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The Doctrine _____ of God

BY JOHN MARK HICKS

This paper was prepared for the "Theology in Service of the Church" seminar held on July 17–18 in conjunction with the 1996 Christian Scholars Conference, Nashville, Tennessee.

Where Are We Today?

One of the most significant influences upon the vision of God commonly held among Churches of Christ has been the secularization of our culture. By secularization I mean the desacralization of institutions, the transposition of religious functions into the secular domain, and the differentiation of sacred and secular so that the sacred loses its overarching claim.¹ This secularization entails the loss of a sense of transcendence in the life of faith; a pragmatic or dogmatic emphasis on rule keeping takes precedence. It entails the reduction of Christianity to religious organizations; Christianity is equated with ecclesiology and its institutions. Further, it entails the loss of a sense of divine immanence within the cosmos; the perceived activity of God is restricted to maintaining the regularity of nature. Consequently, words like "accident" and "luck" are more a part of our vocabulary than is the biblical phrase "Lord willing."

Secularized religion, as an ideological perspective, characterized Churches of Christ of the mid-twentieth century. Secularization, however, took a particular form in our movement. It focused conver-

sion in a formula, reduced piety to the forms and structures of the true church, and relegated God to the fringes of human experience. God has done his part in both creation and redemption, it reasoned, and now we must do ours.

Secularized religion, however, does not represent our authentic heritage. The Stone wing of our movement had a dynamic view of the conversion and transformation of human lives. God was not on the fringes of his world, but was deeply involved through spiritual and providential activity. One need only remember the views of James A. Harding to note the powerful influence of the Stonite perspective on subsequent views of spiritual dynamics and providence. David Lipscomb, whose Stonite roots are well known, believed that God had a dynamic, rather than static, relationship with his world, including the divine ordering of civil war within a nation. According to Lipscomb, God "tolerat[ed] and ordain[ed]" the evil of slavery in order to punish the South through "God's battle-axe," the Northern army.²

The Campbell wing of our heritage was rooted in a solidly Reformed perspective on providence and God's involvement in the world.³ While rarely discussed today, Campbell's view of God's activity in the world was dynamic: God acts in history to bring about his kingdom. His own movement, he believed,

was a work of God that would usher in the millennial kingdom.

But as the Churches of Christ increasingly concentrated on the plan of salvation and church order, where the concerns were primarily centered on human activity, our own vision of God was increasingly influenced by the cultural dynamic of secularization. Failing to reflect specifically on the doctrine of God as the transcendent One, we unconsciously and subtly remade our doctrine of God in the image of our ecclesiology and culture. Our polemics against the direct operation of the Holy Spirit, against miracles, and against the special and specific providential work of God had the tendency to reduce the transcendence of God to our human-focused ecclesiological issues. We tended, then, to adopt a secularized, deistic vision of God.

Currently, tremendous confusion characterizes our doctrine of God. We are uncertain about whether to believe God is the enthroned sovereign of premodern thought, the deistic watchmaker of modern thought, or the divine partner and fellow sufferer that characterizes some postmodern theology.⁴ We are uncertain about how our doctrine of God ought to impact our lives—whether we should expect to experience God in the daily moments of life, or only in the pages of scripture. We are uncertain about how to reflect upon the life and character of God—whether we should follow metaphysical, pietistic, or pluralistic models. We are uncertain about how the love and holiness of God ought to mold our lives. We are uncertain about whether a personal, institutional, or mystical experience of God ought to be expected. We are uncertain about how the doctrine of God should mold our vision of the church, when we have for so long permitted our ecclesiology to mold our vision of God. Clearly, we need some profound thinking, dialogue, and application of the doctrine of God in the life of the church. I wish to offer three directions for thinking about God in our fellowship.

