

The personal God

D. A. Carson

God is, but what is God like? The question is not merely academic, because if what we think about God is basically wrong, we may be worshipping a false God, an idol. And what we worship shapes us. We tend to take on

So what is God like? What are his main qualities (which are sometimes called his attributes)? Many of God's characteristics are shared in some degree with human beings. This makes it possible for us to understand what he is like. But the qualities God shares with us are not exactly like ours, for our words are not adequate to express his perfection. God wills, and we will; God loves and we love; God hates, and we hate. But God's will, God's love and God's hate are not exactly like ours. In each case, we must try to detect how God's qualities are like ours, and how they differ.

In addition, God has attributes quite unlike anything else in the universe. They are far harder for us to understand, even when they are described for us. But there are ways of picturing them and glimpsing them, and they are an essential part of what makes God who he is.

QUALITIES GOD SHARES WITH PEOPLE

God is personal. This means he is aware of his own existence, that he reasons, makes free decisions. He is an intelligent moral being, not merely an abstract idea, a 'thing' which somehow exercises fatalistic control over

the universe, like a giant robot in a factory. He acts and speaks because he consciously chooses to act and speak, deciding what he will do and what he will say.

All moral virtues belong to God. Jesus has shown us that

God is good, loving, forgiving, merciful, gracious, holy, truthful, righteous; that he is a peace-maker, helper, a compassionate provider; that he plans things according to his own perfect will. Because he is perfectly righteous, he is also angry at both sinners and their sin, for light cannot stand darkness, and is jealous of those pledged to be his but who yet turn away and choose some lesser allegiance.

All these qualities belong in some measure to people as well. We, too, can be merciful, truthful, compassionate, angry, jealous. We use our wills and choose our course.

God's perfection

What makes these characteristics different in God from in us? It is that in God they are perfect and unqualified, quite untarnished by sin. God is perfectly good. Everything he is and everything he does and says is good; he cannot be other than good. God is loving, so much so that the Bible dares say God is love. His love, unlike ours, never fails. His forgiveness is far more remarkable than ours. When we forgive we remember that we, too, have sinned; but when God forgives, it is despite the fact he is always the wounded party, and has never sinned.

The Bible tells us that God feels wrath against all sin and all sinners (we are all by nature 'children of wrath'). But, unlike most of our anger, this is not the result of personal pique. It is a

necessary part of his justice. He cannot but be angry with sin and with sinners. If he were indifferent he would be denying his own holiness.

This does not mean God's anger is impersonal, merely a symbolic picture of his justice. It is personal enough, but without

“A city bullion broker, I am told, decided to adorn his notepaper with a suitable motto and asked staff for suggestions. The best they came up with was *Ingot We Trust.*” *The Times*, London

being spiteful, arbitrary, or uncontrolled. His jealousy is justified precisely because he is God, who rightly lays claim to our devotion. Our jealousy, by contrast, is too often (though not always) the result of our desire to hang on to something over which we ought not to make such absolute claims.

More important yet, most of us find we can be loving or angry, forgiving or jealous, compassionate or holy, but not both at once. God is under no such limitations. He cannot be other than both compassionate and holy. In what he feels towards a sinful human being, God will invariably be both loving and angry. But to understand better how this can be so, we must think about some other of God's qualities.

QUALITIES UNIQUE TO GOD

There are some things which can be said of God alone. God alone is self-existing. This means that whereas everything and every-

“If your conception of God is radically false, then the more devout you are the worse it will be for you. You are opening your soul to be moulded by something base. You had much better be an atheist.”

William Temple

one else depends on him for existence, he is absolutely independent of them. He has life in himself, and he is the source of the life of the universe; but he himself has no source. He alone is utterly self-sufficient. He needs nothing the universe offers him.

It follows that God does not change. His life does not change, his character does not change, his ways do not change, his purposes do not change; even his Son does not change. For this reason, God is supremely reliable and trustworthy.

It is most important to understand God's changelessness correctly. It does not mean he is passionless, that he cannot feel a variety of emotions. The Bible shows us a God who feels very deeply. Nor does it mean that his dealings with a particular person or nation may not change in their experience. Rather, it means God's dealings with us will always be based on the same things – on what God is like.

