

## SESSION 4: The Living God

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 16-18:

| WCF | WLC  | WSC |
|-----|------|-----|
| 2   | 6-11 | 4-6 |

### Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the sufficiency of Scripture, its attributes, and its interpretation. Having concluded this three-part study of what the Bible teaches concerning itself, we now move into the next section of our standards to consider what the Bible teaches about who God is.

### Why Theology Matters

As we turn to study the being of God, we might well ask ourselves: why is it important? What we believe about who God is matters for at least three reasons:

1. It is a matter of *eternity*. In a previous session, we talked about entering into God’s story. But this presupposes that we have the right God! The Bible contains many warnings against idolatry. Therefore, if we truly want to know God, then we must know God truly.
2. It is a matter of *integrity*. If we claim to be people who live by God’s revelation in Scripture, then we must study and take seriously what the Bible says about God.
3. This doctrine affords great *security* to the believer. The accomplishment of our redemption, our assurance of salvation, and the activation of faith in real life situations depends essentially on the Triune being of God, his unchanging (and thus utterly reliable) character, and the identity of Jesus as the second Person of this God. As Michael Reeves puts it:

“What makes Christianity absolutely distinct is the identity of our God. Which God we worship: that is the article of faith that stands before all others. The bedrock of our faith is nothing less than God himself, and every aspect of the gospel—creation, revelation, salvation—is only Christian insofar as it is the creation, revelation and salvation of this God, the triune God.”<sup>27</sup>

### The Being of God

One of the best summary descriptions of God ever penned is found in WSC 4-6. The fourth question gives us the *attributes* of God, the fifth teaches us the *unity* of the Godhead, and the sixth details the *diversity* in the Godhead. The parallel sections in the WCF and WLC flesh these out in further detail. There are several things we should note.

First, we must always maintain that there is but *one God* (Dt 6.4). Both the WLC and WSC use the expression “the same in substance.” What does this mean? Substance is “equivalent to essence, independent being. Thus, in the Godhead, the three persons are the same in substance, *i.e.*, of one and the same indivisible, numerical essence.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 15-16

<sup>28</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (reprint: Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1999), 164.

All three Persons of the Godhead share the same self-existence (*aseity*), and all three share all the attributes listed in WSC 4. Note how WSC 4 underlines this with the expression, “in *his* being, wisdom, power, etc.” Put another way:

Since there is but one divine essence, and since all attributes or active properties are inherent in and inseparable from the essence to which they pertain, it follows that all the divine attributes must be identically common to each of the three persons... there is but one substance, and one intelligence, one will, etc., and yet three persons eternally co-exist of that one essence, and exercise that one intelligence and one will, etc.<sup>29</sup>

Second, alongside the unity of substance we must equally affirm that God is *three Persons*. The theological expression used here is that while there is but *one substance*, there are *three subsistences*. What is meant by ‘subsistence’? It is “that mode of existence which distinguishes one individual thing from every other thing, one person from every other person. As applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, subsistence is that mode of existence which is peculiar to each of the divine persons, and which in each constitutes the one essence a distinct person.”<sup>30</sup>

But just what is it that makes each divine person distinct? WLC 9 tells us that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “distinguished by their personal properties.” WCF 2.3 and WLC 10 describe these personal properties. Calvin unpacks these:

Nevertheless, it is not fitting to suppress the distinction that we observe to be expressed in Scripture. It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity. Indeed, although the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and the Spirit, since God could never exist apart from his wisdom and power, and we must not seek in eternity a *before* or an *after*, nevertheless the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit. For the mind of each human being is naturally inclined to contemplate God first, then the wisdom coming forth from him, and lastly the power whereby he executes the decrees of his plan. For this reason, the Son is said to come forth from the Father alone; the Spirit, from the Father and the Son at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Yet having described the personal properties, Calvin reminds us:

Furthermore, this distinction is so far from contravening the utterly simple unity of God as to permit us to prove from it that the Son is one God with the Father because he shares with the Father one and the same Spirit; and that the Spirit is not something other than the Father and different from the Son, because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. For in each hypostasis the whole divine nature is understood, with this qualification— that to each belongs his own peculiar quality.<sup>32</sup>

How can we carefully keep both the unity and diversity in God together? Calvin cites two helpful passages from the church fathers:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 167. Note that this statement does *not* deny that our Lord Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, also partook fully of his humanity, for Hodge immediately adds, “In Christ on the contrary, there are two spirits, two intelligences, two wills, and yet all the while *one* indivisible person,” (167-168).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.13.19.

