The Scriptures tell us that God is not only a spirit, but that He is a spirit with life and personality. He is a *living* God, not merely an impersonal force. Jeremiah 10 is one of the greatest chapters in the Bible dealing with the nature of God. Here we see the distinction between idols made with the hands of man and the living God.

No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple—all made by skilled workers. But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.

Tell them this: "These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens." But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is

shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish. He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance—the LORD Almighty is his name (Jeremiah 10:6-16).

There is no other god like our God! Verse 10 says it plainly: “The LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.”

He is not like those idols that cannot speak. No, He is a living God. God is spirit, with life and personality. He speaks, He hears, He sees, He declares, He creates, He wills. He expresses anger, remorse, joy. He loves, He judges. God is personal; He is a personal Creator, and He is personally concerned about each of us as His personal creations. *God is alive with life and personality.*

To say that God is devoid of these attributes is to make Him far less than who He really is. This is where many of the cults make their major mistake. Mary Baker Eddy taught in Christian Science that God is merely a divine principle. The same is true of the Unity School of Christianity; it says that God is merely an impersonal force. But a “divine principle” and an “impersonal force” never loved anybody. Only a *personality* can love. God, who created this world, can love *because* He is living and personal. It isn’t something He learned to do. He always was God, and He always had this nature.

God Is Self-Existent

The Bible declares that God is the self-existent One. He has always eternally existed. He has no beginning and no end. He alone was and is God. There were and are no others. As Isaiah 44:6 says, “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”

Moses was told by God in Exodus 3:14: “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM’ has sent me to you.” God was declaring that He was unique from man. You cannot label God or define Him the way you would a man. He is the eternal One.

This is a mistake that many philosophers and humanistic theologians have made, those who hold to a naturalistic system. They have set up a definition so small that God can’t fit inside it. For example, many people are saying that the only reality today is what we find in our three-dimensional world of naturalism.

But God is far bigger than our finite three dimensions. He may be more than eight dimensions. He may be more than 100 dimensions. In fact, we don’t have any idea how complex He really is. But He has broken into the narrow confines of our small box called Earth to communicate to us who He is. He is the self-existent One who alone has life in Himself.

The very first verse of the Bible tells us a little about the width and breadth of His life and power: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Acts 17:25 tells us that He is the giver of life to all things. In Colossians 1:16,17 we read:

By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

God Is Immutable

We also discover that God, by His very nature, is immutable. By “immutability” we mean that God does not change. Malachi 3:6 tells us, “I the LORD do not change.” Ecclesiastes 3:14 affirms that *everything* God does remains forever and that nothing can be added to it or taken from it. Hebrews 6:17,18 tells us that God is immutable. He does not change and He does not lie.

These are tremendous truths to understand because we are living in a world of constant change and turmoil. But we have a solid foundation, a solid rock, in God. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God does not change as to His nature or purpose. He has never done so in the entire history of mankind, and He will never do so through the end of time.

Many of the groups that we will discuss in this book have gods who change and vacillate. Their worshipers live on a seesaw of doubts and fear, manipulated by the holy priests of their faiths. They cannot conceive of the peace that comes from being at the altar of a never-changing, loving, caring God.

God, while never changing, may still use different methods with us. He dealt with Moses one way, He dealt with Noah in another way, and He dealt with Abraham in still another way. He may have dealt with you in one way and us in some other, but His purpose is the same and His nature remains the same. God is immutable, and because of this immutability God is always consistent in truth.

When God reveals something to us, He never contradicts Himself. It is because of His immutability that we can test all the latter-day revelations coming from all the false teachers of all the cults today: God does not change. It is almost humorous to see how quickly many of these latter-day prophets fall by the wayside when tested by God's Word.

Since God does not change, He is consistent in truth. He never communicates one truth to one generation and then a contradicting truth to a different generation. He is always consistent in truth. Simply put, truth is truth. How many times, when we were children, did we try to bend the yoke of truth at home or at school? It rarely worked with mom and the teacher, and it never will work with God!

Therefore, should God theoretically choose to give a *new* revelation today, it must be consistent with His oldest revelation, the written Word of God. If a revelation given by someone today contradicts the earliest revelation, then we immediately know it is not of God.

Your Word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations.... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path (Psalm 119:89,90,105).

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matthew 24:35).

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12,13).

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:18,19).

We must test all things by the Word of God, and hold fast to that which is good, as we are exhorted in 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

God Is Omnipotent

The Bible also declares that God is omnipotent or all-powerful. He told Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before me" (Genesis 17:1). Matthew 19:26 says that "with God all things are possible." Revelation 19:6 tells us, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns." His name is written, "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (verse 16). Isaiah 40 is an exciting chapter that gives the meaning of the omnipotent power of our God. Beginning with verse 12 we read:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as

his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?

Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow

tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:12-31).

What a tremendous chapter! If you want to wake up and be inspired every morning, read Isaiah 40 and get a glimpse of what God is like. He holds the entire cosmos together by the power of His hand! He knows every star in the universe by its name, and every hair of your head. That's the God we worship.

Have you ever truly thought about how great God is? Have you ever imagined what the magnitude of the cosmos really is? The speed of light is 186,000 miles per second. In one second, light can travel around the earth at the equator 7½ times!

If you go outside on a clear night, you can see a band going across the sky which appears as dense clouds across the center of the sky. Actually that is the rim of what we earthlings call the Milky Way. What you are seeing are not clouds but stars, so many billions of stars that it appears to us to be clouds. If you were traveling at the speed of light, it would take you 4½ years just to reach the nearest star you can see at night!

A light-year is how far light travels in one year. In one year light will travel 6 trillion miles. The nearest star is Alpha Centauri, 4½ light-years away, which means that the nearest star that you can see at night is something like 27 trillion miles away! And that is just the *nearest* star in our galaxy. There are over 100 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy!

As huge as this sounds, ours is one of the *smallest* galaxies in the universe! In fact, astronomers with the 200-inch telescope at Mount Palomar in California estimate that as they look out through the cup of the Big Dipper constellation they can see over one million galaxies the size of our Milky Way or bigger.

At the speed of light it would take us a hundred thousand light-years to cross the Milky Way galaxy. This means that our small galaxy is six hundred thousand trillion miles across. And astronomers can see over one million galaxies that size or bigger

just in the cup of the Big Dipper. Think of the magnitude of what we are saying!

Leaving the Milky Way galaxy, the farthest thing that astronomers can see or hear with their most sophisticated equipment is a quasar, which is 15 billion light-years away, which means it is 90 billion trillion miles away.

We have no idea what is beyond that, but astronomers estimate that this quasar 90 billion trillion miles away emits enough energy in one second to supply all the electrical needs of the earth for one million years. That's just *one* quasar, and there are *millions* of quasars in the universe. Do you begin to get the picture? The Bible says that the God who created all this holds it together *by the power of His hand*. And some people wonder if God is really big enough to solve their problems?

God is far bigger than our finite minds can hope to comprehend. Yet the God whose energy transcends all the energy in the universe by infinity nevertheless loves each one of us. That God is concerned about you personally.

The Bible says that God considers you more important than all those galaxies put together. What a tremendous truth! As you begin to get a glimpse of what God is really like, it will change the way you pray. When you come into the presence of the Almighty Creator, it becomes an awe-inspiring thing. It becomes a thing of *wonderment*.

God Is Omnipresent

Not only is God omnipotent, but He is also omnipresent. His omnipresence means that God is everywhere at once. From the farthest corner of the most distant galaxy to the deepest part of your heart, God is there. Listen to the rejoicing over God's omnipresence in Psalm 139, beginning with verse 5:

You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I

make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you (Psalm 139:5-18).

Have you ever gone down to the ocean and tried to count the grains of sand on just one beach? God says He thinks about you continually and that the sum of His thoughts outnumber the grains of sand on the earth!

God Is Omniscient

We also refer to the omniscience of God, that fact that God is all-knowing.

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD (Psalm 139:1-4).

The LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts (1 Chronicles 28:9).

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our LORD and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit (Psalm 147:4,5).

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11:33).

Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows nothing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. God knows you and is concerned about you personally.

God Is Transcendent

Four attributes of God that help us avoid common fallacies are God's transcendence, His immanence, His immensity, and His eternity.

Transcendence means that God is detached from all His creation as an independent, self-existing being (Isaiah 40:12-17). God is not the creation or part of the creation. He is in fact the *Creator*, who created everything apart from Himself. This is why the Eastern concept of pantheism is not true. This is also why the New Age teaching of "Mother Earth" is not valid. God is not the earth or the cosmos. He is the *Creator*, not the creation!

Immanence means God's all-pervading presence and power within His creation. As Isaiah 57:15 says, "This is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" God is actively concerned and involved with His creation. This attribute refutes the concept of deism, which says God wound up the world like a watch and then left it to run down on its own.

Immensity means that God is not confined by space. The fact that God is *eternal* means that He is not confined by time. Time and space are aspects of the created world. God by definition is outside

time and space; He is not limited by our three-dimensional, naturalistic world, nor is He limited by the fourth dimension of time. God is supernatural, beyond our natural understanding. Isaiah 55:9 says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

God Is Sovereign

The Bible also speaks of God's sovereignty, the fact that He alone is the supreme authority, the only God, Creator, and Ruler in the universe.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name (1 Chronicles 29:11-13).

