

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

A Christian understanding of God is unique, distinct, and unlike any other concept of God. It is different from the Jewish understanding of Jehovah, and unlike the Islamic understanding of Allah, even though these theological concepts are also monotheistic.

Theology is not a bad word! Some people have an aversion to theology, considering it to be the endless speculations of lofty ideologues fine-tuning their epistemological doctrines with ever more obfuscated semantics. There has admittedly been too much theological hair-splitting, but “theology”, by definition, is simply “the study of God” whereby we arrive at “an understanding of God.” Theology, proper, is limited to the consideration of God Himself. Theology, in general, includes all subjects pertaining to God – His historical actions, His objectives, His projected future actions, etc.

It is incumbent upon mankind to engage in some form of theological consideration. As we seek to explain reality, the world around us, and ourselves, man is forced to confront some understanding of God, even if it is a concept of God that he subsequently rejects and repudiates. Even the atheist has some concept of God that he denies. The development of an understanding of God is a necessary starting-point for the cosmic consideration of human understanding.

God can only be known to the extent that He reveals Himself. “No man has seen God at any time” (John. 1:18), but God has revealed Himself in His natural creation (cf. Rom. 1:20), as a Personal God to His people (cf. Exodus 3:14), and subsequently revealed Himself supernaturally in the incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:14; 14:9; Luke 10:22). Our understanding of God is not a result of independent human reasoning having set out to find God and figure Him out. Our knowledge of God comes only by means of, and must be derived out of, His own Self-revelation. We must allow God to determine our understanding of Himself, and that by His own Self-revelation.

Human understanding of God is further limited by the finite faculties that man has been created with. Our knowledge of God cannot be exhaustive, for the finite is attempting to understand the Infinite who has revealed Himself. If we had an infinite and completely comprehensive understanding of God, we, too, would be God, having omniscience. God ever remains somewhat of an inexplicable “mystery” to the finite understanding of man.

In this attempt to develop “a Christian understanding of God” there are two presuppositional premises that will be used to format our thinking. They are:

What God *is*, only God *is*.

God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* who He *is*.

These have purposefully been expressed as simply as possible in order to avoid making our understanding of God any more difficult than it already is. The legitimacy and veracity of these premises will hopefully be made evident as we proceed.

Our first stated premise is: “What God *is*, only God *is*.” To begin with, this means that God stands alone as Who He is. Notice that the premise has already been expanded by using the personal pronoun, “Who.” “What God *is*, only God *is*,” is expressed equivalently as “Who God *is*, only God *is*.” By using the pronoun “what”, we do not want to imply that God is an impersonal being. We, the personal beings who make this inquiry into “a Christian

understanding of God, cannot entertain the illogic of the personal derived from the impersonal, the living derived from the non-living, or something derived out of nothing!

The Bible begins, “In the beginning God (the living, personal God) created...” (Gen. 1:1) all things – all things apart from Himself and except Himself, for He Himself is Self-existent (not self-created or self-caused, but self-existent). Note that the Bible presupposes the existence of God, and does not attempt to prove God’s existence. God is the Self-existent, Creator God – and “what God *is*, only God *is*.” God, the Self-existent Creator, must be regarded as distinct from the creation that He, the Creator God, created. Why is this important? Because, as C.S. Lewis points out in several of his writings, there are only two basic philosophies in man’s understanding of God, and they are best represented in Christianity and Hinduism.¹ The Christian understanding of God always maintains the distinction between the Creator and the creation, by recognizing that “what God *is*, only God *is*.” The Hindu philosophy, on the other hand, merges the concept of creator and creation into a monistic oneness, whereby God *is* all that *is* – the very antithesis of “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

Some would declare that the Christian understanding is dualistic, whereas the Hindu view is monistic. A distinction or dichotomy can logically create a duality, but the classic dualism is inherent within the monistic interpretation that requires a monistic equilibrium between good and evil – two equal powers, neither of which can overcome the other – as is illustrated in the *yin-yang* concept. In this view, everything is good and evil in one sense or another; there is good within all evil and evil within all good; and neither good nor evil will conquer the other. That is why a monist can look at a putrid human cancer, at a fetid human slum, or at the disastrous consequences of war, and say, “From God’s point of view, this, too, is God.” C.S. Lewis responded by calling this “damned nonsense.”² The Christian understanding is that the Creator God is good, and “what God *is*, only God *is*.” Though the opposite of good, i.e. evil, has come into the world and into man, God has overcome that evil in the death of His Son, Jesus Christ, and God’s intent is to restore His character of goodness to His creation. A monistic concept of God will inevitably disregard sin and evil, affirming all natural desires, whereas the Christian understanding of God views God alone as good, desiring to manifest His character of goodness in His creation in place of the fallen, natural, evil tendencies of man’s desires.

God *is* Creator – and “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

God *is* Good – and “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

The extension of this premise must be applied to *all* of the attributes of God. “What God *is*, only God *is*.” Theologians have long attempted to differentiate between the “non-transferable attributes” of God and the “transferable attributes” of God. Such attributes as omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience have been regarded as God-only attributes which are non-transferable to man or the created order. Attributes such as “God is Good,” “God is Holy,” and “God is Love” have been regarded as character qualities of God that are transferable to man. The problem with this interpretation is that the attributes of God are not “properties” or “features” which God *has* as transferable commodities. The attributes of God are what God *is* in Himself, and are thus non-transferable, for “what God *is*, only God *is*.” Anytime we attempt to attribute and attribute of God to anything or anyone else, we ever so subtly deify, or attribute an attribute of deity, to that other thing or person.

God *is* good (Mark 10:18). Can we ever say that another *is* good in the same sense that we say, “God *is* good”? No, for “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

God *is* holy (I Pet. 1:15,16). Can we ever say that another *is* holy in the same sense that we say, “God *is* holy”? No, for “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

God *is* love (I John. 4:8,16). Can we ever say that another *is* love in the same sense that we say, “God *is* love”? No, for “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

God *is* absolutely, intrinsically, inherently, self-existent Good, Holy, and Love, and the source of all goodness, holiness and love within His creation. Whenever His character is expressed within His creation, it is necessarily He expressing such. When Christians are referred to as “holy ones” or saints (Greek *hagioi*), it is only because God, in Christ, the Holy One (cf. Acts 3:14) is present and indwelling that individual, comprising the basis of their spiritual identity. Such a derived identity allows for the derived expression of God’s holy character in the behavior of the Christian. Holiness is intrinsic to and inherent in God alone. What God *is*, only God *is*. Holiness cannot be acquired by or possessed by another.

The second presuppositional premise for a Christian understanding of God is just as important as the first. “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.” A Christian understanding of God must commence with Who God *is*, and then proceed to what God *does*. Otherwise God’s Being is established by His doing, and God is nothing more than a mechanical and functional principle of action that can be proceduralized for utilitarian purposes. Christian theology must commence with the character of God, Who God *is*, recognizing such from God’s own Self-revelation. From the basis of His own character, God conducts Himself in absolute consistency with Who He *is*. God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.

It is a sad indictment upon much Christian theology to note that the majority of systematic theology texts begin with what God *does*. They begin by addressing the plan of God, the predetermined or predestined will of God, the covenant arrangements of God, the decrees of God, God’s methods of operation, the precepts of God, the Law of God, the grace of God, etc. These all pertain to what God *does*, to God’s acting as an administrator, a project planner, a judge, a lawyer, or a benefactor. There is a widespread failure in Christian theology to adequately explain that “God *does* what He *does*, only because He *is* Who He *is*.”

