

God

Reprinted from "A Dictionary of the Bible,"
edited by John D. Davis, Ph.D., D.D., LL.D., 1898, pp. 251-253.

[Benjamin B. Warfield](#)

Dr. Benjamin B Warfield graduated from the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, in 1871 and after a period of study abroad at Edinburgh and Heidelberg entered Princeton Theological Seminary and was graduated with the class of 1876. Following a year's study at Leipzig, Germany, and a short pastorate in Baltimore he was appointed instructor in New Testament Language and Literature in Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and a year later elected professor. In 1886 he was called to succeed Archibald Alexander Hodge as professor of Systematic Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary — a position which he occupied with great distinction until his death in 1921.

Dr. Warfield won early recognition as a scholar, teacher and author. He received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the college of New Jersey in 1880; that of Doctor of Laws from both the College of New Jersey and Davidson college in 1892; that of Doctor of Letters from Lafayette College in 1911; and that of Sacrae Theologiae Doctor from the University of Utrecht in 1913. He was editor of the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* from 1890-1903 and until the time of his death, the chief contributor to the *Princeton Theological Review*.

The English word "God" is derived from a root meaning "to call," and indicates simply the object of worship, one whom men call upon or invoke. The Greek word which it translates in the pages of the New Testament, however, describes this object of worship as Spirit; and the Old Testament Hebrew word, which this word in turn represents, conveys, as its primary meaning, the idea of power. On Christian lips, therefore, the word "God" designates fundamentally the almighty Spirit who is worshiped and whose aid is invoked by men. This primary idea of God, in which is summed up what is known as theism, is the product of that general revelation which God makes of Himself to all men, on the plane of nature. The truths involved in it are continually reiterated, enriched, and deepened in the Scriptures; but they are not so much revealed by them as presupposed at the foundation of the special revelation with which the Scriptures busy themselves — the great revelation of the grace of God to sinners. On the plane of nature men can learn only what God necessarily is, and what, by virtue of His essential attributes, He must do; a special communication from Him is

requisite to assure us what, in His infinite love, He will do for the recovery of sinners from their guilt and misery to the bliss of communion with Him. And for the full revelation of this, His grace in the redemption of sinners, there was requisite an even more profound unveiling of the mode of His existence, by which He has been ultimately disclosed as including in the unity of His being a distinction of persons, by virtue of which it is the same God from whom, through whom, and by whom are all things, who is at once the Father who provides, the Son who accomplishes, and the Spirit who applies, redemption. Only in the uncovering of this supernal mystery of the Trinity is the revelation of what God is completed. That there is no hint of the Trinity in the general revelation made on the plane of nature is due to the fact that nature has nothing to say of redemption, in the process of which alone are the depths of the divine nature made known. That it is explicitly revealed only in the New Testament is due to the fact that not until the New Testament stage of revelation was reached was the redemption, which was being prepared throughout the whole Old Testament economy, actually accomplished. That so ineffable a mystery was placed before the darkened mind of man at all is due to the necessities of the plan of redemption itself, which is rooted in the trinal distinction in the Godhead, and can be apprehended only on the basis of the Trinity in Unity.

The nature of God has been made known to men, therefore, in three stages, corresponding to the three planes of revelation, and we will naturally come to know Him, first, as the infinite Spirit or the God of nature; then, as the Redeemer of sinners, or the God of grace; and lastly as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or the Triune God.

I. GOD, THE INFINITE SPIRIT

The conviction of the existence of God bears the marks of an intuitive truth in so far as it is the universal and unavoidable belief of men, and is given in the very same act with the idea of self, which is known at once as dependent and responsible and thus implies one on whom it depends and to whom it is responsible. This immediate perception of God is confirmed and the contents of the idea developed by a series of arguments known as the "theistic proofs." These are derived from the necessity we are under of believing in the real existence of the infinitely perfect Being, of a sufficient cause for the contingent universe, of an intelligent author of the order and of the manifold contrivances observable in nature, and of a lawgiver and judge for dependent moral beings, endowed with the sense of duty and an ineradicable feeling of responsibility, conscious of the moral contradictions of the world and craving a solution for them, and living under an intuitive perception of right which they do not see realized. The cogency of these proofs is currently recognized in the Scriptures, while they add to them the supernatural manifestations of God in a redemptive process, accompanied at every stage by miraculous attestation. From the theistic proofs, however, we learn not only that a God exists, but also necessarily, on the

principle of a sufficient cause, very much of the nature of the God which they prove to exist. The idea is still further developed, on the principle of interpreting by the highest category within our reach, by our instinctive attribution to Him, in an eminent degree, of all that is the source of dignity and excellence in ourselves. Thus we come to know God as a personal Spirit, infinite, eternal, and illimitable alike in His being and in the intelligence, sensibility, and will which belong to Him as personal spirit. The attributes which are thus ascribed to Him, including self-existence, independence, unity, uniqueness, unchangeableness, omnipresence, infinite knowledge and wisdom, infinite freedom and power, infinite truth, righteousness, holiness and goodness, are not only recognized but richly illustrated in Scripture, which thus puts the seal of its special revelation upon all the details of the natural idea of God.