Augustine well and clearly expresses the cause of this diversity in another place, when he speaks as follows: “Christ with respect to himself is called God; with respect to the Father, Son. Again, the Father with respect to himself is called God; with respect to the Son, Father. In so far as he is called Father with respect to the Son, he is not the Son; in so far as he is called the Son with respect to the Father, he is not the Father; in so far as he is called both Father with respect to himself, and Son with respect to himself, he is the same God.” Therefore, when we speak simply of the Son without regard to the Father, we well and properly declare him to be of himself; and for this reason we call him the sole beginning. But when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son.<sup>33</sup>

And that passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me: “I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.” Let us not, then, be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity. Indeed, the words “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” imply a real distinction— let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty— but a distinction, not a division.<sup>34</sup>

There is obvious mystery here, and we should beware of going beyond the very limited information provided to us in the Scriptures. In discussing this question with regard to Christ, John Owen cites warnings from two other church fathers:

[Lactantius, advisor to Constantine the Great]: “How, therefore, did the Father beget the Son? These divine works can be known of none, declared by none; but the holy writings teach that he is the Son of God, that he is the Word of God.”<sup>35</sup>

[Ambrose of Milan]: “It is lawful to know that he was born – it is not lawful to discuss *how* he was born; *that* it is not lawful for me to deny – *this* I am afraid to inquire into. For if Paul, when he was taken up into the third heaven, affirms that the things which he heard could not be uttered; how can we express the mystery of the divine generation, which we can neither apprehend nor hear?”<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, we should note how WLC 11 demonstrates that both the Son and the Holy Spirit “are God equal to the Father.” The acronym to remember here is NAWW: *names, attributes, works, and worship*. The proof texts listed here (among others) are particularly helpful. How do we know the Son is fully God?<sup>37</sup>

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23.5-6)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1.1-3)

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., I.13.17.

<sup>35</sup> John Owen, *On the Person of Christ*, in *The Glory of Christ*, vol. 1 in *The Works of John Owen* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>37</sup> Beyond these obvious examples, the New Testament is literally saturated with passages that teach the deity of Christ. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14.8-9)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1.15-20)

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1.3)

How do we know the Holy Spirit is fully God?

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." (Acts 5.3-4)

And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet..." (Acts 28.25)

Beyond these Son-specific or Spirit-specific passages, one of the most striking passages is found in the Great Commission, where *three persons* are said to share *one name*: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28.19).

### The Attributes of God

In addition to telling us how many persons are God, our standards also summarize for us the attributes of God. What do we mean by 'attribute'? "The divine attributes are the essential properties by which he makes himself known to us who are weak and those by which he is distinguished from creatures; or they are those which are attributed to him according to the measure of our conception in order to explain his nature."<sup>38</sup> Our standards list these attributes in WCF 2.1-2, WLC 7, and WSC 4.

Some of God's attributes are reflected in us. These are called *communicable* attributes – because in a limited and creaturely way, God communicates them to us. Examples include knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. God possesses these in an uncreated, infinite degree – yet he allows us to experience them in a created, limited way. However, there are other attributes of God which are unique to God. These are called *incommunicable* attributes. Examples include God's aseity, his eternity, and his infinity. These are the things that essentially mark the boundary between God as Creator and everything else as creatures.

The Scripture proofs listed in our standards do a good job of helping us understand the attributes of God. But before concluding this session, we might touch upon just a few.

First, what does WCF 2.1 mean when it says that God is "without... passions"? Does not the Scripture testify that God experiences anger, delight, love, etc.? J.I. Packer helpfully explains the statement – and why it matters so much:

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<sup>38</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 3.5.5 (vol. 1, p. 187).

God has no *passions* – this does not mean that he is unfeeling (impassive) or that there is nothing in him that corresponds to emotions and affections in us, but that whereas human passions—especially the painful ones, fear, grief, regret, despair—are in a sense passive and involuntary, being called forth and constrained by circumstances not under our control, the corresponding attitudes in God have the nature of deliberate, voluntary choices, and therefore are not of the same order as human passions at all.