Has theology capitulated to the fallen premises of a humanistic society that emphasizes the pragmatism of productivity by performance in order to establish identity, priority and success? The fallen world order indicates that an individual *is* who he *is*, because he *does* what he *does*, and tends to transfer that premise to their concept of God in performance-oriented concepts: “To *do* is to *be*! Identity is established by industry. I *am* because I *do*!” This only serves to document that “our ways are not His ways” (cf. Isa. 55:8,9), for “God *does* what He *does*, only because He *is* Who He *is*.”

God’s Being is the basis of His doing, and not *vice versa*. God’s character is always expressed in His actions. There is no divine action that is not empowered by and expressive of His own divine Being. The very Being of God cannot be separated or detached from anything God does. God does not employ a formula, a principle, or a law to accomplish what He seeks to do. He did not create, for example, by utilizing a “spiritual law of speaking a word of faith.” Rather, God created out of Himself (Greek *ek theos*), His action being incorporative with the entirety of His Being. In so creating out of Himself, He could still create that which was not Himself, the greater creating the lesser, and thus retaining the important distinction between the Creator and the creation.

The Being of God is never passive, but always active. God always acts out of His own Being. He acts in accord with Who He *is*, i.e. consistent with His own character. Paul explains

that “God is faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (II Timothy 2:13). Granted, the Bible states that “with God, nothing is impossible” (Luke 1:37), but it turns right around and says, “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). Why can God not lie? Because God “cannot deny Himself.” He cannot deny Who He *is* by acting contrary to Who He *is*. God *is* in His essential Being, absolute Truth, and He cannot act contrary to His character. His activity will always express His Being. “God *does* what He *does*, only because He *is* Who He *is*.”

Let it be noted also that God cannot overlook or tolerate that which is contrary to Who He *is* and incompatible with Who He *is*. That, too, would be to “deny Himself.” God does not condone sin, which in its broadest definition includes anything contrary to the character of God. God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*, and therefore has taken remedial action to address sin and its consequences in His Son, Jesus Christ. He continues to function in the restorative intercessory activity of His Spirit to overcome sinful behavioral expressions by the manifestation of His character – *doing* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.

We have formatted this study by establishing two presuppositional premises that will form the context of our subsequent considerations for understanding God.

What God *is*, only God *is*

Since we have insisted on beginning with Who God *is*, we are obliged to commence by considering some of the attributes of God’s Being. We shall begin with some of the most difficult statements of Who God *is*, and consider five (5) of these statements at this point in the study:

God *is* One
God *is* Being
God *is* Person
God *is* Spirit
God *is* Love

Other attributes of God will be considered later.

God *is* One

Does the Christian understanding of God believe that “God *is* One”? Yes, the Christian understanding of God is monotheistic, meaning “one God”, in contrast to all forms of polytheism, meaning “many gods.” But there are divergent ways in which the oneness of God can be defined. All forms of monotheism are not the same. There are different varieties of monotheism.

The first type of monotheism is that of a *monad monotheism*. This understanding views God as a singular, unitary monad, i.e. as a single, unextended unit of one. The Judaic understanding of Jehovah is that of an unextended monad. The central creed of Judaism is the *Shema* statement of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord.” Other statements abound in the Jewish Scriptures indicating that Jehovah alone is God, and that there is no other God other than Jehovah (cf. Deut. 4:35; I Kings 8:60; I Sam 2:2; Ps. 86:10; Isa. 44:6; 45:5,6,21). The Islamic understanding of Allah is also that of a single monad deity. The central

statement of Islam is “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet.” Muslims repudiate all forms of polytheism and any extension of God such as that expressed in Christian Trinitarianism. In the early church there were some (ex. Arius) who sought to retain the Jewish concept of monad monotheism rather than accepting Trinitarian monotheism, and there are still some contemporary groups (ex. Jehovah Witnesses) who promote monad monotheism.

A second form of monotheism is that identified as *monistic monotheism*. This understanding of God views everything to be incorporated in a singular and unitary God-reality comprised of, and expressed in, the whole universe. This is the monistic concept of oneness wherein “God *is* all that *is*” (cf. discussion above). Such an understanding of a monistic oneness impinges upon the distinction of the Creator and the creation. There was a form of monistic monotheism in some Greek philosophy, as “nature” was elevated as the ultimate substance of everything. Monistic monotheism is also evident in some forms of oriental religious philosophy, as well as in Unitarian forms of monism in Christian Science teaching and in the so-called New Age philosophy. Some have attempted to express Christian teaching as a monistic monotheism, misusing such verses as Isaiah 45:5,6 in the KJV, “I am the Lord, and there is none else,” to indicate that there is nothing else but God.

The third form of monotheism is *Trinitarian monotheism*, which has been the historic Christian understanding of the oneness of God. The oneness of God is not conceived of merely as a singular, mathematical oneness, i.e. an unextended numerical integer of one, but as a relational oneness of divine being in the Triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such an understanding of Trinitarian relational oneness can still accept the Old Testament statements of God’s oneness, interpreting them in the inclusive understanding of Trinitarian monotheism. Christians also often see intimations of relational Trinitarianism in the plural pronouns that refer to God (cf. Gen. 1:26,27), as well as in the Hebrew plural noun, *Elohim*, employed as God’s name throughout the Old Testament.

Trinitarian monotheism is unique to the Christian understanding of God. This is not an idea that Christians concocted to complicate the understanding of God. This concept of God’s relational oneness was forced upon Christian understanding by God’s own Self-revelation. Jesus, the Son of God, came as Messiah, and declared, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Such a statement either had to be repudiated as a blasphemous declaration impinging upon the monadic understanding of God (which the Jewish leaders did, saying, “You being a man, make Yourself out to be God,” and sought to stone Jesus); or there had to be a rethinking of what divine Oneness entailed. Jesus’ statement indicates a plurality and a relationality in the Oneness of God. Some (usually those with a monadic concept of God’s oneness) attempt to avoid the problem of Jesus’ statement by claiming that He meant, “I and the Father *have* a single purpose or objective.” But, Jesus was not speaking of something that He and the Father *had*, but He said, “I and the Father *are* one.”

Later Jesus prayed to the Father for His disciples (and for all Christians), praying, “that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22). Jesus was not praying that Christians would have a common monistic essentiality with God, in which case they would *be* God, in violation of the premise that “what God *is*, only God *is*.” On the contrary, Jesus was obviously referring to a relational oneness. Jesus was praying that His followers, all Christians, would function in a relational oneness in the one Body of Christ, in like manner as He and the Father functioned in relational oneness in the Oneness of the Trinitarian Godhead. Christians have the privilege of participating in the inter-relational oneness of the Triune God, and expressing the interpersonal relationality of God’s Oneness.

What we are emphasizing here is that the oneness of God must not be viewed as merely a mathematical oneness, a static numerical integer, for this creates (at best) a monadic concept of God as an isolated individual deity. That “God is One” must refer to a relational oneness.

