

The Nature of God

by Pastor Marty

I ended last year with a 3-month series on the nature of masculinity and femininity and an apologetic on the role of women in ministry. This newsletter begins another series discussing the nature of God, humanity, and evil. This is extremely important because there are many conflicting doctrines in the Body of Christ today that would be resolved if we examine them in light of God's nature. The early Church spent centuries doing this very thing—examining every doctrine and position according to what they knew about God. They did this much more comprehensively than we do it today: they took time to consider what each belief indicated about God along with the results of the view. For example, as the Church tried to understand how Jesus could be both God and man, some thought He might have a human soul and divine spirit joined in a physical body; others claimed His soul was half human and half divine. Both ideas were honest attempts to explain the incarnation. However, Church leaders came to realize that compartmentalizing His nature did more harm than good. (If you think about it, you will see Gnostic influences in both positions and the belief that matter is inferior to spirit). Though nobody can explain the idea perfectly, they saw Theology, Christology, Pneumatology, and soteriology protected by affirming mystery: Jesus is both 100% God and 100% man at the same time. They considered the ramifications of their beliefs carefully by taking plenty of time to evaluate them both in light of God's nature.

The early Church took time to carefully consider the ramification of their beliefs.

Usually when Christians talk about the nature of God, they immediately think of the 3 O's—omnipotent, omniscient, & omnipresent. A problem is that we often do not take the time to really consider what we are saying or the full

ramifications of our vocabulary. For example, I am sure that we all would agree that God is omnipotent—all powerful. There is not a lot of argument on that fact in orthodox circles. Still, we sometimes erroneously relate that to mean God can do absolutely anything. The fact is that if we take scripture seriously, we find that God cannot do “absolutely anything.” I once got into a discussion about this with another Christian. He claimed there was absolutely nothing at all that God could not do. I pointed out to him that the author of Hebrews states clearly that God cannot lie. He rejected my argument, claiming I was misusing the word “cannot” because if He wanted to lie, He certainly could. In this case, he was appealing to the idea of omnipotence because he felt any potential restriction on God would make Him no longer fully God. However, his claim meant interpreting Hebrews 6:18 in a way directly contrary not only to the meaning of the verse but also to the entire passage. Some Bible versions translate the verse “it is impossible for God to lie” because the Greek word means just that—“not possible, not able.” God is physically and literally not able to lie; He could not tell a lie even if He wanted to do so.

According to scripture, God is physically not able to tell a lie; He just can't do it.

Now, we might feel some distress at the idea of saying there is something God cannot do; however, what appears to be a limitation is in fact an affirmation of God's perfection. Even the most adamant proponent of God being able to do “anything” would probably not argue that “God can fail” or “God can make a mistake” or “God can be wrong.” What we are saying when we refute those statements is “God cannot fail” and “God cannot be wrong” and “God cannot make a mistake.” We do not view our denying God's ability to be wrong as putting a limitation

on His perfection but as affirming it. Telling a lie involves intentionally deceiving a person. It is identifying something contrary to what is true. It is precisely what the serpent did to Adam and Eve when he said God had lied to them. If God is truth and there is no darkness in Him at all, then He CANNOT lie, for lying would be denying His nature. In essence, God would suddenly be contradicting Himself. It is vital we recognize that some actions relate as much to nature as they do to choice. Concerning the devil, Jesus said, “whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar.” He connects what the devil does to who he is: there is no truth in him, so lies come naturally to him. If we say something comes “naturally” to someone, we are saying it is “according to the person’s nature” to do it. If we believe God is perfect, loving, good, and all the other characteristics we ascribe to Him, we are forced to reject all attributes & actions that contradict His nature.

If we believe God is perfect, good, and holy, we must reject whatever is contrary.