Directions for the Future

The Trinitarian Community of Holy Love

Trinity has not been a popular term in our fellowship. Campbell and Stone both rejected it, and it

has been written out of our hymnbooks (as in “Holy, Holy, Holy”). I have no vested interest in the term myself. Where my interest lies is in a communitarian understanding of God. What I mean by “Trinity” is the divine community that created the cosmos and redeemed a fallen people. The Father created and redeemed a people for himself through the Son by the Holy Spirit. Ever since Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* and Rahner’s *What Is the Trinity?* there has been a revival of trinitarian theology, and in the last two decades, there has been a revival of Eastern social trinitarianism over against Western trinitarianism, which emphasizes the monarchy of God. This revival of social trinitarianism is one of the most significant developments in contemporary theology.⁵ It fosters a communitarian understanding of God over against a more individualistic understanding of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Social trinitarianism affirms that a community created a community. The Father through the Son and by the Spirit created male and female as a community that was to reproduce itself through procreation. The human community was to model the creative act of the divine community. Just as the Trinity created in order to share the love of their community, so parents have children in order to share their love within community. God is interested in *koinonia*—a fellowship that flows out of the community of God to envelop the human community.

When the human community fell, the divine community took the initiative to redeem. God intends to have a people for himself, among whom he can dwell—a community where they can be his people and he can be their God. The Holy Community intends to dwell with a community; it intends *koinonia*. A holy community was created, but it fell, and now the Holy Community takes the initiative to redeem what has fallen.

The created and redeemed communities are called to image the trinitarian community of God. The model for human community is the community of God. Humanity was created to image God. Israel was redeemed as a people of God who would represent God in the world. The church is called to emulate the community and unity of the Father and the Son. Jesus offers the relationship between himself

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and the Father as the model of community relationships among his disciples (John 17:21). Consequently, how the community of God models self-giving love, how it models gracious initiative, how it models self-risking servitude, how it models holiness, how it models mutual interdependence ought to give human communities—family, church, and state—a vision of God’s intent for them.⁶ This communitarian understanding of God has tremendous implications for theology and life. Permit me to make a few observations along this line.

First, a communitarian understanding of God rejects the highly individualistic and ego-centered character of Western, and particularly American, culture. It provides a vision for social redemption, as well as personal redemption. It conceives salvation along communal, rather than individual, lines. It roots ecclesiology in the nature of God rather than simply reducing ecclesiology to an institution or rejecting ecclesiology in favor of some personal, individualistic relationship with God. Second, a communitarian understanding of God helps us understand the kind of communities we ought to be and how relationships ought to function within those communities. It provides us the definitive model of *koinonia*, which we are to emulate and in which we share through the Holy Spirit. Third, a communitarian understanding of God grounds the practice of holy discipline within a community. Our fellowship with God is a fellowship with a community of light, and the community that images God in this world ought to be a holy one. The holy *koinonia* of God must be manifested on earth as well as in

heaven. The church ought to be the image of God’s holy community on earth.

Doxological Understanding of God’s Attributes

As I surveyed recent writings on the subject of God, I was struck by the incessant and persistent “problem-solving” approach to our understanding of God.⁷ While there are some notable exceptions, our discussions of God have tended to focus on certain problems regarding his attributes. Given our rationalistic, as well as modern (that is, scientific), methodologies, we tend to approach God as an object to be dissected, analyzed, and justified (as in theodicy). We seek to maintain the logical consistency of our God through exploring and determining the logical relations of God’s attributes. Our rational inquiry functions to delimit the sort of thing that God can be. For example, we want to know how God’s immutability is consistent with his activity in the world. Or, we want to know how God’s omniscience is consistent with his creation of free creatures. Or, we want to know whether omnipotence is a meaningful concept at all.

This rationalistic approach—whether arising from a classic scholastic Aristotelian tradition such as Aquinas, or from modern process metaphysics such as Hartshorne, or from a well-intentioned revisionism in neo-evangelical free-will theism⁸—assumes a realist understanding of the attributes of God that believes those attributes can be truly known, processed, and delimited by human rationality. It assumes that human rationality can somehow describe (perhaps prescribe) the limits of what is possible for God. While I believe that the attributes of God can be truly known as they are revealed in scripture, I also believe that they can be known only in the way they are revealed in scripture. I want to call us to a different way of understanding and appropriating these attributes of God.