To illustrate this relational oneness, I will employ an admittedly inadequate analogy. My wife and I are married. The Biblical statement for marital union is that “the two shall become one” (cf. Gen. 1:24; Matt. 19: 5; I Cor. 6:16). Now, obviously, this is not a mathematical oneness. To express this colloquially, “she is she, and me is me,” but when “we are we,” we are one in the relational oneness of marriage.

Paul employs this relational oneness of the marital union as an analogy of the oneness between Christ and the Christian. Quoting the Genesis 1:24 text of “two becoming one” in marriage, he states, “I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31,32). The oneness of husband and wife, and the oneness of Christ and the Christian are not mathematical onenesses of essentiality, but they are both relational onenesses.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he again quoted Genesis 1:24 explaining that in the marital union “the two become one” in a relational oneness, and then proceeded to explain that “the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (I Cor. 6:16,17). The entire context of the passage has to do with the relational oneness that is established in sexual union. Like the marriage union, the spiritual union between Christ and the Christian is a relational oneness. Not a monistic oneness, or an organic oneness, or a merged oneness, or an absorption oneness; but a relational oneness.

If my wife and I were essentially absorbed or merged into an intrinsic or monistic oneness in marriage, then I could say, “I am Gracie,” and she could say, “I am Jim.” That would be absurdity. It would not be the marital union of relational oneness.

In like manner, if the Christian is essentially absorbed or merged into intrinsic or monistic oneness with God, then the Christian could say, “I am God,” or “I am Jesus Christ,” or “I am the third person of the Trinity; I am the Holy Spirit.” God, in turn, could say, “I am Joe Blow” or “John Doe.” Not only is this absurd, it is blasphemous, and preempts all relational, spiritual oneness, union, and unity.

((That is why NPG clearly indicated in his writings that “to say ‘I am God,’ or ‘I am Jesus Christ’ is blasphemy.X The same is true for saying, “I am the third person of the Trinity.” He went on to say that “the essence of idolatry is to claim to be what only God is.”X And in reference to the Christian being one spirit with Christ, NPG wrote, “Our oneness with Christ does not alter our two-ness.”X In other words, it is a relational spiritual oneness.))

Those who cannot, do not, or will not differentiate between the relational oneness of God and other concepts such as merged oneness, absorbed oneness, or universal oneness, or any other form of mathematical oneness, cannot maintain a Christian understanding of the Trinitarian relational oneness of God. ((Ex. Michael Nevins. Pressed the idea of “union” as mathematical oneness to the point that he logically had to deny the Trinity – which he did, and ended up with a deterministic unitarianism. That is why Sylvia asked that her articles and her ministry no longer be linked to his website.))

In the new covenant Self-revelation of Himself, God revealed Himself as Trinitarian relational Oneness. It took a while for the Christian community of the first few centuries to think this through and explain such, but this Trinitarian monotheism was clearly advocated at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., and has been the historic Christian understanding of God through the centuries. Allow me to interject an interesting side note here: Those who adopted the Arian concept of a mathematical monad monotheism, those areas (ex. North Africa) of Christendom

capitulated and were overcome by the Islamic conquest of the 7th and 8th centuries. Without a Trinitarian understanding of the relational oneness of God, their God was no different, and had nothing more to offer, than the Muslim monad of Allah. With the militant “push” of Islam in our day, is the necessity not apparent that we must explain the ontological dynamic of the relational oneness of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Those without a Trinitarian theological foundation are susceptible to accommodating the Islamic Allah as equivalent to the Christian God.

It is imperative that Christians share the “good news” of the Christian gospel, and its distinctive understanding of the Triune God. Anyone receptive to God’s Self-revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ can be drawn into the relational oneness of the Triune God, in the *At-one*-ment of reconciliation, wherein we are joined in a relational “one spirit” oneness with the three Persons of the Godhead. It is not that we are mathematically merged, or that we are integrated into a single integer union, but we participate in a relational oneness with God, in Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit.

Thereby we have a relational oneness and unity with all other Christians who are likewise so joined in relational oneness with God. Being relationally “one spirit” (I Cor. 6:17) with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, allows us to “stand firm in one spirit” (Phil. 1:27), being “united in spirit” (Phil. 2:2), in the “unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3), allowing love to be the “perfect bond of unity” (Col. 3:4) in Christ.

So, when we declare that “God *is* One,” we are indicating a Trinitarian, relational Oneness. Not an abstract oneness of monism. Not a single integer oneness of a divine monad. But the Trinitarian relational Oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then, our first presuppositional premise is valid: “What God *is*, only God *is*.” And because God is Who He is, He has acted in the Self-revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ, to facilitate mankind’s relational *At-one*-ment with God in reconciliation and regeneration. This, in turn, allows for relational unity in the interpersonal relationships of mankind – contingent upon, and derived from, the relational oneness of the Trinity.

Is it any wonder that the relational oneness of Christian unity in the Body of Christ has been so lacking? We have not understood that it can only be produced by the relational oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at work in His people!

God *is* Being

This is not to say that “God *is* a being” among a multiplicity of beings. No, we want to consider how it is that God *is* the essence of all being.

“Being,” in its broadest sense, has to do with that which *is* or that which exists. The Greek word, *ousia*, was used by Greek philosophers in this abstract sense, as was the Greek word *hypostasis*, indicating foundational existence. The Latin words *essentia* and *substantia* were also used in the sense of total existence. Used in this way, “being” is equivalent to existence, i.e. to all that *is*.

If we recall our previous insistence on the distinction between the Creator and the creation, the statement “God *is* Being” cannot be construed to mean, “God *is* all that *is*.” That is not a Biblical concept, despite that fact that some have misused I Corinthians 15:28 to attempt to indicate, “God is all in all.” The contextual interpretation of this statement to the Corinthians must take into account that Paul is referring to the future consummation of Christ’s reign when “all things,” including the Son, “will be (future) subjected to the One (God the Father), that God

may/should (subjunctive) be all in all.” God will eventually be *all* that He intends to be in *all* of His people. This will be a perfect, heavenly expression of His Trinitarian relationality of Being. Paul was not telling the Corinthians that “God is all in all.” If God *is* all that *is*, then all that *is is* God. This idea is at the heart of the monistic pantheism that is prevalent in the East, and is becoming popular in the West via the medium of “New Age” thinking, but it is not a concept of God that is compatible with a Christian understanding of God.

So (to repeat), the statement that “God is Being” cannot be construed to mean, “God *is* all that *is*.” That would fail to maintain the distinction between the Creator and the creation, and violate the first premise that “what God *is*, only God *is*”.

A Biblical understanding of God’s Being is based on the fact that “God *is* personal Being.” God did not identify Himself as “all that *is*,” but as “I AM that I AM” (Exod. 3:14). This is not just a statement of God’s existence, and certainly not a statement that “God *is* all that exists.” God reveals Himself as Personal Being.

