The Greatness of God: A Meditation

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We begin our session this morning with the Shorter Catechism's celebrated answer to the question, What is God? Described by Charles Hodge as the 'best definition of God ever penned by man',[1] the Answer reads, 'God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.' (*Shorter Catechism*, Answer 4)

The first thing to note here is that these words apply to the triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They describe the divine essence in all its fullness. The one God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. But they also describe each of the divine persons. The divine essence subsists fully and equally in each, none being greater and none being lesser; and this means that when we speak of the deity of the Son or the Spirit we are saying that each, with the Father, is 'infinite, eternal and unchangeable.'

But we must note, too, that these attributes are not separate parts of the deity. The divine essence is one and indivisible. This is the truth enshrined in the doctrine of the divine simplicity: a word introduced into theology not to hint at some naïveté in God, but to highlight the fact that he is not a composite. The attributes are not like the segments of an orange, allowing you to take one away and leave a remainder. Nor they like different areas of the brain, where one area controls cognitive functions, another mobility, another speech, and so on, and where one area can cease to function while the others continue. There is no 'area' in God which is wisdom or righteousness or holiness. His attributes are what God *is*, not what he *has*. He is justice, he is goodness, he is truth, and he is each of them infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. Furthermore, each of the attributes characterises all the others, and this immediately rules out any tension between them. Mercy and justice do indeed meet in holy concord, but not (as older preachers sometimes suggested) after dramatic negotiations. His justice is merciful and his mercy just, in the same way as his wisdom is holy and his goodness powerful. For God, to be is to be such a God, and he could be different only by ceasing to exist. This is equally true of God's triune-ness. It is not that God has three persons. He is three persons, and this three-ness is co-eternal with his essence. He has never existed, and could never have existed, except as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the form of eternal being.

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1 *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: Nelson, 1871), p. 367.

It is also notable that in this list of divine attributes there is no mention of his greatness, even though Scripture (and particularly the Book of Psalms) abounds in references to it. Nor is the Catechism alone in such an omission. Few of the weighty tomes of Christian Dogmatics give separate treatment to the greatness of God.

What are we to make of this?

First, greatness is an attribute of all God's attributes. He is great in wisdom, great in power, great in holiness, great in justice, and great in goodness and truth. And the same would be true if we were to extend the list. God is great in knowledge and great in graciousness and great in love. He is great in all that he is.

Secondly, greatness is not so much a distinct quality of deity as the sum-total of all that God is. It is, overwhelmingly, the impression he makes on us. He is a magnitude: an infinite, eternal and unchangeable magnitude; a towering, unbounded eminence; an immense and awesome majesty.

This immediately means that any attempt at a detailed analysis would be presumptuous. But we can make contact (to put it no more strongly) with a few aspects of it.

GOD FILLS AND TRANSCENDS ALL SPACE

First, God fills and transcends the whole of space. The Old Testament already had a clear grasp of this. God's active presence was everywhere: in the depths of the earth, at the heights of the mountains, on sea, on dry land (Ps. 95:4–5); the clouds were his chariot, the wind his wings (Ps. 104:3–4); the stars were exactly where he had placed them, he was on intimate terms with all of them (calling them by name) and it was due to his power that not one was missing (Is. 40:2); the whole earth was full of his glory (Is. 6:3, ESV); and it was impossible to evade him. Even if one fled to the farthest seas, to the highest heavens, to the depths of *sheol*, to the darkness of the womb, to wherever, he is there before us, and the fleeing soul cries, defeated, 'Thou there!' (Ps. 139:8).

Today, we have a much fuller understanding of the vastness of space than had our Old Testament forebears, or even our 19th century ones. We no longer see the stars as little, twinkling things a few miles above us. We know that they are vast bodies, and that they are so far distant from us that their twinklings have taken millions of light-years to reach us. We know that many, indeed most, are beyond the reach of even the most sophisticated telescopes; and we know that, even as we speak, space itself is expanding at a phenomenal rate. For all practical purposes, space is

infinite. We can never reach its boundaries, because it has no fixed outer edges.

Yet God is present to it at every point, even to what to us are its remotest extremities, not by extension, like some physical substance stretched out over some 'immense' area, but as an all-present mind of infinite intelligence and power; and he is present not as an idle or curious observer, but as an active preserver, governor and loving carer, upholding the cosmos, not from a distance, but from a position of the closest conceivable proximity to its every part. There is no space between him and any point in space. Every atom, every galaxy, every living creature, is equally near him; and this presence means more than mere proximity. It is also means accessibility, and for us, his weak and wayward children, this is the most glorious fact of all. God has no postcode. Instead, he is always within shouting distance; even, indeed, within whispering distance; close enough to hear our groans, even when least articulate, and even when coming from the deepest pit.