Over against a rationalistic framework, I want to call for a doxological approach to the attributes of God. This approach does not call for irrationality as opposed to rationality, but it understands the attributes of God as they are revealed in scripture as expressions of God’s relation to his creation. It submits to the attributes of God revealed in scripture rather than delimiting them by human rationality. It

calls for understanding the attributes in the context of redemptive history instead of Aristotelian scholasticism. The doxological approach is a confession of God's relationship to us rather than a thesis for debate.

The doxological approach to the attributes of God eschews philosophical abstraction and exalts liturgical contemplation. It has more in common with the contemplative tradition of Bernard than with the scholastic tradition of Aquinas.⁹ It understands that the church is first of all a worshiping community that images God's character in our relationships. Worship calls us to be like the one whom we worship—and we worship the revealed God rather than the God of speculation. God is sought in worship/encounter rather than in rationalistic and metaphysical grids; his attributes are praised rather than plumbed with respect to their logical relations. In the doxological approach, rational understandings of God that contain or constrain God are replaced with the praise of the God who is known through scripture, experienced in life's situations, and encountered in corporate worship.

The Sovereign, but Relationally Dynamic, Action of God in the World

Our movement has no common agreement on the nature, means, and extent of divine action in the world. We can find within the twentieth century a wide range of understandings, from explicitly deistic notions of natural law to the so-called extreme understandings of divine providence advocated by James A. Harding.¹⁰ Maybe this is why, in 1880, David Lipscomb lamented that "no question . . . needs study more than the principles of God's dealing with men."¹¹ Contemporary theology is in no better shape. Understandings range from the postmodern, narrative interpretation of E. Frank Tupper in *A Scandalous Providence*,¹² which rejects interventionism and counsels that God is doing the best he can with the world he has, to the exposition of a classic Reformed understanding by Paul Helm in his recent book *The Providence of God*.¹³ On the continuum between these two views are the compatibilist, but less rigidly Reformed, understanding of D. A. Carson in *How Long, O Lord?*¹⁴ which attempts to balance divine sovereignty and human freedom and the occasional in-

terventionism of Jack Cottrell's *God the Ruler*.¹⁵ The nature, means, and extent of divine action in the world is a hotly contested discussion in the theological arena.¹⁶

My heading has joined two concepts that are often regarded as mutually exclusive: (1) God is sovereign over everything in the world, and (2) God is involved in the world in a relationally dynamic manner. I understand God as sovereign over the world

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in the explicit sense that God can do whatever he pleases (Pss 115:3; 135:6). Whatever does happen, God could have caused it to happen otherwise. God does whatever he desires, according to his own purposes. But I also understand that God has a dynamic relationship with the world in such a way that the future is open; God is interactive with his creatures, and he values their freedom. Prayer is a genuine dialogue whereby the future is created out of the interplay of divine and human actions. Nevertheless, the end of the future, or God's goal, which is his kingdom, is not open, but certain. God is ultimately sovereign, and he will accomplish his purposes.

Of course, in these few lines, I do not have space to explain this understanding of divine action. But perhaps a few comments on the practicality of this understanding will illuminate my vantage point. First, God is fully engaged in actively working within his world toward the goal of bringing about his kingdom. God is not on the sidelines. The God who created the game—and set up its rules—is also a player. He cares for his creatures (1 Pet 5:7); bears their burdens daily (Ps 68:19); and acts on their behalf within history, through his mighty acts (Ps 107), and within their own existential moments, by his power (1 Thess 3:11–13). Second, God is sovereign over the mystery of evil in the world. Although theodicy is sometimes

a necessary and useful task as we think through our faith, it must always be secondary to the confession that God is sovereign, no matter how we may perceive the consequences. We must not permit our finite bewilderment to undermine God's sovereignty, even if it soothes the conscience of faith. We must ultimately confess with Job, who had "seen" (experienced) God in the whirlwind, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2 NIV). It is precisely God's sovereignty over evil that grounds the promise of eschatological hope and the confidence that good will triumph over evil. Our vexations with the presence of evil and suffering in the world must not undermine the sovereignty of God. Rather, we must confess God's sovereignty and trust his purposes.