In the progressive revelation of Himself in the new covenant, God reveals Himself more fully as Relational Personal Being. Revealing Himself as the incarnate Son of God, Jesus continues the self-revelation of God in His corollary statements: “I AM the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). “I AM the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). “I AM the light of the world” (John 8:12). “I AM the good shepherd” (John 10:11,14). “I AM the door” (John 10:7). “I AM the bread of life” (John 6:35,48,51). “I AM the expected Messiah” (John 4:26). “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58). “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Such statements of Self-revelation required that the early Christians develop an understanding of God that went beyond their previous understanding. They had to recognize that God *is* Relational Personal Being in the tri-unity of His Godhead as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As noted earlier, such a concept of God is not something that Christians dreamed up, for human reasoning would never have postulated the intricacy of a Trinitarian God. The Trinitarian understanding of God is determined by the fact that God has revealed Himself as such. The early Christians pondered and evaluated this Triune Self-revelation of God as Relational Personal Being for approximately three hundred years before a stated clarification of this Christian understanding of God was drafted at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., a council convened by Constantine for that purpose. Arius claimed that the Son of God and the Spirit of God were not the same being (Greek *anomoiousion* – not like being) as God the Father. Athanasius, however, won the day by documenting from scriptural sources that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were the same being (Greek *homoousion* – same being), and arguing that this was the Self-revelation of God. After the Nicene Council the semi-Arians flip-flopped on the original Arian position, and stated their willingness to accept that the Son of God and the Spirit of God were of similar being (Greek *homoiousion* – like being), but not of the same being (*homoousion*). This semi-Arian understanding was also rejected, but it was the occasion of the argument, “Does it make an *iota* of difference?” And the answer must be an unequivocal “Yes, it does make a difference!” From 325 A.D. onwards the Christian understanding of God was clarified and expressed in the Trinitarian understanding of the shared Being of God in three persons. The three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, relate and function together as the same divine Being.

That “God *is* Being” has been more precisely defined: God *is* Triune, Relational, Personal Being. And “what God *is*, only God *is*.”

What is the practical meaning of this understanding of God for Christians? The personal, relational Being of God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the only Being that can provide *being*, i.e. His Being, in the human being, in order that we might become a “new being,” a “new

creature” (II Cor. 5:17), a “new man” (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), by the presence and function of the triune Being of God in us. Christians can thus “live and move and have their being” (Acts 17:28), functionally being what God intends them to be by His Being operative in their humanity. There is a sense, therefore, in which we can only be a legitimate “human being” when we are deriving our *being* from His Being. On the basis of His Being, the relational, personal “I AM,” I can, as a Christian, know “who I am” in a derived identity united with His Being. Collectively, this relational personal Being of God in Christians will be the basis of our interpersonal relationships with one another as we interrelate in community, the common-unity of personal, relational beings expressing the Being of God. The Trinitarian “community of Being” will be the relational reality that is expressed in the ecclesial “community of being”, i.e. in the Church, the Body of Christ.

God is Person

Unlike those whose god, or gods, are an impersonal and idolatrous object made of wood or stone, and unlike those whose god is an impersonal and monistic amalgamation of “all that is,” the Christian understanding of God has always conceived of a personal God. But the monadic concepts of God in Judaism and Islam also claim that God is personal, so how is the Christian understanding of a personal God in Trinitarian monotheism different from these other views of God?

When we state that “God is Person,” we are not merely indicating that God is *a* person in the singularity of individualism, or the isolation of solitariness, for such would comprise a monad monotheism. Neither are we stating that “there is only One Person in the universe” in the sense of a monistic universalism. Nor are we declaring that God is an individual person patterned after a created human being, for we cannot argue backwards from man to God. We are certainly not saying that God is the personification of an idea, ideal, or universal concept of abstract Being, whether individuated or universal. It is not even sufficient to say that God is personal, rather than impersonal. And we obviously mean more by this statement than the general observation that God is personable, amicable and likeable.

What then do we mean by “God is Person.” Our understanding of this statement will depend on how we define “person.”

Originally the Latin word *persona*, from which we get the English word “person”, referred to the mask worn by a dramatist as he played a role and projected himself in a different persona or façade. Later, the Latin word *persona* was applied to the actor himself, the role-player who was wearing the mask. As the language evolved (as all languages do) the word *persona* designated an individual human being. If we accept Shakespeare’s analysis that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,”³ then it is not difficult to see how all individuals are regarded as but role-players. In modern English usage, the word “person” is almost invariably defined in psychological terms, as one having personality. Descartes’ emphasis on human thought and rationality as the defining factor of the human being set the stage for the psychological definition of person as one having mental, emotion, and volitional capability in mind, emotion, and will; how we think, feel and choose. A “person” is often defined as one having the capacity of decision in the free choice of self-determinism, or as one possessing the self-consciousness of self-desires. The humanistic orientation of Western society defines the “person” almost exclusively in these psychological terms.

This is **not** how Christian theology has defined God as Person for the last 1700-1800 years. The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), at the insistence of Athanasius, determined that God as Person is defined by the fact that God is relational Person within the inter-relations of the Triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God, as Person, is not defined by psychological function, but by relational function or social function. Colin Gunton asks,

“In what sense is God personal? The answer from all that has gone before is clear: He is personal as being three persons in relation, of having His being in what Father, Son and Holy Spirit give to and receive from each other...”⁴

Earlier Gunton wrote,

“...a person is different than an individual, in the sense that the latter is defined in terms of *separation from* other individuals, the person in terms of *relations with* other persons. To think of persons is to think in terms of relations...”⁵

A “person” is only a “person” in relation to other persons. Relatedness, relationality, sociality is at the root of personhood. Martin Buber was on the right track when he noted the “I-Thou” interpersonal relationality of personhood, although his Jewish presuppositions did not allow him to apply this to God.

Trinitarian relational Personhood is distinctive to the Christian understanding of God. God is a communion of persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relating to one another in “common union”. The particular uniqueness of Trinitarian monotheism is that the tri-personalism of the persons of the Trinitarian God is such that their persons can only be defined in relation to one another. Their personal relations mutually constitute each other. The person of God the Father can only be defined in relation to the person of God the Son, and both of their persons can only be defined in relation to the person of God the Holy Spirit.

Allow me to employ another inadequate human analogy. I am the father of five children. But I can only be a “father-person”, if I am personally related to a “mother-person”, and we have a “child-person.” Without the relatedness to these other persons, I cannot be a “father-person.”

God, as Person, is defined by the personal relatedness of the three persons of the Trinitarian Godhead. But, we must make a careful distinction at this point. We do not want to get caught in the logical absurdity of indicating that God is three Persons in one Person. Proper logic will not allow us to employ a syllogism that $3 Xs = 1 X$. That is invalid. The historic statement of the Triune understanding of God has been that God is three Persons in one Being. This preserves the distinction that avoids logical absurdity. The Trinitarian relational Oneness of God in the inter-relations of the three Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, constitute and comprise a God who is the essence and source of all relational personhood. When we declare that “God is Person”, we are declaring that God is Trinitarian relational Personhood, and that all proper interpersonal relationships are grounded in and derived from the Trinitarian relational Personhood of God. Thus, we can state, “God is Person,” and that “what God is, only God is.”

The inter-relatedness of the three Persons of the Triune Godhead creates a perfectly harmonious interpersonal community of divine Being as they express divine character one to the other. It is that perfectly harmonious interpersonal interaction of relationship that the Triune God wants to impart to and actuate in the created relational persons of mankind; i.e. you and me! When that was destroyed in the fall of man into sin, God’s intent was to restore humanity to the

intended interpersonal relations with Himself and with others. In order to do so, the Son of God became a man in the hypostatic union of deity and humanity, and the God-man was the “one mediator between God and man” (I Tim. 2:5). Jesus took upon Himself the death consequences of sin, that by His Spirit He might impart the divine life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to receptive mankind. The divine provision of the presence and function of the Triune God in Christians is the sole basis for harmonious interpersonal relationships in the Christian community. That is our privilege – to participate in the perfect and harmonious Trinitarian interpersonal relations of the Trinity.

