

School of Discipleship

The Doctrine of God

Part 1

God is the covenant LORD.

Therefore man is a respondent to the divine initiative. Throughout Scripture, covenant promise is a key theme. We encounter the promises from God from the very beginnings of the biblical narrative. We see these promises in Genesis several times in Adam, Noah, and Abraham. The promises that God makes to man are instrumental in the response of man to God. God makes a covenant with Adam, Abraham, Moses, etc. each with implications for the redemptive story. All of our knowledge about God comes through this covenant relationship and is informed by it. Any other characteristics of God are all be informed by this most important feature. For example, our knowledge of God as transcendent and immanent are not important in and of themselves, but rather because they speak of how God relates to us in the covenant. We know God as the transcendent one because we are to worship him, and we can know that he is able to redeem us. We know God as immanent because he enters into relationship with us and comes to save us. While all of these are tainted by sin, it is God's continued relationship with his creation that allows us to know God in these various ways. Therefore, the significance of God being our covenant LORD is that the ways in which we speak about him must be seen through the covenant relationship. It must be said that the relationship has been marred by the effects of sin so that in every way that we know God, we do not know him as fully as we should. The relationship is in renewal and the assertions are a testimony to the endurance of the relationship. *The reasons for all of our other assertions about God must be seen as serving the relationship, not merely a collection of facts about God.* Knowledge of God necessitates a personal, though not always individual, commitment to love God as he has revealed himself. In other words, if our knowledge of God isn't informed by our relationship with God, then we do not have a real understanding of a particular or any of the knowledge about God. The knowledge of God brought about in the covenant is most clearly expressed in the person of Christ. Just as all mankind fell with Adam as their covenant representative, so all men must look to Christ as their covenant representative now for redemption (Romans 5:12-19).

God is a person.

Therefore creation is in a personal relationship with God. The Bible never seeks to prove that God is a person, but simply assumes that he is. God is never spoken of in abstract or philosophical terms. Scripture testifies (Genesis 3:8-19) and is a testimony itself (2 Timothy 3:16) that God communicates with his creatures. He is not a God who has left his creation without direction or comfort (Psalm 23:4). Like all other persons, he speaks. God is also like other persons because he has a name. In Exodus 3:14 when Moses asks God to reveal his name, God responds saying, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Yahweh, the God who is faithful to his covenants, is our God. For this reason, he is calls his name holy (Leviticus 20:3), desires that his name be hallowed (Matthew 6:9) and commands that not be taken in vain (Exodus 20:7). In short, he not only has a name but also takes the use of his name very seriously. The God of Scripture is also a God who enters into relationship with his creatures (Genesis 2:16-17, Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:4-6) and desires that they know him (Exodus 6:7, John 17:3). Yahweh's personhood is significant for man because as persons ourselves, we are able to have a personal relationship with him. He is not a God

who is far off or ultimately removed from his creation. He desires relationship with his creatures and response to his communication. Therefore man can pray to him knowing that he will listen (Matthew 6:9). Further, our relationship to him can grow as we learn about him and see him working in our lives. We are allowed to know him intimately and he is shaping through our relationship how we grow as persons. As fallen creatures, however, we often neglect the grace that has been given to us. Though Yahweh has given himself that we could be reconciled to him and have relationship to him, we seek solitude that we may continue in our sin. Our relationship with God is too often characterized by his goodness and our presumption of his goodness. Ultimately we do not want to accept Yahweh as the person he is, but we seek gods that we can manipulate. Yahweh rebukes his people for this very thing through the prophet Jeremiah who writes, “Therefore I still contend with you, declares the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend. ¹⁰ For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has been such a thing. ¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. ¹² Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, ¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:9-13).” It is futile to seek after domesticated gods. We must contend with the God who is, Yahweh, the one true God.

God is a spirit.

Therefore creation is limited in language to functional-relational rather than ontological or definitional. In Deuteronomy 4:15-19, God reveals that he is wholly other than anything that is created, and therefore, we are not to make any images to represent him from the things which are created. There is no image large enough or grand enough to capture him. To represent him is to misrepresent him (John 1:18; 1 Timothy 1:17, 6:16-17). The Gospel of John makes this assertion explicit as John says “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (4:24).” God’s being in spirit is shown in these two passages to be significant in how we are to worship him. They are not assertions of his ontological makeup, but rather are assertions of how we are to relate to God in our worship. The assertions need not be made in a world that is not fallen, but as a result of sin, man wants to have a relationship with a God that he can see and touch. However, this is impossible because he is not material but is spirit. The significance of his being a spirit is that he is wholly other from his creation and he is unique. Therefore, God must accommodate to man for man to be able to know him. This accommodation is not ontological or definitional, but rather he accommodates to us by his relation to us. We only know God as he relates to his creation and his people, and as he performs functions with both. As a worshipper, man must worship God as Spirit meaning that he cannot carry around with him or place within his religious setting anything that will represent him as he truly and wholly is.