So the love of the God who is spirit is no fitful, fluctuating thing, as human love is, nor is it a mere impotent longing for things that may never be, it is, rather, a spontaneous determination of God’s whole being in an attitude of benevolence and benefaction, an attitude freely chosen and firmly fixed. There are no inconstancies or vicissitudes in the love of the almighty God who is spirit. His love is “as strong as death” (Song 8.6). “Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away” (Song 8.7). Nothing can separate from it those whom it has once embraced (Rom 8.35-39).<sup>39</sup>

Second, what does it mean to say that God is ‘immutable’ (WCF 2.1) or ‘unchangeable’ (WLC 7, WSC 4)? Did not God the Son become a man at a definite place and time in history? How then can we say he never changes? A.A. Hodge explains, “His eternal person was not changed in itself, but only brought into a new relation.”<sup>40</sup>

Third, what does it mean to say that God is ‘incomprehensible’ (WCF 2.1, WLC 7)? Does not God make himself known to us in creation, revelation, and incarnation? J.I. Packer explains, “God is great, says Scripture... greater than we can grasp. Theology states this by describing him as incomprehensible – not in the sense that logic is somehow different for him from what it is for us, so that we cannot follow the workings of his mind at all, but in the sense that we can never understand him fully, just because he is infinite and we are finite.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, what does it mean to say that God is “most wise” (WCF 2.1) or “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his... wisdom” (WSC 4)? Thomas Vincent explains, “The wisdom of God is his essential property, whereby, by one simple and eternal act, he knoweth both himself and all things possible perfectly, and according to which he maketh, directeth, and ordereth all future things for his own glory.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Why Theology Matters (Again)**

Before concluding this session, it is worth revisiting the question with which we began. Why is it important for us to understand who God is? The answer is simple – *knowing who God is helps Christians understand who Jesus is – and vice-versa.*

Knowing who God is – “most holy... most just... hating all sin...” (WCF 2.1) – helps us understand both the character and the work of Jesus Christ. It reminds us that we cannot excuse sin by setting up a false dichotomy between the “God of the Old Testament” and Jesus. Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, whose character is ‘immutable’ (WCF 2.1) and ‘unchangeable’ (WLC 7, WSC 4). Jesus is no friendlier to sin today than he was on the day when he delivered the Ten Commandments upon Mount Sinai (Acts 7.38).

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<sup>39</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993), 51.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained*, 29.

On the other hand, knowing Christ shows us the loving heart behind even the most intimidating attributes of God. In looking at Jesus, we see that though God will never *lie* about our sins, he did *die* for them (1Jn 4.8-10). British theologian Michael Reeves writes, “Here, then, is the revolution: for all our dreams, our dark and frightened imaginings of God, *there is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus.*”<sup>43</sup> He then quotes T.F. Torrance at length:

There is in fact no God behind the back of Jesus, no act of God other than the act of Jesus, no God but the God we see and meet in him. Jesus Christ is the open heart of God, the very love and life of God poured out to redeem humankind, the mighty hand and power of God stretched out to heal and save sinners. All things are in God’s hands, but the hands of God and the hands of Jesus, in life and in death, are the same.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, knowing that Jesus is both “the open heart of God” and the God who is unchangeable provides a firm anchor for our faith. We know God won’t ever change his mind about those who trust him because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” (Hebrews 13.8).

### Important Questions

1. Jehovah’s Witnesses say they worship Jehovah, but not Jesus. They say Jesus is a created being. Do they worship Jehovah (Jer 23.5-6, Jn 14.8-9)?
2. Mormons say they are Christians, but they believe that each divine person (Father, Son, Spirit) is a separate being. Do they worship the God of the Bible (Dt 6.4)? Are they Christians?
3. Muslims say they worship the true God, but they also say that Jesus is only a human prophet. According to Jesus, do they worship the true God (cf. Jn 5.23, Jn 14.9)?
4. How does a knowledge of theology and of Christ – his character and work – help us understand that even God’s wrath cannot be separated from his love?

### Additional Resources

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*

J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity and Rejoicing in Christ*

### For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 19-21, which covers:

| WCF | WLC   | WSC |
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| 3   | 12-14 | 7-8 |

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 14.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 15.