So, when we state that “God *is* Person,” we are explaining that God is Trinitarian relational Personhood, and the actuator of all legitimate interpersonal relationships between human persons. What God *is*, only God *is*.

God *is* Spirit

When Jesus declared to the woman at the well in Samaria, “God *is* Spirit” (John 4:24), He does not seem to have been stating that “God is *a* spirit” among many spirits. That is to fall into the same hermeneutic trap as those who add the indefinite article in the prologue of John’s gospel and translate the words to mean “the Word was *a* god” (John 1:1), not wanting to admit that Jesus, the *Logos*, was, and is, God.

Neither was Jesus telling the woman, “God is a spirit-force or a spirit-energy – an abstracted and impersonal “fourth dimension” within the universal cosmos. Nor was Jesus indicating that “God is spiritual,” especially since the adjective “spiritual” and the noun “spirituality” can be applied to anything and any action, as is obvious in our terminology today.

The declaration that “God *is* Spirit” should not be interpreted merely as a statement that “God is invisible.” That God is invisible (cf. I Tim. 1:17), and that “no man hath seen God at any time” (cf. John 1:18; I Tim. 6:16) is certainly true, but this does not seem to be the point that Jesus was making. Jesus was not defining God by the privation or absence of human ocular visibility. To do so would be to create a static and impersonal concept of God as but some nebulous, abstract, intangible, incorporeal, immaterial, non-physical anti-matter. If pushed to its extreme, this line of reasoning would be to declare, “God *is* nothing.”

Jesus appears to be making a positive statement about God when He declared, “God *is* Spirit.” It is interesting to note that references to the “Spirit” both in the Old Testament (employing the Hebrew words *ruach* and *n’shamah*) and in the New Testament (employing the Greek word *pneuma*) usually have a dynamic context. For example: “the Spirit of God was *moving* over the surface of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). “The Lord God...*breathed* into his nostrils the spirit of life” (Gen. 2:7). When Jesus tried to explain the Spirit to Nicodemus, He said, “the *wind blows* where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). When Jesus said, “God *is* Spirit,” this was not a statement of static invisibility, but a positive statement of the dynamic activity of the living God, wanting to express a visible manifestation of His character in the effects of His dynamic activity.

Consistent with our previous explanations of God, the “God *is* Spirit” statement declares that God *is* personal, relational Spirit-Being. The context of the statement is the subject of worship. Just previously Jesus said, “true worshippers shall worship the *Father* in spirit and truth; for such people the *Father* seeks to be *His* worshippers” (John 4:23). The extended statement is, “God is Spirit, and those who worship *Him* must worship in spirit and truth” (John

4:24). Note the references to God the Father and the personal pronouns referring to “His” and “Him.” There is a relational sense of personal worship implicit in Jesus’ words. When the woman subsequently states that she knows “that the Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ)...” Jesus responds with the divine Self-revelation of “I AM HE” – the expected Messiah of God (John 4:25,26). The Trinitarian relationality of the “God *is* Spirit” statement is evidenced by reference to God the Father (4:23), God the Son (4:26), and God the Spirit (4:24).

Jesus was telling the Samaritan woman, “God *is* the personal and relational Spirit-Being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Real worship requires such an understanding of God. One cannot extol and exhibit the worth-ship (the root of the English word “worship”) of God, except one extols and exhibits the worth-ship of the personal, relational Spirit-Being of the Triune God. Real worship is relational, personal, and spiritual. It is not just throwing accolades at God up above. It is not just getting “high” on emotional and subjective appreciation of God. If we are to understand the depths of Christian worship we must come to appreciate how it is that we are drawn into the inter-relationality of the Triune Spirit-God. Worship becomes a far greater privilege than we ever imagined as we participate in the inter-relational expressions of worship within the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can worship one another through us. The Son worships the Father through us, and the Spirit worships and glorifies the Son through us. “God *is* Spirit,” the only One worthy of our worship, and it is He who is the actuator of all relational worship of His own Triune Spirit-Being. It requires His Trinitarian Being in action in order to “worship in spirit and truth” (4:23,24). “God *is* Spirit,” and “what God *is*, only God *is*,” for God alone *is* Spirit in this sense of being the object, essence, and source of all true worship.

It does not matter what spiritual mountaintop you are on. It does not matter which religious temple-box you are in. True worship is to be drawn into the interpersonal and inter-relational worship activities of the Triune Spirit-God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God created mankind, not because He was lonely and needed some personal relationship, “someone to ‘hang with’.” Absolutely not! In His Self-existence, God has always been the Triune relational God with perfect interpersonal relationships. The expression of worth-ship has always flowed to and from the three Persons of the Trinity. God created mankind so that His all-glorious character might be even more abundantly enjoyed, worshipped and glorified by human creatures that would allow His character to be expressed in their behavior. We were “created for His glory” (Isa. 43:7), and “He does not give His glory to another” (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). God created us with spiritual, psychological and physical functionality in “spirit and soul and body” (I Thess. 5:23). Those who are “joined to the Lord, are one spirit with Him” (I Cor. 6:17) in a relational spiritual union, and have the opportunity to participate in the inter-relational spiritual worship of the Trinitarian God, who *is* Spirit. May we continue to learn to appreciate the privilege of Christian worship by understanding that “God *is* Spirit.”

God *is* Love

Twice in his explanation that consistent Christian behavior must of necessity be expressive of God’s loving character, the Apostle John makes the statement, “God *is* Love” (I John 4:8,16).

“God *is* love” does not mean that God is lovely, and worth loving by others. Nor does the statement mean that “God is loving,” i.e. that He engages in activities of love. It is only because “God *is* love,” and *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*, that His Being Love is expressed in active loving expressions.

John's statement does not mean that "God *has* love," as if love were some entity or ideal that God *has* and can give, distribute or dispense to others as a God-commodity; perhaps like "love-potion #9". Norman Grubb correctly states,

"God *is* love – not *has* love. Each of His attributes are (sic) not some "thing" that He shares with us. They are not separate gifts and graces with which He would endow us, but they are in reality, He Himself. His attributes cannot be yours." 6

In other words, "God *is* love" and "what God *is*, only God *is*."

God's love is not just a feeling of sentimentality that was willing to condescend to disadvantaged humanity. God's love is a relational reality that has always been expressed in the interpersonal relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their "everlasting love" (Jere. 31:3). God's love did not commence with John 3:16 when "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son..." For God to *be* love necessitates a Trinitarian relational God wherein the Father loves the Son (Matt. 3:17), the Son loves the Father (John 14:31), and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. C.S. Lewis comments,

"God *is* love has no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another. If God was a single Person, then before the world was made, He was not love. ...What Christians mean by the statement that 'God is love' is that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever and has created everything else."7

"God *is* Love" and has *always been* Love. He has always expressed the Love that He *is* unto others among the three Persons of the Trinity. Divine Love is Trinitarian relational Love. It is important to understand that God is a wholly adequate object of His own Love, within the interpersonal relations of the three Persons of the Godhead. God's love is not necessitated by or precipitated by the needs of mankind. God did not need mankind in order to have someone to love. God *is* Love, and has *always been* Trinitarian relational Love.

