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THE CHRISTLIKENESS OF GOD

James E. McGoldrick

The apostle John recorded these words of Jesus:

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will behold Me no more; but you will behold Me; because I live, you shall live also. In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:1-21).

Perhaps the most fundamental question that ought to occupy our attention is: Who, or what, is God? Quickly a host of other questions arises: What is God like? How can I know God for certain? What does God expect of me? Is God actually interested in me? These ought to be the foremost questions of our concern. The greatest minds of humanity across the centuries have tried to provide answers to these questions, and the variety of opinions about them is almost without limit. There is much confusion of thinking about fundamental matters. There are people who believe that God and nature are one and the same. There is no independent God, but God is the sum total of material reality; therefore, God is not a person. God cannot be sympathetic. Human beings cannot approach Him. They cannot reach Him. He is not responsive to their needs. *Naturalism* as a philosophy appears in summary in a statement from the poet James Thompson: "No one can pierce that black veil uncertain because there is no light beyond the curtain. All is vanity and nothingness." This is the logical conclusion of a naturalist worldview. All is vanity. All is nothingness. There are no answers to the most urgent concerns.

Those dissatisfied with the naturalist view have often

turned to humanism. In humanism, man becomes his own God. Man's beliefs about God are but projections of his aspirations for himself. Reality once again is found in material things. A German philosopher summarized it well when he said, "Man is what he eats." Humanism, therefore, provides no satisfying answer to the human quest.

There is an alternative to these points of view. It is called theism, which is belief in a personal God who is ethical in character and spiritual in nature. He is a God who is separate from the creation but ever present within it. He is an intelligent being who has revealed Himself and made it possible for His creatures to know Him.



In the eighteenth century *deism* became popular. Voltaire, a bitter enemy of Christianity, insisted, nevertheless, on the necessity in believing in a god. In fact, Voltaire said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Human life without some concept of a supernatural being is intolerable and absurd. Eighteenth-century deists likened God to a clock maker. The existence of the clock demands the existence of a clock maker. Somebody

designed it, created the parts, put them in proper ratio to one another, and infused them with energy. That's the way it is with the world. Someone or something created it all, but the deists did not know who that someone was. They did not believe it was possible to maintain vital contact with the designer and architect of the universe. Deism also left the human heart and the human mind in a quagmire of confusion and uncertainty.

There is an alternative to these points of view. It is called *theism*, which is belief in a personal God who is ethical in character and spiritual in nature. He is a God who is separate from the creation but ever present within it. He is an intelligent being who has revealed Himself and made it possible for His creatures to know Him. Theism is therefore the superior teaching. Without it humans have no hope whatever of knowing God, and failure to know God leads also to terrible confusion regarding oneself. When John Calvin produced the famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he began with the assertion that humans have Holy Scripture for two primary reasons: to convey (1) the proper knowledge of God, and (2) the proper knowledge of themselves—to know God and to know themselves. Without such knowledge, life becomes a tragedy in which people are the victims. There is no rhyme; there is no reason. There can be no certainty and no satisfaction. To say that there is a God whom people may know is not necessarily satisfying either. It still does not identify that God. It still does not relate what that God is like. Often religious conceptions of God are unsatisfying. They do not provide a clear and sure understanding of who God is and what God expects of His creatures. The God who made heaven and earth has, however, kindly chosen to reveal Himself. This is the message of biblical theism.

Jesus said, "God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). God is spiritual in character. The Bible declares that when God created

human beings, He endowed them with a spiritual reality. God breathed into man the breath of life, and man became a living being (Gen. 2:7). God designed human beings so they can enjoy correspondence and fellowship with their Creator. By means of that correspondence and fellowship, human beings can acquire the proper knowledge of God and the proper knowledge of themselves.

People may know only as much about God as He has chosen to reveal. How will they know what God is like? If they cannot see a spirit, is there someplace where they may have a tangible portrait of God? Where may they see the attributes of God displayed? How may they know God actually and personally?