II. GOD, THE REDEEMER OF SINNERS

While reiterating the teaching of nature as to the existence and character of the personal Creator and Lord of all, the Scriptures lay their stress upon the grace or the undeserved love of God, as exhibited in His dealings with His sinful and wrath-deserving creatures. So little, however, is the consummate divine attribute of love advanced, in the Scriptural revelation, at the expense of the other moral attributes of God, that it is thrown into prominence only upon a background of the strongest assertion and fullest manifestation of its companion attributes, especially of the divine righteousness and holiness, and is exhibited as acting only along with and in entire harmony with them. God is not represented in the Scriptures as forgiving sin because He really cares very little about sin; nor yet because He is so exclusively or predominatingly the God of love, that all other attributes shrink into desuetude in the presence of His illimitable benevolence. He is rather represented as moved to deliver sinful man from his guilt and pollution because He pities the creatures of His hand, immeshed in sin, with an intensity which is born of the vehemence of His holy, abhorrence of sin and His righteous determination to visit it with intolerable retribution; and by a mode which brings as complete satisfaction to His infinite justice and holiness as to His unbounded love itself. The Biblical presentation of the God of grace includes thus the richest development of all His moral attributes, and the God of the Bible is consequently set forth, in the completeness of that idea, as above everything else the ethical God. And that is as much as to say that there is ascribed to Him a moral sense so sensitive and true that it estimates with unfailing accuracy the exact moral character of every person or deed presented for its contemplation, and responds to it with the precisely appropriate degree of satisfaction or reprobation. The infinitude of His love is exhibited to us precisely in that while we were yet sinners He loved us, though with all the force of His infinite nature he reacted against our sin with illimitable abhorrence and indignation. The mystery of grace resides just in the impulse of a sin-hating God to show mercy to such guilty wretches; and the supreme revelation of God as the God of holy love is made in the disclosure of the mode of His procedure in redemption, by which

alone He might remain just while justifying the ungodly. For in this procedure there was involved the mighty paradox of the infinitely just Judge Himself becoming the sinner's substitute before His own law and the infinitely blessed God receiving in His own person the penalty of sin.

III. GOD, THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST

The elements of the plan of salvation are rooted in the mysterious nature of the Godhead, in which there coexists a trinal distinction of persons with absolute unity of essence; and the revelation of the Trinity was accordingly incidental to the execution of this plan of salvation, in which the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation for sin, and the Son, when He returned to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, sent the Spirit to apply His redemption to men. The disclosure of this fundamental fact of the divine nature, therefore, lagged until the time had arrived for the actual working out of the long-promised redemption; and it was accomplished first of all in fact rather than in word, by the actual appearance of God the Son on earth and the subsequent manifestations of the Spirit, who was sent forth to act as His representative in His absence. At the very beginning of Christ's ministry the three persons are dramatically exhibited to our sight in the act of His baptism. And though there is no single passage in Scripture in which all the details of this great mystery are gathered up and expounded, there do not lack passages in which the three persons are brought together in a manner which exhibits at once their unity and distinctness. The most prominent of these are perhaps the formula of baptism in the triune name, put into the mouths of His followers by the resurrected Lord (Matt. xxviii. 19), and the apostolic benediction in which a divine blessing is invoked from each person in turn (II Cor. xiii. 14). The essential elements which enter into and together make up this great revelation of the Triune God are, however, most commonly separately insisted upon. The chief of these are the three constitutive facts: (1) that there is but one God (Deut. vi. 4; Isa. xlv. 6; I Cor. viii. 4; Jas. ii. 19); (2) that the Father is God (Matt. xi. 25; John vi. 27; viii. 41; Rom. xv. 6; I Cor. viii. 6; Gal. i. 1, 3, 4; Eph. iv. 6; vi. 23; I Thess. i. 1; Jas. i. 27; iii. 9; I Pet. i. 2; Jude 1); the Son is God (John i. 1, 18; xx. 28; Acts xx. 28; Rom. ix. 5; Heb. i. 8; Col. ii. 9; Phil. ii. 6; II Pet. i. 1); and the Spirit is God (Acts v. 3, 4; I Cor. ii. 10, 11; Eph. ii. 22); and (3) that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are personally distinct from one another, distinguished by personal pronouns, able to send and be sent by one another, to love and honor each the other, and the like (John xv. 26; xvi. 13, 14; xvii. 8, 18, 23; xvi. 14; xvii. 1). The doctrine of the Trinity is but the synthesis of these facts, and, adding nothing to them, simply recognizes in the unity of the Godhead such a Trinity of persons as is involved in the working out of the plan of redemption. In the prosecution of this work there is implicated a certain relative subordination in the modes of operation of the several persons, by which it is the Father that sends the Son and the Son who sends the Spirit; but the three persons are uniformly represented in Scripture as in their essential nature each alike God over all, blessed forever (Rom. ix. 5); and we are

therefore to conceive the subordination as rather economical, that is, relative to the function of each in the work of redemption, than essential, that is, involving a difference in nature.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).