But though God fills space, he is not confined by it. As Solomon reminds us, the highest heaven cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27). Space is not co-eternal with God, nor should we imagine him fitting his creation into space as if it was there before the universe itself. He created space in the very act of creating the world and gave it whatever characteristics it pleased him. Here it is important to distinguish between God's omnipresence and his immensity. Omnipresence is a relational term, defining God's relation to the created universe, and reminding us that God is all-present to the world he has made. But the universe does not contain him nor set limits to his freedom as creator. He was when space was not, and his presence is not exhausted by his omnipresence. What C. S. Lewis called, 'the land of the Trinity',[2] transcends space, and it is closer to the truth to say that God lives parallel to space than to say that he lives in it.

GOD FILLS AND TRANSCENDS TIME

Secondly, God fills and transcends time. He is eternal, and here again is a clear Old Testament emphasis. In the Beginning, God already was (Gen. 1:1, Jn. 1:1). He *was* from everlasting (Ps. 90), and he *will be* to everlasting (Is. 40:28), present to every moment of time as he is present to every moment of space; and present not only as a witness, but as the supremely active agent, ruler and carer. He was there at the creation of light, billions of years ago; he was there at all the great moments of salvation-history such as the birth of Isaac, the crossing of the Red Sea and the resurrection

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960. Repr. London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 169.

of Christ; and he is there (and here) in every moment, whether critical or commonplace, of our own lives. He will be there when the heavens and the earth pass away, supervising the unimaginable moments of final apocalypse; and he will be there, for ever, in the new heavens and the new earth.

Yet he transcends time, existing not merely before it, but above it. This is not to say that time does not exist for God. Like space, it is an inalienable and permanent element in the form of his creation, and he takes full account of it as an objective reality. He created the world not in an instant, but in successive stages (Gen. 1:1–2:3). Yet his creative word was not spoken in successive stages.[3] It was spoken in eternity, but fulfilled in time, each effect coming at its own appointed moment. This is not to say that God creates 'in time', as if it were a medium which existed before creation and to which God had to adjust, or a box into which he had to fit his creation.[4] He created time itself, and he gave it the exact features needed to support life and, above all, to facilitate the redemption of his people. He no more violates or ignores the properties of time than he violates the liberty of his moral creatures, and we see this even in his arrangements for the incarnation. Not only does the Son come 'in the fullness of the time' (*chronos*, Gal. 4:4), but he repeatedly recognises that he is working to time: hence his references to, 'My hour has not yet come' and, 'The hour has come.'[5] God is a meticulous time-keeper.

But time is not a condition or modifier of his own existence. He is 'the Being One' (*ho ōn*, Ex. 3:13, LXX) who eternally is, and whose being explains all other being. He was never young, he will never be old, he suf-

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[3] Cf. the language of Augustine: 'You call us, therefore, to understand the Word, God who is with you (John 1:1. That word is spoken eternally, and by it all things are uttered eternally. It is not the case that what was being said comes to an end, and something else is then said, so that everything is uttered in succession with a conclusion, but everything is said in the simultaneity of eternity […]. Yet not all that you cause to exist by speaking is made in simultaneity and eternity.' (*Saint Augustine: Confessions*; tr. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 226).

[4] This point was highlighted by Anselm in his *Proslogion* (9): 'You exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time; however, You, though nothing can be without You, are nevertheless not in place or time but all things are in You. For nothing contains You, but You contain all things.' See *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 98.

[5] See for example John 2:4, 7:6, 7:30, 17:1.

fers no change or decay, he undergoes no development and he is never in process. Nor does he experience things successively, one after another.

Is he not bored then? Does he not feel the time long? How does he pass the day, if every day is the same? Let's remember that he is the blessed God, and he enjoys that blessedness without past, present or future, in an eternity which has been well defined as 'simultaneity in the present.'[6] All, the eternal and the temporal, is simultaneously present to him in one eternal 'moment' of blessedness: his blessedness in his own fellowship as the eternal Trinity; his delight in his finished creation; his satisfaction in the obedience of his Son; his joy when sinners repent; his delight in his children. This is one single moment of infinitely varied blessedness, as the triune God enjoys both the joys of the Land of the Trinity and the joys of his space-time creation. Even the doctrine of divine passibility, if we embrace it, must be set within this single moment of blessedness. The cost of the Father's love as expressed on Calvary was not a transient moment, but part of the one eternal 'moment' subsumed, we know not how, into his infinite blessedness.