In the seventeenth century, the Puritans met in London to draft documents of faith in order to publish their understanding of biblical theism. Those statements are the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Westminster Catechisms*. Question 4 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is, "What is God?" The answer is, "God is a spirit; infinite, eternal, unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, jus-

tice, goodness, and truth." That is a magnificent summary of biblical teaching regarding the person and character of God. It begins as Jesus did with the affirmation that God's nature is inherently spiritual. "God is spirit." This presents some outstanding information about the nature of God. It begins, however, with a statement that constitutes what might be an insurmountable problem. It begins as Jesus did by affirming "God is spirit."

What's the difficulty? A spirit by its very nature is invisible to the human eye. How can humans know a God who is a perfect spirit in His being? How can they know a God when they have no ability whatever to see Him?

He is infinite, but they are finite.
 He is eternal, but they are temporal.
 He is unchangeable, but they are constantly changing.
 He is wisdom, but they are foolishness.
 He is power, but they are weakness.
 He is goodness, but they are evil.
 He is holiness, but they are perversity.
 He is justice, but they are injustice.

The knowledge of God acquired from Scripture can be and has to be a distressing experience because it sets in sharp contrast the utter discrepancy between the Creator and the creatures. God and His creatures are far apart, not only different in being but separated, alienated because of sin. What is God like? God is perfect spirit. It is, of course, impossible to define God. God is beyond human ability to comprehend Him. People may know only as much about God as He has chosen to reveal. How will they know what God is like? If they cannot see a spirit, is there someplace where they may have a tangible portrait of God? Where may they see the attributes of God displayed? How may they know God actually and personally? They may know

God actually and personally because God has reproduced Himself pictorially in the Bible. The Bible is God's self-portrait. This is the place where God has chosen to describe Himself for the benefit of His creatures.

A portrait, however, does not tell everything about a person. It gives but limited knowledge of that person. Likewise, the Bible as God's self-portrait provides us with an incomplete model of God. The Bible is perfect as far as it goes, absolutely reliable, thoroughly truthful in every question it addresses. Nevertheless, the Bible conveys an incomplete knowledge of God. The human being will always remain a human being. The infinite distinction between Creator and creatures is permanent. That will never change. In eternity, when God has removed all the consequences of sin, humans will no longer be fettered by the immorality of their condition but will obtain a vastly improved knowledge of God. That knowledge will, nevertheless, remain partial and imperfect. The creatures will never comprehend the Creator, but through God's self-portrait in the Bible, He has conveyed enough information so that people may know Him personally and redemptively. The attributes of perfection of God are all displayed in a person, and that person is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Philip petitioned Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus answered, "Don't you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" Jesus claimed unequivocally that He had the right to speak as God and man, and that people who had the privilege of seeing Him were, in fact, seeing God. To see Jesus Christ is the exact equivalent of seeing God the Father. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him (Col. 1:19).

The apostle Paul wrote, "God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our

hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). If people want to see God, they must look at Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God, the glory of God. Incarnate goodness radiates from the countenance of Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews, in a magnificent declaration, affirms this truth:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1-3).

Notice the emphasis—in *these last days*—the entire period between the first and second advents of Christ. "In these last days God has spoken to us in His Son." This Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being." What is God like? God is like Jesus Christ. God is exactly like Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ is the perfect portrait of God. Perfect to the extent that Jesus said unabashedly, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He is the express image of God's being. With confidence, then, people may look to Jesus Christ in order to obtain the proper knowledge of God. To know who God is and what God is like and what God requires, they must look at Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him" (John 14:7). Notice this sweeping claim to deity. It distinguishes Christ from other significant religious teachers. In Asia, hundreds of millions of people worship at the shrines of Buddha. Buddha, however, made no claim to deity. In China, millions of people follow the

teachings of Confucius. Confucius, however, never claimed to be God. The claim of Jesus Christ is clear, uncompromising, and unequivocal. Jesus claimed absolute equality with His Father and His Holy Spirit. People cannot know God if they ignore Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, He is also God the Son. The Son of God and God the Son.

Jesus Christ is the revelation of the attributes and perfections of God's being. One of God's characteristics is His fatherhood. Christians rejoice to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." They delight to know that God relates to them in fatherly kindness and loves them as His chosen children. They glory in the fatherhood of God, and the clearest demonstration of God's fatherhood is in Jesus Christ.