The unlimited God

Both the glory of God, and the difficulties we have in grappling with what he has revealed of himself, stem from the fact that he transcends the limits we experience. God is essentially unlimited. By contrast, we human beings are limited in time (we are born, live and die at a certain time in history); place (if I am in London I am not simultaneously in Montreal or Karachi); power (there are many things I am incapable of doing); knowledge (enough said!). But God is infinite in all these respects.

● He is unlimited in **time**. His realm is eternity. Our very

notion of time is bound up with the movement of the stars and planets which he created. We cannot easily think of days or years or any sequence, apart from presuppositions about the movement of planet earth, rotating on its axis and circling the sun. But God is not bound by this system. He made it, and so he is above it.

The problem is that we can scarcely understand what it means to be above time. It certainly does not mean that God is merely static; the God of the Bible stands in active relationship with the universe he created. We are creatures in time, and so if God is to reveal himself to us, it must be in terms of history, of sequence, of 'before' and 'after'. Before Paul was converted, in the days of Pontius Pilate, Jesus died and rose again, the perfect manifestation of God within time, at a specific place in history.

The thought is staggering: the eternal God, the timeless God, has chosen to reveal himself to us in time, because that is the only habitat we understand. And if we find it difficult to understand what it means to say God stands above time, how much more difficult is it for us to understand how this eternal God can reveal himself to us in time. There is nothing intrinsically illogical about the idea; but there is much we do not comprehend about it.

● God is unlimited in **place**. He is everywhere; as the theologians say, he is 'omnipresent'. It is impossible to hide from him or to escape from him. He is in everything. But it does not follow that he cannot sometimes appear to people in a

TIME AND ETERNITY

Bruce Nicholls

Throughout human history people have had different pictures of time, especially when they think of eternity or immortality. For many ancient cultures, especially in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, the rhythmical pattern of the seasons – seed-time and harvest, hot and cold, wet and dry – has given meaning to life itself. The sun, the moon and the stars are the reference points. The goal of living is to

harmonize through festivals with the cycle of nature.

There is little thought of the past or the future; the present is all-important. Ancestors are the living dead with whom immediate contact is possible. People from such cultures are offended by impatience, but not by lateness, and this is reflected in the behaviour of students coming from such cultures to study in the West. The apocryphal tombstone inscription,

'Here lies the man who tried to hurry the East', aptly illustrates the tension between different views of time.

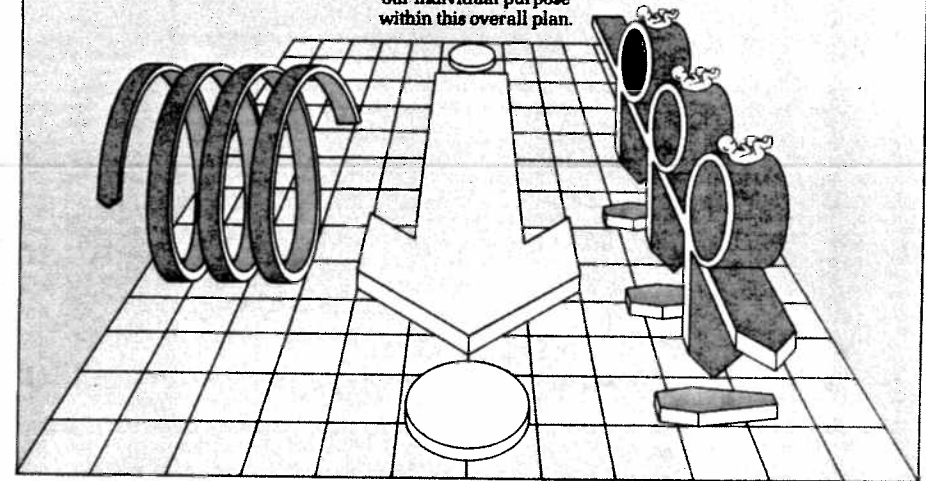
Hellenistic culture, which pervaded the world of the New Testament, was dominated by a cyclic view of time. For Plato only eternity as timelessness was real. Time was but a copy of eternity and no event in time had any ultimate meaning. This made the death of Jesus foolishness to the Greeks. The

THREE WAYS OF SEEING TIME

The wheel of existence – the Hindu understanding
History is a series of repeated reincarnations at different levels of life. (The Greeks also had a cyclic view of time.)