TRANSCENDENT HOLINESS

Thirdly, God is great in his transcendent holiness. Holiness is not in the first instance an ethical concept, but a relational one, expressing the otherness and separateness of God. This is why it is so often expressed in spatial imagery. In Isaiah 6:1, for example, God is 'high and lifted up', and the same sort of language appears in Isaiah 57:15, where it is amplified in the divine pronouncement, 'I dwell in the high and holy place'; and in this very same context we note that God's name is 'Holy'. Not only does he have a holy name. His name is 'Holy'.

What such language is pointing to is that there is no continuous chain of being, with God as the final, most impressive link. On the contrary, there is an infinite gulf between him and all other forms of being. However high we rise, in time or eternity, God is on another plain and at an infinitely higher level; and this is not simply a matter of his magnitude, but of the very mode of his being. He *is* in a way that marks him off from all creaturely being. He is ever awesome and ever mysterious. We can know him only to the extent that he chooses to reveal himself, but this revelation itself serves only to give a glimpse of a form of being which is far beyond our experience and far beyond our conceptual framework. We

[6] This phraseology derives ultimately from Augustine as in Footnote 3 above. In a footnote to his edition of the *Confessions* (p. 233) Chadwick adopts Augustine's language to provide a definition of eternity: 'the reality of eternity is simultaneity in the present.'

can say in words that God is triune, but how can we begin to understand what it means to be one being in three persons, united in community of nature, mutual adoration and a shared commitment to saving the world? Then there is the fact of his *aseity*, a Scholastic term which means, literally, that God is from himself. His being has no cause. He is self-sufficient. He is independent. He has no needs that men or angels can meet. He has no need to be needed, and though he made us for his own glory he did not need us in order to receive glory: the Trinity itself is an eternal symphony of doxology. And at the same time, he is awesome in might and power, the source of all the forms of energy in the created universe, yet more powerful than the sum-total of all these put together. We cannot even begin to imagine omnipotence at work, creating and then re-creating the heavens and the earth.

But while in its root-meaning holiness refers to the awesome otherness of God, part of that very otherness is his moral grandeur, and particularly the spotless purity which sets him apart from sinful humanity. This is reflected in the way the Scriptures emphasise that every approach to God involves some prior rite of purification. One outstanding example of this is the elaborate ritual prescribed for the consecration of the priests in Exodus 29:1–46, and, following on from this, the detailed prescriptions for the cycle of Levitical sacrifices, culminating in the great annual ritual of *yom kippur* (Lev. 16:1–34). Only on the basis of purification-through-atonement was it possible to approach God, and this typology found its fulfilment in the self-sacrifice of Christ. He, too, Son of God though he was, could enter the Holy of Holies only as one bearing blood, but the whole ritual was elevated to a new plain by the fact that the blood he offers was his own, the blood of God (Heb. 9:12; Acts 20:28). Nothing could more dramatically underline the fact that sinners can get access to 'Holy' only on his own terms, as those who have been 'purified' in accordance with his own prescriptions. Everyone who hopes to see him as he is 'must purify himself as he is pure' (1 Jn. 3:3); but although this is clearly something to which we must give the most serious personal attention, we also know that it is something for which God himself has taken ultimate responsibility. Christ shed his blood not only to secure the remission of our sins (Eph. 1:7), but to bring us to the point where we stand before him in perfect moral splendour, 'holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:27).

In our case, perfection and purity consist in obedience, but this clearly cannot be its meaning as applied to God. Being subject to none, and under no law, his perfection lies in his self-consistency. He is always true to himself: always just, always true, always faithful, always wise, always holy; and, perhaps above all, always good.