Third, the first two convictions ground a confident, bold theology of prayer. The future lies open to us, and nothing is predetermined except what God will bring about eschatologically or what he has planned specifically to do (as in the death of Christ). Prayer engages God through intercession, petition, praise, and thanksgiving as it calls upon him to act on behalf of his people. It calls for divine activity in our ministries (as in 2 Thess 1:11), and it calls for divine presence in our worship (Ps 141:1).

It is our confidence that God cares and that he can act on our behalf—both of which he has demonstrated through his mighty acts—that fuels the power, boldness, and confidence of prayer. Psalm 62 reflects this twofold confidence when the psalmist confesses that his soul can find rest in God because he knows that God is both "strong" and "loving" (Ps 62:11–12). His strength and love have been demonstrated through his mighty acts. The source of Israel's confidence is God's revelation of himself through his mighty deeds. That revelation has taught Israel to depend upon God's activity in the world for both rest and salvation.

American culture needs a refreshing sense of daily dependence upon God. An understanding of God's actions within the world will undermine the self-reliant disposition, as well as the self-help strategies, of American Christians. A deistic God encourages self-reliance and self-help, but the sovereign/relational God of scripture encourages submission, confidence, and trust. Americans may want a God

who values self-reliance rather than submission, but that is not the God of scripture.

Conclusion

The doctrine of God is the beginning of our theology. One wrong turn here will have serious implications for where we end up. Consequently, all theology begins with God, and all theology must be measured by who God is and what he has done, according to how he has revealed himself.

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Notes

¹ See Karel Dobbelaere, "Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept," *Current Sociology* 29 (summer 1981): 1–213.

² David Lipscomb, "God Uses the Evil as well as the Good," *Gospel Advocate* 22 (30 September 1880): 634.

³ Alexander Campbell, "Providence, General and Special," *Millennial Harbinger* 26 (1855): 601–8; "Chance: Observations on the Terms Chance, Accident, Lucky, Unlucky," *Millennial Harbinger* 22 (1851): 615–21.

⁴ These categories are taken from Philip Dale Krumrei, "The Relevance of Secularization for Interpreting and Nurturing Spirituality in Dutch Churches of Christ: An Analysis of the Relation of Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Paradigms of Faith and the Practice of Prayer" (D.Min. diss., Harding University Graduate School of Religion, 1992), see appendix 7. His survey of congregants is enlightening. It demonstrates that the people in the pew are thoroughly confused about God's relationship to life.

⁵ A good theological history of contemporary thought on the Trinity is Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). The contrast between the East and West may be seen in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991).

⁶ I would recommend Stanley Grenz's recent systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), especially pages 92ff., as an illustration of how communitarian themes should shape our systematic understanding of God. I would also recommend Catherine LaCugna's *God for Us*, especially pages 377ff., for insights into how trinitarianism should impact practical life.

⁷ My survey was an unscientific perusal of the index to Restoration periodicals over the last decade or so.

⁸ As, for example, in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).

⁹ Here I would recommend, as an example, Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness and Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).

¹⁰ See J. A. Harding and L. S. White, *The Harding-White Discussion* (Cincinnati: F. L. Rowe, 1910).

¹¹ Lipscomb, 634.

¹² E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassionate God* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).

¹³ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

¹⁵ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Ruler* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1984).

¹⁶ See, for example, Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); and Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986* (London: SCM Press, 1986).