The line of God's purpose – the Bible view
God's plan for the world is an undeflected straight line. It runs from creation to the day of Jesus Christ's return; Jesus' death and resurrection are its midpoint. Each of us finds our individual purpose within this overall plan.

The circle of life handed on – a modern secular idea
Immortality lies simply in the life of each generation being taken up and carried on by the next.



"If God is dead, then the great capitalization of the force standing over against man has been made, and man is free to move forward and to occupy the God-like positions. Henceforth, man is free to make of himself what he will... If God is dead everything is permitted, even the resort to the animality of an amoral natural force. The decision that the war is over, and man has won, and God is dead is the inspiration and despair of contemporary movements such as nihilism and existentialism."

Lestie Paul

errors of Gnosticism which infiltrated the early church go back to the Greek view of time. The Gnostics saw salvation as deliverance from the wheel of bondage. Hindus also picture time as an endlessly recurring circle. Each life is repeated time and again, in successive reincarnations.

Time is real

The Christian picture of time is quite different, because Christianity has a different view of God as creator and saviour. The Bible speaks of yesterday, today and tomorrow and of God's intervention in history and in individual lives. But time is never viewed as an abstract philosophical concept. God acts in history. Time, like the created world, is real because it is part of God's creative action. It is not illusion. We speak of God's intervention in the world as 'salvation history'.

In the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see God's unique and final act that has significance for all time. All those who share in God's eternal life, whether they lived before Christ or after, do so because of this one event in time. Many in the East and West have found this hard to accept. For Mahatma Gandhi no atoning event 2,000 years ago could have eternal meaning now, though he himself wept at the sight of a crucifix. He had a different understanding of the meaning of event and time.

The Bible speaks of time as *chronos*, chronological time of days and hours, and as *kairos*, time of opportunity, promise and fulfilment. We should not exaggerate the difference between these two understandings; both are biblical and



Some religions see time as unreal. But for Christians time is real. Even though God's realm is eternity, he has entered time in Jesus Christ and he has dealings with us in our time-bound existence.

should be held together. Christ came in a specific moment of time, and he promised to return visibly in a moment of time. Yet the Bible is rich in expressing times of opportunity and promise. The 'day of the Lord' is seen as the time of fulfilment. At the last day there will be a new creation and time will be caught up into eternity.

Many Christians have pictured time as a straight line, or as a line moving upward, to reflect the idea that biblical time has purpose and is moving towards a goal. Movement along the line is from past to future; God's creation began time, Jesus Christ's coming is the mid-point, and his return will bring time to an end.

Because time is so real to us, we are tempted to think that God is also bound by time and we become involved in unnecessary debates. God is eternal. He is the I AM ('Before Abraham was born I am,' said

Jesus); God, who is eternal, created time and surrounds it on all sides. Our future is always present to him. Some have found help in C. S. Lewis's picture of time as a straight line along which we travel and of God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. God from above or outside or all around contains the whole of time and sees it all.

No human analogy or picture can fully explain the mystery of time and eternity. But we can share John's confidence that, when a person responds to Jesus Christ, eternity breaks into time and he experiences God's eternal life here and now.

"God's love is an exercise of his goodness towards individual sinners whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, he has given his Son to be their Saviour, and now brings them to know and enjoy him in a covenant relation."

James Packer

localized way. In the Old Testament, God meets with his people personally and at a particular place – in a bright cloud of glory, at the tent in the wilderness, at the temple. When he withdraws from them in wrath, he makes it impossible for them to meet him or experience him; but in one sense even then they cannot escape his presence.

In the New Testament, God meets his people in the most humanly personal way possible – in his Son Jesus. When Jesus is in Galilee, he is not in Jerusalem or Jericho; he is spatially restricted. But God himself is not thereby restricted to any one location, for Jesus continues to pray to him as his 'Father in heaven'.

In other words, just as God is timeless, but meets us in history, so is he omnipresent, but meets us in his Son Jesus. And Jesus lived in a real place, Palestine, and met people in separate encounters on known roads, in boats, in houses. Today, too, he meets with us by his Holy Spirit where we are.