It has often been remarked in criticism of the *Shorter Catechism* that its 'definition' of God makes no reference to his love, and this omission is clearly in stark contrast to the modern Christian tendency to give love a primacy, and even a regulatory function, over God's other attributes. This pushes us relentlessly towards the point where 'love is God' and when we reach that point then, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, love becomes demonic, serving as a pretext for anything and everything.[7] To make matters worse, our understanding of love is isolated from its New Testament context. Far from being a wonder, it is taken for granted, as if it were just what we would expect,[8] and we then compound the error by assuming that love means that God is all-indulgent and that forgiveness no more than his *métier*. Above all, we have divorced the divine love from its greatest manifestation — the cross, where God, not sparing his own Son, delivered him up as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 Jn. 4:10). Deny this divine action, deny that Christ was judged in our place, deny that the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:6), and you completely evacuate God's love of its biblical meaning.

In highlighting the goodness of God the Westminster divines had not the least intention of obscuring or down-playing the divine love, but they saw the divine goodness as the more comprehensive term. God is good through and through; and that goodness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable; wise, just, powerful and holy. It includes his benevolence towards the whole of his creation. He wishes his every creature well: Shedd even goes so far as to say, 'There is no malice in the Eternal Mind toward the arch-fiend himself.'[9] It includes his patience, not only towards the sinful

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7 Lewis is restating a comment by M. Denis de Rougemont to the effect that, 'love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god'. Lewis puts it positively: 'love begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god'; and when this happens love 'attempts to override all other claims and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done "for love's sake" is thereby lawful and even meritorious.' (*The Four Loves*, pp. 7–8). Cf. James Packer's contrast between divine and human love: 'God's love, as the Bible views it, never leads him to foolish, impulsive, immoral actions in the way that its human counterpart too often leads us.' (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973, p. 136).

8 This modern attitude is in stark contrast to that of Anselm, who wrote: 'How do You spare the wicked if You are all-just and supremely just? For how does the all-just and supremely just One do something that is unjust? Or what kind of justice is it to give everlasting life to him who merits eternal death?' (*Proslogion*, 9).

9 W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons to the Spiritual Man* (1884. Repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 66.

human race in general, but towards every individual in particular (even his children sorely try his patience). It includes his kindness and generosity, lavishing his gifts where they are not deserved and where there is little gratitude in return. It includes the blessings of his common or general grace, extended even to those who are his enemies. His sun shines, and his rain falls, on the unrighteous as on the righteous (Mt. 5:45); nations which give him little or no recognition still enjoy the benefits of civilisation and stable government; and individuals who have no hesitation in blaspheming him are often the very ones most distinguished for the artistic, technical, and scientific gifts which come so freely from his hand.

But God's goodness also includes his justice; and justice, as far as the Bible is concerned, means retribution. This is not an idea with which moderns have much patience. Justice, they argue, is not a matter of punishing wrongs, but of putting things right, and what we must emphasise is God's graciousness and his unconditional forgiveness. Yet when the man in the street sees power abused, and sees fraud and violence and oppression and criminal negligence go unpunished, his immediate cry is, 'There's no justice.' Just as the psalmist recognised that there can be no deliverance for the oppressed without the crushing of the oppressor (Ps. 72:4), so people today recognise instinctively that goodness cannot be indifferent to evil. 'God is not just,' writes James Packer, 'that is, He does not act in the way that is *right*, He does not do what is proper to a *judge*, unless He inflicts upon all sin and wrongdoing the penalty it deserves.'[10] It is this ultimate divine justice that gives legitimacy to our human judicial systems with their law-courts and prisons and war-crime tribunals; and it is this same divine justice which explains why, even within history, God's wrath is revealed against pagan society (Rom. 1:18–32). In fact, as we read through the Psalms one of the things that strikes us most is the frequency with which the psalmist prays for God's judgement on the enemies of truth. Where we might content ourselves with praying for the conversion of Islamist extremists, and deem this the Christian thing to do, the Psalms are uncompromising in their belief that only by punishing wrong can God put things right: 'Arise, O LORD, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies […] let the evil of the wicked come to an end' (Ps. 7: 6, 9).

Nor is this some outdated Old Testament sentiment rendered obsolete by the progress of revelation and the disclosure of God's grace and truth in the incarnation of his Son (Jn. 1:14). On the contrary, when that same Son returns in glory it will be to destroy the Lawless One (2 Thess. 2:8). A universe where the Supreme Judge treated evil and goodness indifferently

[10] James I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 166.

would be a nightmare. Goodness and justice cannot be divorced, and that is why history as we know it will close with what John Wesley called the Great Assize.