Thomas, after the Savior's resurrection, demanded evidence that Christ was alive, and when Christ appeared to him in His resurrected glory, Thomas fell at the Savior's feet

and hailed Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). That is the correct posture for every human being—to fall at the feet of the Savior and to hail Him, "My Lord and my God!" To see Jesus Christ is to see the perfect revelation of God. To worship Jesus Christ is to worship the triune Godhead. Through Jesus Christ people enjoy the proper knowledge of God and the proper knowledge of themselves. To see what God is like, look at Christ. For Christ is the personal demonstration of biblical theism, which is belief in God, centered in Christ as the perfect revealer of God in His own person.

Jesus Christ is the revelation of the attributes and perfections of God's being. One of God's characteristics is His fatherhood. Christians rejoice to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." They delight to know that God relates to them in fatherly kindness and loves them as His chosen children. They glory in the fatherhood of God, and the clearest demonstration of God's fatherhood is in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). Jesus Christ is the clearest demonstration of the fatherhood of God. How do believers know that God, their Father, loves them? They know He loves them because He sent to them His only begotten Son. He loved the world in such a manner that He gave the world His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ is the clearest of all evidences that God is the Father who loves His children sacrificially.

Jesus said with much boldness, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). It is therefore impossible to appreciate adequately the fatherhood of God unless one comes to the Father through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is entitled to claim to be the exclusive means of access to the Father, because in Jesus Christ God literally became man. As the ancient

Creed of Nicaea says so well, "Christ became man for us men and for our salvation." He "came down from heaven; was made flesh and was made man." Jesus Christ perfectly reveals the fatherhood of God.

Likewise, the other attributes of God are flawlessly displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. God is powerful, the omnipotent ruler of heaven and earth. Jesus Christ demonstrated the omnipotence of God. He rebuked the wind and the waves, and they became still. He multiplied loaves and fishes to feed throngs of 4,000 and 5,000. He brought the dead back to life. He gave sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, and hearing to the deaf. He rose triumphant out of His own grave. The power of God is displayed magnificently in Jesus Christ.

Is there a word that captures this relation of God to the prayers of His people? There is: the word Father.



The eternity of God's nature is revealed in Jesus Christ as well. Jesus said to His Father, "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:4-5). In Jesus Christ the timeless God entered time. The timeless Author of time entered the

dimension of His own creation. As God, He was never young; as God, He can never be old. He is above the dimension of time, but He became man for us men and for our salvation, thereby accepting the limitations of time and space. Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God. He was with God and was God and is God. The eternity of God's being is revealed in Jesus Christ. God is invisible. He is unchangeable. It is no coincidence that Scripture proclaims Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today, yes and forever" (Heb. 13:8). So the attribute of God's immutability appears in Jesus Christ our Lord. All the characteristics of God are present in perfect combination in Christ, for Christ is the Son of God and God the Son. People must see God in Jesus Christ, or they will never see Him at all.

That, of course, is the message for which Christians can make no concessions and grant no compromises. Humanity, if it is to ever know God, to enjoy the proper knowledge of God and the proper knowledge of self, must enjoy that in Jesus Christ or not at all. Jesus Christ reveals all the characteristics of God's being. Jesus Christ reveals God's plan of redemption. Redemption is "through His blood" by which believers obtain "the forgiveness of sins" (Eph. 1:7). The plan of redemption God had conceived in eternity past was executed by Jesus Christ in time.

What is God like? God is like Jesus Christ—exactly like Him. Therefore, to be without Christ is to be without God. To reject Christ is to reject God. Those who do not know Christ on the Day of Judgment will hear Him say: "I never knew you; depart from Me" (Matt. 7:23). There can be no doubt: God's self-disclosure makes it crystal clear. What is God like? God is like Jesus Christ—exactly like Him. That is the message Christians must proclaim to humanity: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). There is but one way and access to God in heaven, and that is through Jesus Christ, the God-Man, who came

down to earth to save sinners. Behold then *the Christlikeness of God*. God is like Jesus Christ, and the world urgently and desperately needs to know that truth. For in Christ people see what God is like. They behold the Christlikeness of God.

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