Isaiah 45:5,6 tells us:

I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.

He alone is God. Before him there was no God and therefore there will be none after Him. Colossians 1:16 tells us that "all things were created by him and for him." First Timothy 6:15 tells us that God is "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords." Revelation 4:11 says:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

He is the Sovereign Creator, He alone is God, and He alone is Lord.

God Is Holy

Now we come to a third area: the moral attributes of God. The basis of His moral attributes is His holiness. We are referring to God's absolute purity, perfection, and majesty.

Out of His holiness come three areas: His righteousness, His truth, and His love. Isaiah 6:3 tells us, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah 57:15 tells us His name is holy; He dwells in the high and holy place. In Hosea 11:9, He tells us:

I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.

God is holy and because of His holiness He demands righteousness. When we speak of His righteousness, we speak of three things: His mandatory righteousness, His punitive righteousness, and His redemptive righteousness. God demands righteousness because His holiness is our standard for living. In Leviticus 19:2, He says:

Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."

In 1 Peter 1:15,16 we read:

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

What does God require? How are we to approach Him in His holiness and in our sin? In Micah 6:6-8, there is an answer.

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of

my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

This is what God requires. He does not want our sacrifices or our burnt offerings. What God demands is justice, lovingkindness, and a humble walk with Him. God is intensely concerned with the *heart* of man. He is concerned with our attitude of life, that we grow in maturity in Jesus Christ so that we might become more like Him. He has given us the standard to be holy as He is holy. One day God will perfect us in holiness, but daily we are to grow in maturity and grow *toward* God's holiness to conform to His nature.

Psalm 96:13 tells us that one day God will judge the world in righteousness. Acts 17:30,31 repeats that concept:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

God Is Love

While His righteousness demands justice, God did not leave us to stand before the judgment seat uncovered in our sin. God does not merely parcel out justice, but He offers fallen man *redemption*. This is God's redemptive righteousness, a holiness which desires the redemption of mankind. Psalm 51 tells us that God is ready to restore salvation to us when we seek forgiveness with a contrite heart. Romans 3:23-26 tells us:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it

to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, we have this glorious promise:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This brings us to our last points about the love of God and the truth of God. John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This eternal life is not something that is out there somewhere in the future. The eternal life mentioned here starts *the moment one believes in Christ*. It is not only for eternity but is a qualitative life right now.

Psalms 103:17 says that God's lovingkindness is everlasting. John adds:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9,10).

Jesus was that infinite sacrifice. There needed to be that spotless Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

Covered by Christ

When Ron was lecturing in New Zealand and Australia, the sheep ranchers told him what often happens in a large flock of sheep. When the mother ewes are giving birth to lambs, there will often be a mother that dies while giving birth to a live lamb. But somewhere else in the flock a mother ewe gives birth to a dead lamb. The sheep ranchers bring the orphan lamb to the mother who lost her baby, in order for the orphan to nurse and feed. But the mother ewe can smell that it is not her baby, and she will always kick it away and not allow it to suckle. But the sheep ranchers have discovered that they can take the blood of the stillborn lamb and smear it as a covering over the fleece of the orphan lamb. Then when they bring that lamb to the mother who lost her baby, she will smell the blood, sense that it is her lamb, and allow it to nurse and feed.

It's the same way with God. God is holy and will not look upon our sin. But when the blood of Jesus Christ covers us and cleanses us and forgives us, the holy God looks down upon us and does not see our sinful nature. Instead, He sees the blood of Jesus Christ that covers us. So He accepts us as His own. It is the blood of Jesus Christ that covers us and cleanses us and reconciles us to a relationship with God.

You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:18,19).

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace (Ephesians 1:7).

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:8,9).

God Is Truth

Finally, a word about the truth of God. Psalm 100:5 tells us that God's truth endures to all generations. Deuteronomy 32:4 says that God is a God of truth, and that His faithfulness remains forever. In John 8:31,32 we read:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Jesus said He wants to make us free, and His truth will make us free: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (NKJV). Christ, praying for those who called themselves His disciples, asked of the Father, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*" (John 17:17, emphasis added).

God has given us a faithful and true revelation of His nature. As we go into the study of the false doctrines of man, we need to first look intently at the real God. Then we will never bow down and worship before something less than what God has revealed Himself to be.

WHY DEFEND THE FAITH?