But it is especially in his redeeming love that God's goodness shines. The first thing we have to ask here is how this love fits into the description of deity with which our reflections began, and the answer, surely, is that God's redeeming love has all the attributes listed in the Catechism's statement. It is infinite, in that it is unsearchable; eternal, in that it had no beginning, but is co-ages with himself (God never was without loving his people); and it is unchangeable in that it never diminishes, never lets go and cannot in any circumstances be diverted from its purpose. But equally, his love is wise, powerful (able to achieve all its objects), holy, just and true; and conversely, all his other attributes are suffused with love. His wisdom, power, holiness, justice, and truth all serve the purposes of his redeeming love.

All this becomes apparent at the cross, which is simultaneously the wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 1:24) the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:25) and the love of God (1 Jn. 4:10); and just as God is great in his being, wisdom and all his other attributes so he is great in both the manner (1 Jn. 3:1) and the magnitude (Jn. 3:16) of his redeeming love. But this greatness is many-faceted.

First, God's redeeming love was great in its condescension, stooping down to choose for adoption into his family people who had nothing to commend them, but were utterly helpless sinners at enmity with all that God stood for (Rom. 5:6–11).

Secondly, it was great in the plan that it formulated: not only to cancel the guilt of our sin, but to transform us, body and soul, till at last we are completely Christ-like and fit to share the glory he had with the Father before the world was (Jn. 17:5, 22).

Thirdly, it was great in its attention to detail. God would call each one of his chosen individually (Rom. 8:30), watch over our going-out and our coming-in (Ps. 121:8), and personally ensure that all things, even our failings and our lapses, work together for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Fourthly, God's redeeming love was great in the price it was prepared to pay and the cost it was prepared to bear in order to bring his plan to fruition: a cost borne by each person of the Trinity, though in different ways. The Father sacrificed his Son to atone for the sin of the world and, in doing so, had to turn a deaf ear to his anguished cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!' The Son became flesh specifically in order to carry our sins in his own body to the cross (1 Pet. 2:24), and there he plumbed the depths of mental and spiritual anguish as he descended into that Black Hole of Dereliction which love could never reach. And the

Holy Spirit, grieved by the criminal darkness of Calvary, still upheld the Son (Heb. 9:14), sharing in the pain of him whose Spirit he was and from whom not even imputed sin could separate him (the paradox is one we have to live with. The Father forsook him. The Spirit upheld him.)

Finally, and perhaps above all, redeeming love is great in its constancy. This is the truth enshrined in that magnificent Hebrew word, *hesed*: God's steadfast love, the love that never lets go, the love that's still there when everything has fallen or fled. Redeeming love is love that has made its choice. It has laid its plan, met the cost and then gone on to unite us to Christ in all the glory of his obedience and all the power of his resurrection. In him, God has adopted us as his children, flooded our hearts with a sense of his love (Rom. 5:5) and given us the boldness to cry out, 'Abba, Father!' (Gal. 4:6). He will never put us out of his family; nor will he ever allow us to walk out of it. Whatever it takes to keep us to the day of salvation (1 Pet. 1:5), he will do it.

This doesn't mean that as believers we can sin with impunity. True though it is that we can never again fall under God's judicial condemnation, yet as his children we may, by our sins, fall under his fatherly displeasure.[11] He may hide his face, discipline us through adversity, humble us by leaving us for a season to the corruptions of our own hearts, and even deprive us of all sense of his love; and there can be no restoration to his favour until we abase ourselves, confess our sin and renew our faith and repentance. At such times we need a repentance without despair and a faith without presumption. But not for a moment does God let us go. Neither death nor life, neither earth nor hell, neither what happened in our past nor what may happen in our future, neither pain nor backsliding, can ever separate us from his love (Rom. 8:38–39). It will never stop until, brimming over with joy, it presents us faultless before the presence of his glory (Jude 24).

It is in this sheer goodness that we see what the psalmist referred to as the 'beauty' of the Lord (Ps. 27:4, 90:17): the quality which led Rudolf Otto to describe the holy as not only mysterious and intimidating, but fascinating.[12] Holiness not only repels. It also attracts, but as is the case with his greatness, beauty is not such a distinct attribute of God as a description of the total impression he makes on those who live in communion

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[11] See the splendid statement on this in the Westminster Confession's Chapter on Justification (11:5); and compare Chapter 5:5 ('Of Providence').

