

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 9: A living being, spirit, personal and relational
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“Dear God,” one child wrote. “I am the only one in my class who is chinese. They all say that you are american but, I am too, so you could be chinese right? Your friend, Kim.” Another young letter writer to God penned the following brief epistle: Dear God, Are boys better than girls? I know you are one, but try to be fair. Sylvia”

Knowing that at certain stages of development children think differently from adults, we can understand children having such perceptions of who God is. However, a growing number of adults are also confused about God. For example, a 43 year-old Oskaloosa, Kansas attorney says that for him, “God is being alone ‘on a lake, seeing the fog lift up at sunrise and hearing the water bell.’ When he teaches his children, now two and three years old, about God, ‘I plan to take them outside and say, ‘Here it is.’””

Citing evidence from the market-research firm, Roper Starch Worldwide Inc., *The Wall Street Journal*, which quoted the attorney above in an article not long ago, also reported that “[a]cross the country, the faithful are redefining God. Dissatisfied with conventional images...people are embracing quirky, individualistic conceptions of God to suit their own spiritual needs. Although a steady 90% of Americans continue to say they believe in God, the number of those who say no standard definition ‘comes close’ to their notion of the deity has more than doubled in the past 20 years.” The “faithful” the article quotes include clergy, such as the one who answers the question, “Who is God?” with the response, “A force of positive energy.”

Such confusion is the result of moving away from God’s Word as one’s standard and supreme source of truth. While philosophy can demonstrate the reasonableness of believing in God’s existence, only his revelation can tell us who he is and what he is like. We observe some of his characteristics in his general revelation through his creation, such as his divinity, power, orderliness, and even aspects of his will. (Romans 1:18-32) Yet, to know God most fully, we need his special revelation in the Scriptures, where we meet Jesus Christ.

However, many evangelical Christians also hold divergent perspectives on this subject. A survey by the Barna organization discovered that those who accept Christ as their Savior during adulthood are “notably different” from those experiencing conversion in childhood. The report states that “[t]heologically, they are a mixed bag. They are less likely to have a biblical view of God, less likely to believe that divorce without an instance of adultery is sin, and more likely to believe...that both Christians and Muslims believe in the same God.”

In contemplating God and explaining who he is, it is important that we do not presume to define him. Historic Christian systematic theology has accurately and consistently

maintained the inability of human beings who are limited and finite to totally comprehend, much less define, him who is unlimited and infinite. (Cf. Isaiah 55:8-9) However, we can describe God by employing the metaphors and other means he has given us in his Word. In addition to the preceding articles in this series, we observe that God has also revealed the following characteristics of his being.

God lives and is spirit.

When we consult the Bible about God, we see that he is spirit. Jesus plainly pointed out to the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, Samaria, that “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) “This means,” as Louis Berkhof wrote, “that He is essentially spirit, so that all the qualities which belong to the perfect idea of spirit are necessarily found in Him; that He is a self-conscious and self-determining being.”

He is also invisible. (1 Timothy 6:16) This and the foregoing realities rule out the belief that some contemporary people and things are divine, as taught in such religions as the popular New-Age movement, which based on eastern monism and a syncretism of selected religions.

God is personal and relational.

The Bible also clearly indicates that God is a personal being. He knows us intimately, even before our birth, and he interacts with individuals. (Psalm 139:1-18; Jeremiah 1:4-10) He communicates with his people, listening to what they say and genuinely changes circumstances according to their requests which accord with his perfect will. (Exodus 3; 1 John 3:21-22; 5:13-15)

He has feelings. He grieves when his holy children die. (Psalm 116:15; John 11:35) He also grieves when we sin. (Ephesians 4:30) He loves us, having done so even before we loved him (Romans 5:6-11; John 15:13).

He is rational, moral, and free to do as he chooses. He has built into us limited capacities for doing so also, as will be indicated in future articles on the characteristics of God and our nature as the bearers of his image.

Other Practical Benefits for You

Understanding that God is spirit and personal means he is a living being. As such he cares about you and me, and he provides all-sufficient help wherever we are and in whatever circumstances we exist.

As spirit he is not limited by time and space. Neither do other obstacles and constraints that hinder the rest of his creation encumber him.

Since he is personal we can engage in a relationship with him, unlike we would be able to do if he were only an impersonal “force.” Therefore, you need never be lonely. I’ve been in many different parts of the world without family or friends with me; I have deeply missed my wife, children, and other loved ones, but I’ve never felt alone or lonely.

I still feel that way even after my precious wife of 48 ½ years, Carol, died several years ago. I miss her greatly, and I have times of sadness each day, but as I have explained in a brief video¹ and in an essay² on the Marriage page of my Web site, at such times God lifts me out of these times of sadness. I explain how he does so in that video and in the essay.

God has been and will be with me always, and he is so with all who believe in and follow Jesus Christ. He thereby enables us to overcome in himself, as well as through the body of Christ, our fellow believers, one of the greatest of human struggles, loneliness, as we cultivate our relationship with him.

As we proceed in our calling to help friends, workplace associates, neighbors, students, children and grandchildren grow from spiritual acorns to oaks of righteousness in Christ, let’s pay close attention to the assumptions they are making and to the questions they are asking. For those who accept the authority of the Bible, show them the truth. For those who disregard the Scriptures, raise questions, starting with the epistemological question (“How do you know?”) Who God is and what he is like is a question many are asking. Let’s always be prepared to give an answer (1 Peter 3:15), and in the process to point out how practical these aspects of God’s being are for our well-being and joy, now and forever.

¹ [Managing Grief: Thanking God in and for Everything \(Video\)](#)

² [Preparing for Living Again as an Unmarried Person.pdf](#)