Because God's love is relational, it is always directed toward other *persons* – not ideas, principles, theories, or things. To say, "God *is* Love" means that God is a Being for others. Love is always *other-oriented*, giving oneself for the other. As the Triune relational Love that God *is*, He always seeks to enlarge the relational oneness of love that He Himself *is*, giving Himself for, with, and in others. That is why He reached out in Love to fallen mankind – simply because He *is* Love. And such Love is not conditioned by the condition of the object of His Love; it is not predicated on the loveableness of the object. God loved, and loves, the unlovely. "God loved us...while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8). The story of Hosea illustrates that God loves those who do not even appreciate His love, and even reject His love. But that does not mean that God's love is compromising. "He cannot deny Himself" (II Tim. 2:13). His Love is always integrated with all of His other attributes, including that of Justice. There are things that God hates, such as Satan, religion, and sin that is always contrary to His character.

God *is* Love. Love is intrinsic to Who He *is*. He always gives Himself for others. He always acts out of His being of Love. His Love is not just a sentiment or subjective feeling. His love is not just benevolent amicability. His Love is not an idealistic virtue or moral principle. His love is not passive or theoretical – a nice idea about being nice to nice people. The Trinitarian

relational Love of God is always extending to others by giving Himself completely for their highest good.

Since “God *is* Love,” and “what God *is*, only God *is*,” we cannot (as noted earlier) say that any other person *is* love in the same sense that God *is* love. Whenever a human individual expresses love (real love), it is God loving in that individual. That individual is deriving God’s character of Love in his/her behavior. Any pure *agape* love that is expressed in and through us is the active expression of the Triune God who *is* Love.

To facilitate God’s love in human behavior, Jesus prayed to the Father “that the Love wherewith Thou didst love Me, may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). When an individual comes into a relational knowing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in spiritual regeneration, then God’s Love is present and operative within that individual. “He who loves is born of God” (I John 4:7). “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us” (Rom. 5:5), and “the fruit of the Spirit is love...” (Gal. 5:22). The “love of Christ compels and controls us” (II Cor. 5:14) to give ourselves to others – personally, relationally, sacrificially, intercessorily.

The opposite of love is not hate, as many people seem to think. The opposite of love is selfishness – self-orientation instead of other-orientation. A narcissistic “me-ism”. A self-for-self instead of a self-for-others. When selfishness is operative, you can be sure that it will preempt a relational oneness of interpersonal spiritual unity. Paul explains that the “deeds of the flesh are enmity, strife, jealousy, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, and outbursts of anger” (Gal. 5:19-21), which are the opposite of the “fruit of the Spirit which is LOVE...” (Gal. 5:22).

Only when the God who *is* Love is allowed to express His Trinitarian relational Love within His people, within Christians, within the Body of Christ, the Church, will we see the loving, interpersonal community that God intends, wherein Christians “love one another” (John 13:34,35; Gal. 5:13,14; I John 3:11; 4:7), and seek one another’s highest good (Phil. 2:3,4). When “faith is working through love” (Gal. 5:6), our receptivity to the activity of God’s love, then there will be no thought of what we get out of it, no thought of who gets the credit, no thought of reciprocity, and no thought of who is in control. The Trinitarian relational God, who is Love, wants to manifest His character of Love in our behavior, individually and collectively.

We have considered five (5) general statements about God within the context of applying the presuppositional premise that “what God *is*, only God *is*.” In summary, we have noted that the terms must be carefully clarified and defined if we are to have a Christian understanding of God in the Trinitarian and relational way that He has revealed Himself, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God *is* One, not in a mathematical, monadic or monistic sense of oneness, but in Trinitarian relational Oneness. In this sense, God alone is the source of all genuine relational oneness and unity among created mankind.

God *is* Being, not in a monistic sense of being all that exists, but in Trinitarian relational Being. His Being in a human being allows us to become a “new being” capable of expressing His Being in the relational “community of being” that is the Body of Christ.

God *is* Person, not as defined by psychological concepts of personality, but as Trinitarian relational Personhood. Only as the relational Personhood of God is manifested in our interpersonal relationships will there be the social harmony that God intends among His people.

God *is* Spirit, not merely in the sense of being invisible, but in the positive expression of being Trinitarian relational Spirit. When we are “one spirit” with the God who is Spirit, we are drawn into the interactive worship of the Trinity, and able to “worship in spirit and in truth”.

God *is* Love, not as a subjective sentiment that He *has*, but as Trinitarian relational Love that always extends Himself to others. When God’s Love is “shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” we can “love one another” in the relational loving community of the Church.

We could go on to note many other attributes of God, noting how each is defined in a Trinitarian context that indicates that “what God *is*, only God *is*.” For example:

God *is* Life, not in a biological sense, but the essence of spiritual life in its Trinitarian and relational form. “God the Father has life in Himself” (John 5:26). Jesus, the Son, declares, “I AM the life” (John 11:25; 14:6). “The Spirit gives life” (II Cor. 3:6).

God *is* Truth, not just as propositional, sentential truth statements, but as Personified, Trinitarian, relational Truth. The Father is the “true God” (I Jn. 5:20) who “cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). Jesus said, “I am the truth” (Jn. 14:6), and the Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (Jn. 14:17).

God *is* Holy, not “set apart” in Deistic disengagement, but uniquely distinct in His Trinitarian relational character of Holiness. The Father’s name is Holy (Luke 1:49). Jesus is also called “the Holy One” (Acts 3:14). “The Holy Spirit dwells in us” (II Tim. 1:14).

It is always instructive for Christians to consider Who God *is*, and how He has revealed Himself as the Trinitarian relational God that He *is*. The reader might want to “search the Scriptures” to note that God *is* eternal, infinite, unchanging, immortal, gracious, good, forgiving, righteous, faithful, Savior, etc., noting how all of these attributes are clarified and defined by the fact that God *is* Trinity, a personal, relational tri-unity Who has taken the initiative to reach out relationally to mankind in Grace, and is the only divine provision for genuine human relations.

Consideration of Who God *is* could occupy our attention for the rest of our lives, so we must proceed to explain our second presuppositional premise in developing a Christian understanding of God.

God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*

Since all that God *is* must be understood in the Christian context of His Trinitarian relational Being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God’s actions must be expressive of the same. God’s relational Love and Personhood require active expression. His Being is, of necessity, expressed in His actions. God cannot be a passive God. God would cease to be God if His relational, Personal Being was not always expressed actively, for He is not a static, impersonal god as is evident in all idolatry. In like manner, He would not be God if all of His activity were not interpenetrated with His Being. God does not delegate His actions and responsibilities to others, or divest Himself of His assets or actions. Nor does He act in a mechanical way by applying certain principles or procedures to implement His activity, as the Deists would propose. God is personally, intrinsically and intimately involved in all that He does.