[12] Otto's 'formula', describing God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, is expounded in Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, tr. John W. Harvey (2nd edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 12–40.

and fellowship with him. Within the Trinity, each person sees and loves the beauty of the other. Likewise, properly adjusted angels and human beings are fascinated by the beauty of God. The psalmist was not content with a mere glimpse of it: he wanted to gaze and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord (Ps. 27:4). But here, more than anywhere, appreciation depends on the eye of the beholder. The unbeliever sees no beauty in God: nothing to make him desirable (Is. 53:2). Conversion, however, gives us a new aesthetic, because where there is faith there is love, and where there is love God is seen as utterly adorable; and this in turn leads to longing and desire. There are some dramatic representations of this in the Psalms. In Psalm 42:1, for example, the psalmist is panting for God with the same urgency as the parched deer pants for the flowing streams. Conversely, where there is no sense of God's presence the soul is desolate and cries out, 'O LORD, how long?' (Ps. 6:3) To the pure in heart, the supreme blessing is that they shall see God (Mt. 5:8).

This beauty is closely linked to the idea of the divine glory and, of course, neither the one nor the other is visible. God has no physical form, and categorically forbade any attempt to represent him in a visible or material image. God is spirit (Jn. 4:24), and his beauty is a moral and spiritual beauty consisting of such qualities as his immaculate purity, his unfailing love, his compassion, his caring, his gentleness and his tenderness. These are the attributes which make us love him and long to see him, not 'through a glass, darkly', but face to face; and while these qualities were preached by Old Testament prophets and experienced by Old Testament believers, we of the New Testament era enjoy the greater privilege that we have seen this beauty enfleshed in the person of Christ. In him, the glory dwelt among us, full of graciousness and faithfulness (Jn. 1:14). It shone in his face (2 Cor. 4:6), but it shone, too, in his actions: in his pity, his patience, and above all in the self-sacrificing love by which, at unimaginable personal cost, he secured for us life more abundant. It is by his beauty he draws us to himself, and then we happily endorse the words of William Guthrie, 'Less cannot satisfy, and more is not desired'.[13]

GOD TRANSCENDS ALL OUR HUMAN WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Finally, God's greatness means that he transcends all our human words and concepts. No definition of him is possible, because definition means setting boundaries, and he is boundless. This is simply to remind our-

[13] William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (1658. Reprinted 1951 by the Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, n. l.), p. 43.

selves, if we need reminding, that the finite is not capable of taking in the infinite. We cannot contain God, or wrap him all up, in human statements.

Yet we need to be careful here. It doesn't mean that we have to be agnostic, admitting (or even boasting) that we can never know God. On the contrary, the Bible insists time and again on the importance of knowledge. The psalmist prayed that God would make him 'know' his ways (Ps. 25:4), our Lord himself declared that it was life eternal to 'know' the only true God (Jn. 17:3), and the Apostle Paul prayed that the Colossians might be filled with the 'knowledge' of his will (Col. 1:9). The fundamental truth here is that though our fallen and finite intellects could never discover God, he is able to reveal himself to us and able, too, to make us understand his revelation. This is why Paul can speak of 'what can be known about God' (*to gnōston*, Rom. 1:19). The word clearly implies that there are limits to what can be known, but it implies no less clearly that something can be known, provided God shares with us a little of what he knows about himself. His very act of creating is itself a revelation, his works making known his eternal power and God-ness (Rom. 1:20). But beyond that, he has revealed the secret (mystery) of his great redemptive plan through his messengers, the apostles and the prophets; and he has given their message fixed and permanent form in Holy Scripture, which is not merely a record of the word of God, but is itself the word of God *written* (and living).

It is no humility on our part to ignore this revelation, or to make a virtue of not being interested in theology (speech about God). Instead, it is incumbent upon us to cherish every word that God has shared with us, and to engage with the Scriptures not merely sentimentally, but cognitively. They weren't intended just to wash over us, but to challenge, persuade and correct us. Indeed, one of the Bible's key-words is 'consider'.