● God is unlimited in **power**. He can do anything; he is 'omnipotent'. But this fact, frequently stressed in the Bible, is often applied wrongly. College lecturers have been known to ask puzzled philosophy undergraduates, 'Is God so powerful that he can make a stone too heavy for him to lift?' – knowing that a 'yes' answer means God cannot lift the stone, and a 'no' answer means God cannot make the stone. Either way there is something he cannot do. In fact, this old chestnut is a trick question: it is asking God to do something self-contradictory, which no one, not even God, can do.

In the same way, God cannot do anything that would violate his own character, or break one of his promises. When Christians say that God is omnipotent, they simply mean that there is no limit to his power, no intrinsic weakness or inability. He can do anything he pleases; but what he pleases will always be in perfect harmony with his character, with all that makes him God.

● God is unlimited in **knowledge**: he is 'omniscient'. There is nothing that God does not know. This includes not only all brute facts, but also all opinions and thought. He knows the future as well as the past and present – perhaps because he stands above time as we know it, and is not bound by the past-present-future structure which dominates our lives.

Quite clearly, some attributes of God, such as his eternity, are very difficult to understand in their own right. They become that much more difficult when we recognize that this God graciously stoops to meet us where we are – bound by time, place and limitations of power and knowledge. It is hard enough to think deeply about God's timelessness. But it is even more difficult to think about how this timeless God could meet us in history and respond to us in the interplay of real personal relationships.

It is hard enough to understand God's unlimited power, his absolute sovereignty. But it is more difficult to understand how this utterly sovereign God, who does whatever he wants, can have meaningful relationships with us, his creatures, without either reducing us to robots or else sacrificing his own sovereignty.

Yet these very difficulties to our understanding can also prove a help. If we can get them sorted out, they help to explain some of the earlier questions we faced. We said that God is both loving toward sinners and angry with them. We find it hard to imagine how that can be.

The closest analogy might be a good mother or father who both loves and is angry with a disobedient child. But perhaps it is easier to think of God being full of love and wrath 'at the same time' if we remember that he is above time. The mystery of God's eternal, timeless being may well help shed light on some other mysteries.

How should we respond?

Our problem with qualities that belong to God alone is that our human experience of what 'persons' and 'personal relationships' are like takes place entirely within the limits of time, space, knowledge and power. But in God we are dealing with a person who is

“Is God the keystone that supports the structure of our thought? Or is he a personal, warm, attentive presence at the heart of our life? Is he the God postulated by philosophy who gives an ultimate meaning to our world, or is he the living God, in the biblical sense, who touches our hearts?”

Leon Joseph Suenens

beyond all such limitations. Understandably, we do not know exactly how to resolve these matters. We do not have enough information. But there are several useful things

Christians can do when they try to think clearly about God's character.

- We need to **admit ignorance**. We can only know what God discloses of himself. To claim we know more about God than he has revealed is a mark not of knowledge but of arrogance. Indeed, if we knew all there was to know about God, we would have to pass through the very barriers which make us creatures. In short, we would have to be God.

- We must also **worship**. Far from being an excuse for lazy thinking, worship is the only adequate response to the God who made us and who, despite our persistent rebellion and indifference, still delights to make himself known. Such a God will move us to profound adoration, to thinking about God on the large scale and about people on the small scale – precisely the opposite pattern to the predominant attitude in our secular world.

- It is important to **get the problems in perspective**. We may not fully grasp the details of how God, above time, reveals himself and interacts with people within time. But, as many scholars have pointed out, there is nothing fundamentally illogical about the idea.

- Above all, we need to **examine how God's qualities work out in practice** in the Bible. This will save us from using our knowledge of them wrongly. Take God's unlimited power. The biblical writers never deduce from this that we are all robots, or that it does not matter what we do because God will have his way in the end. Instead, the Bible uses God's omnipotence to encourage his

Water, for the Old Testament people, often stood for chaos, from which only the power of God could save: '... we will not fear ... though its waters roar and foam.' But water was also a source of life: 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.'



people and warn his enemies.

Dare a man fight an omnipotent God? Even if such a God is longsuffering, must he not triumph in the end? Cannot God's people invest great confidence in him precisely because nothing can take place apart from his permission? Even a sparrow cannot drop to the ground without God's permission, so his people need not be prey to anxiety. They can trust their heavenly Father.