THE PRESENTATION OF APOLOGETICS isn't always popular. A cultist isn't going to be thrilled that *you* now know things he wishes you never did, and even many of your fellow Christians will frown upon your newfound zeal to defend the faith. In fact, you might be amazed at the number of well-meaning Christians who find the defense of the faith just too embarrassing and negative for them to even try out. They say, "It's too unloving. God sees these people's hearts. Who are we to judge?" So they stand by and let a lie become the norm because they will not speak out with a defense for the doctrines and purity of our faith.

Let's start right out by defining the world of Christian apologetics and polemics.

Apologetics: Systematic argumentative discourse in defense, as of a doctrine. Defense of the faith.

Polemics: An aggressive attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another, as in denouncing heresy.

The Bible tells us in Jude 3:

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

Paul tells us in Philippians 1:7:

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul says:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

He says further in 2 Timothy 4:2:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

Peter also declares this same message in 1 Peter 3:15:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

With these biblical exhortations in mind, we see that *it is our Christian duty to fulfill our commission from the Lord*. We become defenders of the faith as we witness to those lost in darkness, and especially to those who bring those false teachings to the world that we seek for Christ.

Defending the Faith in Israel

In the biblical account of Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal, we find that Baal worship had been introduced into Israel. So Elijah stood before the people and cried out:

How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him (KJV).

He then challenged the prophets of Baal to call down fire from Baal upon the sacrifice that they had prepared. Although they called on Baal from morning to evening, leaping upon the altar and

slashing themselves, nothing happened. Elijah derided them by saying:

Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awakened.

Then Elijah called down fire from God, which consumed not only the sacrifice but also the altar stones and the water in the ditch around the altar (1 Kings 18).

What Did Jesus Say?

In Matthew 12:34,39, Jesus said this to the religious leaders of His day:

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?...A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign.

In Matthew 13:15, He continued:

For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

In Matthew 15:7, He called the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites," and in verse 9, He said:

They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.

In Matthew 21, He connected the parable of wicked husbandmen with the religious leaders of Israel. In Matthew 23:23-25,27,28,33, He said:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

...Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness....

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?

All too many people are willing to hear the words of peace and faith from Jesus but are reticent to hear the Jesus who upbraided those teachers who would lead their followers into darkness (Matthew 15:14).

The Apostles Speak Out

The apostles and disciples of Jesus also boldly rebuked the false teachers of their day. The first of these apologists, Peter in Acts 2:14-41; 3:12-26; 4:8-12 and Stephen in Acts 6:8-10; 7:1-60, spoke forcefully against the unbelieving Jews.

In Acts 13:8-12 Paul condemned sorcery. He spoke against the Jewish leaders in Acts 13:16-46; 14:1-4; 17:1-4 and reasoned with them out of the Scriptures in their synagogues. In Acts 17:16-34 Paul contended with the Jews and then against paganism with the Greeks. Then to the Galatians he defended his apostleship and the teaching of grace against the Judaizers.

The Early Church Fathers

The strong words of correction did not end with Christ and the apostles. After they were gone from the scene, great men of God rose up to defend the church even when to do so was considered illegal.

First, these men had to defend the faith against the Jews, and then later against paganism and later heresies. The first of these

were Quadratus, Bishop of Athens, and Aristedes, philosopher of Athens, who wrote a defense of Christianity addressed to Emperor Hadrian about A.D. 117.

Between A.D. 117 and 138, Hegesippus wrote about the heresies of Simeon, Cleobus, Gorthoeus, Masbotheus, Menander, Marcion, Carpocrates, Valentinus, Basilides, and Saturnilius, and also the Jewish heresies of the Essenes, Galileans, Hemereobaptists, Samaritans, Sadducees, and Pharisees.

Later Justin Martyr wrote his first apology to Emperor Antonius Pius about A.D. 138. Tatian wrote against the Greeks about A.D. 163. Justin wrote his second apology to the emperors, his dialogue with Trypho (to the Jews), and his hortatory address to the Greeks. At about this time Athenagoras and Tatian wrote their apologies.

Melito of Sardis wrote a discourse to Emperor Antonius around A.D. 166. During the same period Dionysius of Corinth and Philip of Gortyna wrote against Marcion, and Theophilus of Antioch wrote against Marcion and others. Apollinaris, Bishop of Hierapolis, wrote five books against the Greeks, two books against the Jews, and another against the Phrygian heresy and Montanus. Musanus Modestus (disciple of Justin) wrote an elegant work to some of the brethren who had swerved from the truth to the heresy of the Encratites and Tatianus.

Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen

Between 170 and 220, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote "On Knowledge" against the Greeks and also "Against Heresies" or "Overthrow of False Doctrine," in which he outlined and refuted the doctrines of the Gnostics, including Simon Magus, Cerinthus, Valentinus, Marcion, and others.