What is the prime function of God? Some might answer, “to create,” or “to redeem,” or “to glorify Himself.” If we are consistent with the premises that we have postulated, we must explain that the prime function of God is to *act* like the God that He *is*? “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.” God’s prime function is *activity* consistent with His character. In Biblical terminology, this is “Grace” – God in action consistent with, and expressive of, His Being. Popular theological expression has cheapened the concept of grace by defining it as a static “undeserved favor of God,” and applying it solely to the initiative of God’s redemptive

efforts in Jesus Christ. An example of such is the acrostic of defining grace as “God’s Redemption At Christ’s Expense.” While not necessarily wrong, such a definition is too limited. We must expand the definition of “grace” to include all of God’s activity, always consistent with His character. Or, in other words, grace is the ontological dynamic of God’s Being in Action.

We will again consider five (5) basic statements that provide a framework for the premise that “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.” These statements do not necessarily provide an exhaustive explanation of God’s active expression of His Being, but they do provide some “handles” for explicating this premise. The five statements are:

- God *does* what He *does*, consistent with Himself.
- God *does* what He *does*, *by* and *of* Himself.
- God *does* what He *does*, *out of* Himself.
- God *does* what He *does*, giving Himself for others.
- God *does* what He *does*, *unto* Himself.

God *does* what He *does*, consistent with Himself.

This is essentially a restatement of the premise that “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.” Because God *is* the Trinitarian relational Being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, what He *does* will always be the unified relational action of the Trinity.

A caution and clarification is in order at this point. Although God always acts as the Triune God in unified, conjunctive Oneness, and we do not want to advocate a bifurcation or trifurcation of one Person of the Trinity functioning independently of the other Persons, we must at the same time allow for distinct functionality of the Persons of the Godhead. For example, God the Father begat the Son – not *vice versa*. And God the Son voluntarily became flesh as the God-man mediator, and prayed to the Father. After the *homoousion* explanation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the “same Being” was clarified at the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), later councils were convened to clarify the distinction of economic or operation function of the Persons of the Trinity. At the Councils of Constantinople (381 A.D.) and Chalcedon (451 A.D.), the Greek term *perichoresis* was used to explain that there is a “space or room around” each Person allowing them to have distinct functionality while remaining unified in one Being. The Persons of the Triune Godhead function conjunctively, yet can have distinct function within their unified action.

The point that needs to be made here is the consistency of God’s action with His Being. God’s character is absolute, and He never acts “out of character.” He always *acts* in accord with Who He *is*. “God is faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (II Tim. 2:13). He cannot act contrary to Who He *is*. To do so would violate the absoluteness of His character, and He would cease to be the God that He *is*.

When His character is expressed in His activity, it is necessarily He Who is expressing such. No other can act like or as God. God alone can express His character, and act like Who He alone *is*. His actions are never detached or disconnected from Who He *is*.

God *does* what He *does*, *by* and *of* Himself.

The relational Being of the Triune Godhead has no necessary relation to anything or anyone outside of Himself. There is nothing outside of God that influences or controls His

actions. There is no one higher or greater than God, or else God is not God, for the higher and greater would be God. God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* exclusively Who He *is*.

God is Self-existent. This does not mean that God is Self-created or Self-caused. Rather, we might more accurately state that God is uncreated and uncaused, for He has always existed eternally. His ground of existence is in Himself, and He has always existed as Who He *is*. God, therefore, acts *by* and *of* Himself. Everything else that exists has its origin in God and is sustained by God. The distinction of the Creator and the creation is hereby documented again. The existence and sustenance of all creation must derive from the Self-existent God.

God is independent and autonomous. He is Self-sufficient. As we have explained, “what God *is*, only God *is*,” so there is nothing and no one within the created order, including man, which is also independent, autonomous and self-sufficient. God is a law unto Himself, and is Himself the basis of all divine law. He is His own center of reference, which is not to say that He is a fixed or static reference point, for such might impinge upon the flexibility of divine freedom of action. But, at the same time, He is fixed in the absoluteness of His character. God is complete in Himself. He lacks nothing and has no needs. “Need” is always a creature word, evidencing the dependency and contingency of the creation upon the Creator. What God *is* He *is* in Himself, and what God *does*, He *does by* Himself. He is unconditioned and uncontingent. He does not derive anything that He does from anything or anyone outside of Himself.

God *does* what He *does*, *by* and *of* Himself because He is the Almighty (Gen. 17:1), Omnipotent (Matt. 6:13), and Sovereign (I Tim. 6:15) God. And “what God *is*, only God *is*.” As the supreme and Self-existent Being, He acts *by* and *of* Himself, not conditioned, contingent, or constrained by any other. “I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heaven *by Myself*, and spreading out the earth all alone” (Isa. 44:24). “He made the earth *by His power*” (Jere. 10:12). And as the Triune relational Being, it can also be said of the Son of God that “all things came into being *by Him*, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3).

God *does* what He *does*, *out of* Himself.

God is Self-empowering, Self-generating, and Self-producing. All that He *does*, He derives *out of* Himself. He is the sole cause, origin and source of all that he *does*. Since “what God *is*, only God *is*,” God alone is thus Self-empowering and Self-generating, and creation cannot function in such a self-producing manner. Creation must derive its functionality from God.

God’s Self-generative activity is evidenced first in His acts of creation. The Self-existent God Self-generated all created existence *out of* Himself. What source could there have been for that which was created except the Self-existent Creator God?

Theologians have traditionally shied away from explaining that God created *out of* Himself, for they have correctly wanted to avoid any suggestion that what God created was an extension of Himself or a derivative of Himself. Such would impinge upon the distinction of the Creator and the creation, and lead to some form of monistic pantheism. Instead, they have explained that God created *ex nihilo*, a Latin phrase meaning “out of nothing.” Such a phrase adequately explains that God did not use pre-existing materials, “that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb. 11:3), but it lends itself to the absurdity that something came out of nothing, and thus falls prey to the same basic illogic as the evolutionary hypothesis. *Ex nihilo* may properly explain the process of creation, but it does not explain the derivative

source and origin of creation, which is implicit in the Latin preposition *ex*, meaning “out of” in terms of source or origin. The source *out of* which all creation is derived has to be God, for He was all that existed as the Self-existent One. The Biblical explanation of creative source is best expressed by the Greek phrase *ek theos*, meaning “out of God.” To the Romans, Paul explained, “from (*ek*) Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). To the Corinthians, he wrote, “There is one God, the Father, from (*ek*) whom are all things” (I Cor. 8:6). “All things are out of God (*ek tou theou*)” (I Cor. 11:12). These serve to verify that God created *out of* Himself, *ek theos*. When God created, He created *out of* Himself, and produced that which was not Himself. God is uncreated and Self-existent, so He could not create Himself. He could not create God, another god, or little gods that were substantive derivations or extensions of Himself, having intrinsic God-likeness and participating in the attributes of God. But, as the Greater, God could create the lesser *out of* Himself, though not Himself. The living God, who *is* Life in Himself, could create other life-forms, living creatures, which are less than Himself. “Thou alone art the Lord. Thou hast made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. Thou didst *give life* to all of them” (Neh. 9:6). That which is living within creation is derived *out of* the living God. The living Creator created living creatures.

This explanation of the etiology of creation, wherein God’s creative acts were *out of* Himself, *ek theos*, retains the distinction of the Creator and the creation, thus avoiding monism, but does not so detach and divorce God from His creation as to lapse into Deism. It is this balance that must be maintained in a Biblical and Christian understanding of God.⁸

Let it be noted that when God created out of Himself, it was His Triune Being that was active in creation. The Father (Acts 4:24; 17:24; Eph. 3:19), the Son (John 1:3; Col. 1:13,16; Heb. 1:2), and the Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30) were all involved in the creative action of God.