Or consider God's limitless presence. The biblical writers never use this idea as if it meant that, because God is everywhere and in everything, an orchid or a daisy is part of God. They recognize that God is also above the universe he has created, and not to be confused with it. The fact that God is everywhere serves as a warning to those who want to escape from him, and as a great comfort and encouragement to those who love him and want to do his will. When Jesus says that he will be with his disciples to the end of the age, he is giving a promise to be savoured and enjoyed, a spur to mission, obedience and worship.

We need to be clear, too, what God's limitless knowledge means in practice. The fact that

God knows all things, even the end from the beginning, does not appear in the Bible as some abstruse theory, or to make him into some sort of clairvoyant. But it does have the great value of assuring God's people he is never taken by surprise, he knows what he is doing, he understands our needs and longings. He even knows 'insignificant' details, such as when we sit down and when we stand up. With such knowledge, he cannot be tricked or deceived, and his justice will be absolutely fair and impartial.

There are two things that come out very clearly from the Bible's account of God's character. First, his qualities are never described in a way which throws one attribute into conflict with another. In other words, it is wrong to lay such absolute stress on one of God's revealed qualities that others, equally revealed, are neglected.

For instance, it is possible to think so much about God's limitless power that his more personal characteristics – his love, his wrath, his give-and-take with his creatures – fade from view. Equally, some people dwell so much on God as a person that they effectively put aside his omnipotence. Others stress his love, and so conclude that his wrath must be impersonal; or else they decide, against the Bible's teaching, that everyone will ultimately surrender to such magnificent love.

These are dangerous ways of thinking about God. They distort the only evidence we have by suppressing the bits we may not like. And sooner or later we find ourselves worshipping a false god. We must frankly confess that, although we can know God

as he is, we cannot, without being God, know all there is to know about him. This means we must take pains to know him as he has revealed himself. It is fatal to speculate about God in such a way that our picture of him is different from the character he has made known.

Second, we need to ask why God has revealed his character to us. It is not to titillate our curiosity but to evoke repentance, faith and worship. Certainly we need to think deeply about God. But God has made himself known to us not primarily to satisfy our intelligence but to meet our many needs. The Bible shows us each of God's qualities first and foremost in the context of the human need that called it forth. God reveals his compassion to people who are lost, his grace to the guilty, his love to the unloving, his eternity to those too preoccupied with what is passing, his wrath to the rebellious.

God is greater than the sum of the qualities he has revealed. If

all that we can know about God were a jigsaw puzzle, we would be missing many pieces! But the pieces he has graciously given us are magnificent. When we fit

“A God who does not sanctify the everyday is dead, and belief in such a remote God is an intellectual or aesthetic luxury . . . it does not lead to the celebration of life. An unemployed God quickly exhausts his capital and becomes a dead God.”

Sam Keen

these together they form patterns of great beauty and grandeur which stretch our human conceptions to the limit. We must guard against forcing the pieces together in unnatural ways, or throwing some of them away, or introducing new pieces from different puzzles. Otherwise the picture becomes badly distorted and is no longer a picture of God.

GOD AS HE REVEALS HIMSELF

All we know about God has come to us in *history*. He has revealed himself in historical events and in words spoken by historical people. What he has revealed has affected the history of the nations it has touched.

God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity in a number of remarkable ways. One of these is to use deeply significant names for himself. His 'names' or 'titles' reflect what and who he is. He is 'Yahweh', the personal God of the covenant

with his people. (The old word for this was 'Jehovah'; in most Bibles it is given as 'the LORD'.) The name signifies 'I am what I am'. He is 'Yahweh the everlasting God'. He is addressed as 'Yahweh provides', 'Yahweh is our righteousness', 'the Ancient of days', 'the holy One of Israel'.