Yet our words and our concepts can never fully capture God. No list of divine names, no summary of the divine attributes, and no collation of the great creeds and confessions, allows us to search out the Almighty unto perfection; and even of the most recondite and thorough tomes of theology we have to say what Solomon said of the Temple, 'Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this system that I have built' (2 Chron. 6:18). Our systems may contain truth, and nothing but the truth, but they can never contain the whole truth. Even if we knew our whole Bibles intimately, our knowledge would still not be complete, because, as Calvin pointed out so often, God's revelation, though never misleading, is always accommodated to the 'rudeness' of

his people.[14] Some passages of Scripture still baffle us; others assure is that there are secret things that God has kept to himself (Deut. 29:29); and sometimes the Bible itself makes plain that there are questions we shouldn't even ask (Acts 1:7). Nor is this condition of 'not knowing' a merely transitional phase of our discipleship, to be left behind once we arrive in glory. On the contrary, it is an unavoidable consequence of our human finitude. Granted, one day we shall see God 'fully', as Paul puts it (1 Cor. 13:12), but even such perfection is relative to our human condition, and for ever limited by our finitude. Only omniscience can comprehend deity, and we shall never, ever, be omniscient. Even to the glorified human mind of Christ the depths of deity (his own deity) remain an inexhaustible (and delightful) mystery.

But there are two further points we must bear in mind.

First, though we cannot know all *about* him, we can still know him. In this respect, the praying believer, bowed down with a sense of sin and need, and overwhelmed by the majesty of God, can converse with him more intimately than the most brilliant theologian whose heart grace has never broken. As Packer reminds us, 'John Owen and John Calvin knew more theology than John Bunyan or Billy Bray, but who would deny that the latter pair knew their God every bit as well as the former?'[15]

Secondly, we have infinite time to get to know God. The school of Christ never closes, discipleship never ends, and God, as the object of our adoration is never exhausted. The excellencies of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9) will provide abundant stimulus to our hearts and minds throughout eternity. God's self-knowledge is one instantaneous eternal present: *our* knowledge of him will be unendingly incremental, as the Lamb leads us, day after day, to the headwaters of the River of Life, deep within the Throne (Rev. 7:17).

WHERE DOES HE DWELL?

But if he is high and lifted up, and inhabits eternity (Is. 57:15), how can we ever make contact with him, far less enjoy his communion? Is he not infinitely remote from us? Is he not awesome in majesty? And if we dare to gaze at him steadily, are we not reduced to crying, 'Woe is me! I am lost' (Is. 6:5).

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[14] See for example, his comment on Ex. 28:30: 'What the Scripture sometimes relates as to the enquiries made by Urim and Thummim, it was a concession made by God to the rudeness of his ancient people.' (*Harmony of the Pentateuch*, Vol. 2; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853, p. 198).

[15] James Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 34.

Yes! But then, precisely here, we meet what is perhaps the greatest of all the paradoxes of Scripture. 'I dwell in the high and holy place,' declares the LORD (Is. 57:15), but this is immediately followed by the words, 'and also'. There is somewhere else that the LORD dwells: 'and also' with the one 'who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.' He dwells with (and in) those who cry to him, crushed by the pressures of life and looking to him for help and support. He dwells with the penitent, who have been led by God on a terrible journey into self-knowledge and are now crying, 'Lord, be merciful to me the sinner', as if that were the whole truth about them, and as if they were the only sinners in the whole wide world.

But those with whom God dwells are also lowly: they know that their place is at the bottom, and see themselves as less than the least of all saints (the littlest of the littlest). They are poor in spirit, knowing they are completely devoid of righteousness, and readily confessing that they have nothing to bring to the Mercy Seat but their sin. It is of such people that the New Testament says that the life of God is in their souls (Gal. 2:20). It is such people the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, leads, fortifies and consoles. And it is from such people that the Father never takes his eye.

But to what end? We could reply that such an indwelling is, surely, an end in itself, and in many ways it is (Ps. 73:25). But still, like all of God's acts, it is for a purpose, namely, 'to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.' (Is. 57:15) 'Blessed are they that mourn,' said our Lord, 'for they shall be comforted.' (Mt. 5:4)

The Psalms abound with dramatic portrayals of such contrition and such revival. Take, for example, the fortieth Psalm. Here was a man in a pit, surrounded by trouble and almost overwhelmed (verse 12) by the knowledge of his own sin. All he could do was cry to God; and wait. God heard him, and pulled him out. But he did more. He put his feet on a rock, he got him going again, and he set him singing (verse 3). God had restored to him the joy of salvation (Ps. 51:12). That joy, the joy of the Lord, is our strength (Neh. 8:10). Without it we are useless.

What are we to do, then? The starting-point, surely, is to realise that this promise is already fulfilled in the life of every Christian. The High and Holy One is already with you. Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. The Holy Spirit is already by our side, and the fruit of his presence is 'love, joy and peace'. I am already equipped to 'do all things through him who strengthens me.' (Phil. 4:13).

The very thought should be enough to revive us.