God’s acting *out of* Himself is not limited to His initial creative acts. God continues to be personally active and involved within His creation (*contra* Deism), necessarily expressing His character *out of* Himself. Only God can act like God and express His own character. The creation cannot generate or produce divine character. God’s character must be empowered and expressed *ek theos*. God is love; and “love is *ek theos*, for everyone who loves has been born *ek theos*” (I John 4:7). God is Good; and “the one doing good is *ek theos*” (III John 11). God is Righteous; and Paul writes of “having righteousness which is *ek theos* on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9). Christian service is “out of (*ek*) the strength which God supplies” (I Pet. 4:11). We are “not adequate to consider anything as coming from ourselves (*ek eauton*), but our adequacy is *ek theos*” (II Cor. 3:5). The expression of God’s character must have its source and origin in God, and be derived *out of* God. No man can generate God’s character of love, righteousness, goodness, etc., *out of* himself. The dynamic for “new creation” behavior must be derived from God. All expression of character not derived *ek theos* is necessarily derived *ek diabolos* (cf. John 8:44; I John 3:8,12).

God does not offer some part or feature of Himself, a spiritual commodity or product. He does not dispense spiritual benefits that are not His own Being in action. His Being cannot be detached or separated from what He *does*. What God *does* is always a Self-giving and a Self-expression of Himself, empowered, generated and produced *out of* Himself.

God does what He does, giving Himself for others.

Previously we observed the statement, “God *is* Love” (I John 4:8,16), noting, “what God *is*, only God *is*.” God’s love is the active and relational Self-giving of Himself for others. Such other-oriented Love has been eternally expressed in the interrelations of the Trinity, as each divine Person forever gives Himself in love to the other Persons of the Godhead.

Because God *is* Who He *is*, as Love, He *does* what He *does*, giving Himself for others. God’s love seeks the best for others, and He fully recognizes that the best *is* Himself. The highest need of created beings is always the presence and activity of the Creator, in order to function as intended. God does not withhold His Self-giving Love from those who are receptive to such, always willing to “freely gives us all things” (Rom. 8:32). Without God’s Self-giving grace and love no one could live the Christian life, for it is He who intercedes for the Christian (Rom. 8:26,27,34; Heb. 7:25), and sanctifies the Christian (Eph. 5:26; I Thess. 5:23; II Thess. 2:13; Heb. 2:11), and provides the Trinitarian love that is essential for loving interpersonal relationships within the loving community of the Church (Col. 2:2; II Tim. 1:13; I Jn. 4:7-21).

The givingness of God’s love is expressed by all the Persons of the Trinity. God the Father “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16), loving mankind even as sinners (Rom. 5:8), to the extent that He “sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10). The Son of God, Jesus Christ, “loved us and gave Himself for us” (Gal. 2:20). The Holy Spirit who has been given to the Christian is actively expressing the love of God (Rom. 5:5) in the “fruit of the Spirit which is love...” (Gal. 5:22)

God does what He does, unto Himself.

No one other than God can dictate the purposes or objectives of God’s action. “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*.” As there are no higher or more perfect purposes than His own, God determines the objectives of why He *does* what He *does*. God determines His own objectives *out of* His own Being, and energizes His own activities to achieve His purposes *with* His own Being.

The absoluteness of God’s all-glorious character was sufficient reason to create all things for His own glory (Isa. 43:7). In order for the creation to glorify the Creator God, it requires the presence and function of the Creation within His creation, manifesting His glorious character and activity. God does not give His glory to another (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). He cannot dissect His activity from His Being. He cannot distribute portions of Himself or His glorious character for this would be to divest Himself of Himself. The glory of God is the full weight (Hebrew word *kavod*) of who God *is* – His greatness and majesty actively manifested within His creation for His own benefit. Acting *out of* Himself and *by means of* Himself, God *does* what he *does*, *unto* Himself. “For *out of* Him, and *by means of* Him, and *unto* Him are all things. To God be the glory forever” (Rom. 11:36).

Some have objected that if God is the source, means, and objective of His own activity, this constitutes a closed system of an egoistic and self-centered god. Not so! Only God’s character is perfect and all-glorious, weighted in the absoluteness of His own Being. And as previously noted, God *is* Love, forever giving Himself for others, that as their highest good is realized He might be glorified. Only God is qualified to serve both as the subject and object of all His own activity! “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power” (Rev. 4:11).

God is glorified when His glorious character is manifested in His creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God...” (Ps. 19:1). Mankind, in particular, has been created with the spiritual and behavioral capability of manifesting God’s character as no other part of the created order can do. “The chief end of man,” states the Westminster Confession, “is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” We exist to “do all things to the glory of God” (I Cor. 10:31).

God’s Self-glorification, like all of His activities, is implicit in His Trinitarian relationalism. The Father glorifies the Son (John 8:54; 13:32; 17:1); the Son glorifies the Father (John 13:31; 14:13; 17:4; Heb. 1:3); and the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit manifest the glorious character of God within the creation *unto* their own glory.

Conclusion

We have attempted to provide a working framework for a Christian understanding of God. Our premises of “what God *is*, only God *is*” and “God *does* what He *does*, because He *is* Who He *is*” have led us to a relational Trinitarian understanding of God’s Self-revelation of Himself, consistent with the Biblical basis of historic Christian faith.

Contemporary Christians seem to be woefully ignorant of God as Trinity, and the inseparable implications of divine Trinitarian relations in everything that can legitimately be called “Christian.” Apart from a Trinitarian foundation of understanding there could be no Christological incarnation, redemption, resurrection, or Pentecostal outpouring. Apart from the Trinity there can be no viable understanding of regeneration, sanctification, the church, prayer, worship, baptism, Lord’s Supper, eschatology, etc. Apart from a Trinitarian understanding of God, Christianity disintegrates, and has nothing to offer mankind but a monadic religious worship object, or a mistaken monistic worldview.

The vital dynamic of the Christian gospel is in the functional expression of the Trinitarian relations of the Godhead. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell the individual Christian, and are the essence of eternal life, actuating every expression of the Christian life in salvific sanctification and glorification. The interpersonal relationships of Christians in the collective Body of Christ, the Church, require the inter-relational expression of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Apart from this Trinitarian expression in Christians within the Church, all that remains is a dead “Christian religion” with a rigid epistemological belief-system and a moralistic behavioral ethic.

Unless and until we have a solid and unequivocal Trinitarian understanding of God in the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our message of “Christ as our life” will not be valid or viable, ...will not be fully appreciated even in our own lives, ...will not be evidenced in Christian unity, ...will not be received by those who really want to know God.

Footnotes

- 1 Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Publishing. 1978. pgs 43-45. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. 1978. pg. 102.
- 2 Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*, pg. 45.
- 3 Shakespeare, William, *As You Like It*. II, vii, 139.

- 4 Gunton, Colin E., *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1995. pg. 164.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pgs 10,11.
- 6 Grubb, Norman P., *God Unlimited*. Pg. 12.
- 7 Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, pg. 151.
- 8 Cf. Fowler, James A., *The Etiology of Creation*. Fallbrook: CIY Publishing. 1991.