God is sovereign.

Therefore creation is not free in the libertarian sense but rather gains freedom in trusting and obeying God. Arminians emphasize man’s freedom to the detriment of God’s freedom. However, the Biblical picture is that God is truly free in relation to his creatures. Jeremiah 10:10 says that “at his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.” It is man that derives his life from God, not the other way around. God does not derive his life from any other source. Because he alone is creator everyone and everything else owes his, her, or its beginning to God. God’s sovereignty does not end with creation, however, for he sustains and governs all that he has created. God is therefore the only truly independent and self-sufficient persons there are. “For as the Father

has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:26).” He depends on no one and is accountable to no one. Further, were he to simply remove his hand, everything else would become undone. Because God is the only independent being, man’s existence is necessarily contingent upon him. Paul states that God is the “only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15) and the one who “gives life to all things” (1 Timothy 6:13). As the sovereign, God has the right to command obedience from his creatures. With this in view, man’s freedom is not to do as he pleases but to obey God. In a fallen world, man desires autonomy from God in the right to make his own choices which he calls freedom, but man is free only in as much as he is in obedience to God. This is the Biblical picture of freedom rather than libertarian freedom. Indeed, living apart from obedience to God is slavery to sin rather than freedom to disobey. The significance of this lies in the fact that as we become more obedient to God’s will, we will experience the freedom from sin. The more we obey God’s decrees, the more free we will be to enjoy him. God’s sovereignty brings freedom to man most acutely shown in the sovereign act of redemption. Therefore, man must trust God for everything—his next meal, his next breath, his security, his salvation—and in trusting God for these things, man finds freedom in the loss of this burden through obedience to God.

God is transcendent and immanent.

Therefore creation is distinct from God and able to know him in relationship. Again, God is wholly other (Ephesians 2:21; 4:10). God’s transcendence is not a spatial idea as is commonly thought. Indeed, God has created space so that his wholly otherness must be thought of outside of spatial terms. The wholly other is an ontological distinction that we make to say that he is utterly distinct from his creation. He is qualitatively different rather than quantitatively different from his creation (Isaiah 55:8-9). The purpose for knowing this ontological distinction is so that we might know that God alone is worthy of worship. Worshipping anything within the created realm is strictly forbidden as God has nothing to do with the created in makeup. This also means that God is incomprehensible and unapproachable for those of us created. Yet, at the same time, God is immanent and in constant relationship with his creation. Divine immanence is a term which speaks to God’s epistemological relationship with man. This is expressed in terms of covenant relationship and proximity (Ephesians 4:6; Psalm 139:7-11). The presence of God with his people is a concept that is throughout the scriptures. “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mat. 28:20).” The significance of this is that even though God is wholly other, he does not abandon what he has made but rather cares for it and upholds it by his right hand. He is an actor in the history of man as he intervenes for the sake of a people and works his purposes in his world. It is through his acts in history that we may know him as that is how he has revealed himself to us both through general and special revelation. Furthermore, man does not worship that which is far off and unknowable but the one that has revealed himself and is always near to us.

God is holy.

Therefore man must also be holy in order to enjoy his eternal presence. Scripture is clear that God is nothing if he is not holy. In his vision of the Lord’s throne room Isaiah witnessed the seraphim proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3) John was shown a similar vision where he saw the four living creatures who day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8). God’s moral perfection is one of his most basic attributes. And because God is free from all moral impurity, what he has created is commanded to also be free from moral impurity as well. While God is patient and longsuffering with the sin of mankind, he will not tolerate sin forever. The people of God, specifically, are called to holiness. He demands that his people with whom he will

dwell eternally be holy (Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:15-16). Sinful man, however, has little desire for holiness. We are content with our own standards of goodness, and as long as we haven't been convicted of a serious felony, we tend to believe that we are good enough to commune with God. It is not until God awakens us to exactly how holy he is that we have any idea of how sinful we are. Fortunately, God's people are assured of holiness based on the work of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes that Christ "has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (Colossians 1:22). And regarding the Spirit he writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The implications are then apparent. Man cannot settle for moral "pretty good". Man must be morally perfect and this moral perfection can only be found in the Holy One of God. Further, God's holiness is also the basis for the mission of God's people in the world. The prescription to be salt and light within the world (Matthew 5:13-16) is correctly understood in light of God's holiness. It is the holiness of his people that God will use to bring his name to the nations. The significance of this assertion is that we are called to the moral demands of the law, not merely for the sake of obedience but for the sake of freedom and the proclamation of that freedom to those who are still slaves to the world.