In approximately A.D. 180, Rhoto, a disciple of Tatian, wrote against Marcion and other false teachers. Miltiades the historian wrote against Montanus and the Paraphrygian heresy of Montanism. Apollonius of Rome wrote against the Phrygian heresy and Montanus. Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, wrote against the Phrygians.

Around 194, Tertullian wrote his apology, and in 205, Clement of Alexandria refuted the Greek Heresiarchs. Between 205 and 250, Origen had discourse with Beryllus, winning him back from heresy to the truth. He wrote a reply against Celsus the Epicurian called "The True Doctrine," and is also credited with debating the Arabians and later the Helcisaites, leading many of these back to orthodoxy. Between 250 and 256, Cyprian of Carthage wrote against Novatus and Cornelius of Rome wrote against Novatus and the heresies of the Cathari.

Apologetics in the Councils

During this same period, Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, wrote against the Novatians, the Sabellians, and later the schism of Nepos. At the Council of Antioch, a former Sophist refuted Paul of Samosata. In 314, the Council of Arles was held against the Donatists, and in 325, the Council of Nicea was held to deal with the Arian heresy.

These are just some of the church fathers up to Nicea who defended the faith against the Jews, paganism, and heresies. Had it not been for their polemic and apologetic works, we would know little indeed of these great men from the first four centuries of Christianity, as this sort of defense of the faith makes up the greater part of their extant writings.

God Calls the Reformers

In addition to these, a host of great men from every age (such as Augustine and Martin Luther) have spoken out against heresies, excesses, and misuse of power inside and outside the church.

Not a few of them died martyrs' deaths to defend the faith we take for granted!

Among the tenets they so vigorously defended were:

- the deity of Christ
- the trinity
- the sovereignty of God

- the inerrancy of Scripture
- the depravity of man
- salvation as a free gift through faith in Christ
- the certainty of final judgment.

They also wrote against Gnosticism, a terrible heresy which is again creeping into Christian doctrine.

Apologetics in Our Time

In our own age, men like Charles Finney and Dwight L. Moody have spoken out against Freemasonry in the church and immorality, thereby taking a strong stand for the faith.

Today, apologetics has broadened to encompass many different fields in the defense of historic biblical Christianity. Some of the leading apologists for the defense of the faith include C.S. Lewis, who was a great *literary* apologist; Francis A. Schaeffer, who was a *philosophical* apologist; Walter Martin, who was a modern pioneer in *religious and cult* apologetics; Henry Morris, who specializes in *scientific* apologetics in the defense of creation; Josh McDowell, who enunciates *historical* apologetics; John Warwick Montgomery, who uses *legal* principles to defend Christian truth; and Charles Colson, who articulates *cultural* apologetics in defense of the timeless absolutes given by God.

To these and many more we owe a personal debt of gratitude. Today we stand with those who have gone before us and say:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (Romans 1:16).

The Simplicity of the Gospel

As we study the strange manipulations of people in the things of God, we can only shake our heads and wonder what a mess some of them have made of the gospel. The apostle Paul commented:

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough (2 Corinthians 11:1-4).

The key here is *the simplicity of the gospel*. The Bible is not obtuse; it gives us a clear, simple picture of the truth.

The aberrant religious groups cloud the clarity of the Word and bring chaos to the soul. Let's look at the simplicity of the gospel for a moment.

What God's Word Says

1. There is only one true God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:10,11; 1 Corinthians 8:4).
2. God is a Spirit who fills the heavens and the earth (Jeremiah 23:24; John 4:24).
3. God is not a man (Numbers 23:19; Job 9:32; Hosea 11:9).
4. Jesus is Almighty God manifest in the flesh (John 1:1-3,14,18; Colossians 1:15-17; 1 Timothy 3:16).
5. Jesus preexisted in heaven. Man didn't (John 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:46-49; Genesis 2:7; Zechariah 12:1).
6. We become children of God by adoption (Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:5,6; Ephesians 1:5).
7. The gospel (good news) by which we are saved is that Jesus provided forgiveness of sins, resurrection, and eternal life

through His finished work (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Hebrews 1:3; John 19:30; Colossians 1:20-22).

8. We are saved by grace through faith unto good works as God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:8-10).
9. God makes us new creatures as the Author and Finisher of our faith (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Hebrews 12:2).

So, what must one do to be saved?

1. Confess your sins to God and turn from them (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8,9).
2. Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe with your heart that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9).
3. Ask Jesus to come into your life and make you what He wants you to be (Philippians 2:13; 3:9; Romans 12:1,2).