These names or titles often first called forth in specific contexts, became filled with greater meaning as God revealed himself more and more over successive generations. 'Yahweh

Eastern spirituality has had an extensive appeal in the West recently. Some techniques, such as Zen Buddhism and yoga, have the aim of losing oneself in the universal. Here the practice of Zen Buddhism is linked with tuition in singing.



is peace', the ancient Israelites gladly affirmed; but when Jesus came and died for our redemption, it could be seen more clearly than ever what that peace was. By the death of his Son, God brought about peace between himself and humanity, and, among God's people, between person and person. Because he himself provided the sacrifice that brought peace about, 'Yahweh is peace' becomes no mere title but a

burning summary of what God is like. The same is true of all God's 'names'.

God in Jesus

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features about God's names is that, in one way or another, the New Testament applies them all to Jesus Christ. That the writers of the New Testament do not hesitate to apply divine names and honours to Jesus not only tells us what Jesus is like, but equally what God is like.

So we gain our clearest view of God's character by studying Jesus. Although God is one, we learn that God is not solitary, but a fellowship of love: the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, and the Father and the Son make themselves present in believers by the Spirit, and so on.

God the Trinity is treated elsewhere in this book, but what must be stressed here is that God reveals himself as a single God who is a fellowship of love among three 'persons'. And he reveals himself in this way, not to tantalize our minds with deep thoughts, but to draw us into his fellowship of love.

One aim of redemption is that God's people may learn to love God as Jesus loves his Father, and experience the vast dimensions of God's love as Jesus is loved by his Father. The Bible teaching about God as Trinity is thus not only deeply experienced, but also tells us something about what God is like.

The same thing is true about every teaching in the Bible. We study God's providence, for instance - how he mysteriously controls things to bring about his purposes, leaving people

responsible for their actions but never relinquishing his own control. And we glimpse something of his wisdom, power, eternity.

We discern how God has progressively revealed himself across the centuries, from the creation, through the call of Abraham, the exodus, the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel, the rise of the prophets, the establishment of David's kingdom, the constant promises which look to one who is to come, and the promises of a new heaven and a new earth. And we see more clearly that

God not only forms purposes, he is a God of purpose, a being with goals and will. We see that these purposes include drawing together a people who love him in purity and faith.

This tells us something of what God desires and cherishes. We perceive something of the sweep of his thoughts, and meditate on the amazing love of a sovereign Creator-God who does not reject people who have rebelled against him, but works to draw them back. We read of his concern for justice, and deduce he must be just; of his promises culminating in Jesus, and know him to be faithful; of his frequent judgements on people and nations, and his warning of eternal accountability, and know he is a God to be feared; of his promise of eternal life, and recognize that our basis of hope is as certain as the love of God in Jesus Christ. The entire sweep of the history of redemption

The central picture Jesus gave of God was of a father. Our human parenting is always defective to some degree, but we still sense that there is a perfect love of parent for child that we can reach after. God's love is like that.

Bible teaches God is perfect in every way. Sometimes we catch glimpses of his action in the real world he has tied.



See *Who was Jesus?*





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reveals what the personal God is like.

Holiness and love

If there are two attributes of God which most completely sum up all that he has revealed of himself, they are holiness and love.

'Holiness' sums up the nature of God. Other persons and things in the Bible are called 'holy', but only because of their relation to God. Holiness is not essentially a question of character: clothes, food and utensils are sometimes called holy. They become holy not because they are good, nor by some magical rite, but because they are peculiarly God's. The moral obligation in being called holy lies in this: 'holy people', those who belong to God, must reflect something of God's character. That is part of his mark of ownership. God himself is holy in that he is not bound by creation, not to be

compared with anyone or anything: he is completely apart, transcendent, 'holy'. We are holy if we belong to God, if we are set aside for him alone.

The holy God is also the loving God. God's love is not caused by anything in the ones whom he loves, but finds its springs in his own character. We human beings often love because we find the one we love attractive; God loves because it is his nature to love. His love is directed towards the lost world. But the Bible equally declares that God sets his love in a special way on some people, not for any superior value in them, but simply because God has chosen to do so. This love God has towards his people is shown as he works for their good, especially for their eternal well-being. Its greatest demonstration came when he sent his Son to reconcile us to himself.

No description of the character of God can ever be adequate: the subject is too vast. But no other subject so urgently demands our thought. This is God's world, he made us, we will all have to give account to him and in Jesus he has opened up the way for us to know him. Our response must surely be to give our minds to the task of thinking about his character. As we do so, we will become a little more like him.