Of course, saying it and doing it are very different things. We can think that we are being consistent with what we believe about God, but our own attitudes and actions prove us wrong. As imperfect human beings, we may doubt the truth of something God said in His Word, or we might ascribe to Him human inconsistencies if our experiences and feelings disagree with our theology. Those are very real issues we have to fight against as we learn to walk with Him, and the sinful nature and tempting devils usually do not announce themselves beforehand as they try to taint our thinking. However, before we can learn to recognize individual lies . . . and the especially dangerous half-truths . . . we have to recognize the much bigger issues that may lurk in our theology. In a sense, theology is a house of words where we ascribe meaning and value to terms and concepts. This involves risk, for God is absolute reality while human language is

a very relative thing. God is perfect, but human language is imperfect. God doesn’t change, but our dictionary keeps getting updated. We also know our relationships with our human parents tend to affect our perceptions about God. Not only our language but also our very feelings and emotions are fuzzy things. We often say that a picture is worth a thousand words; obviously, if that is true, then not even all earthly languages can succeed in fully describing who God is.

All the languages on heaven and earth together cannot completely describe God.

Even when we agree on a description for God, problems persist. We are apt to say, “God is love” with our mouths but still have very different beliefs about what “love” is. One of the loudest accusations against God is that He cannot be loving and send people to Hell. Christians may counter this argument by stating that He doesn’t “send” anyone—He just allows them to make their own decision. However, as appropriate as that answer may be at times, it fails to recognize the real issue: what “love” is. It changes the context without addressing the underlying disconnect. In essence, contrasting “sending to Hell” with “love” indicates a clear presupposition about what “love” means. The more we understand the noun, the better we recognize what verbs won’t work with it. For example, when things are not going our way, we may be tempted to say, “God hates me.” Now, as we understand what love is and who God is, we recognize our feelings are faulty. However, that doesn’t mean we don’t have problems in our theology. We just have to look at the Body of Christ today to see a major disconnect when it comes to “love.” Whole denominations today have chosen to describe “love” as a cancerous thing, enslaving and crushing entire groups of people, leaving them without hope or freedom.

Entire groups of Christians still embrace a destructive definition of what “love” is.

Of course, it is not surprising that even Christians struggle to understand something as profound and eternal as love, for it is part of the nature of God. However, this is exactly why we must make it a priority to evaluate what we believe about God. You see, no amount of Bible study or exegesis can give us a full definition of “love” because it is connected to who God is—which means it cannot be separated from other aspects of who God is, such as holiness, truth, and light. Since God is NOT schizophrenic, one aspect of His nature cannot in any way conflict with any other aspect of His nature. Love can’t be less than perfectly holy and true as holiness can’t be unloving, dark, or dishonest. As we are apt to realize, our own theology is formed from numerous assumptions and decisions we make about what things mean, and they reinforce all the others. We interpret the meaning of several scripture verses according to our theology, and our theology is the result of how we interpret numerous scripture verses. This is inescapably true no matter what denomination is primary in our faith—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, or Independent; we all have a worldview—a full set of presuppositions about God and the world—that affects how we read the Bible and interpret our experiences. Worldview beliefs are usually subconscious and deeply ingrained in our emotions. If we want to truly know the truth, we have to be willing to accept the fact that what we believe about God (individual statements of doctrine) is entirely defined by how we view God as a whole (our fundamental beliefs concerning His nature).

Our individual beliefs about God and the world are defined by our image of God.

Once we begin to recognize the need to evaluate what we believe about God, we realize that we desperately need somewhere to begin. If we cannot trust anything we believe, then we become like Paul warned, “tossed by the waves of the sea, carried by every wind of doctrine.”

However, we do not have to despair. Gladly, we can trust in the inspiration of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit’s ability to speak to even the densest of us! Although not every single thing that we believe about God may be entirely accurate, if we have read His Word with an honest heart, then not everything we believe will be entirely wrong. We are probably more right than wrong in at least some areas. Our job, then, is to just start where we are and begin to examine what we believe in order to look for weaknesses. It is a fundamental principle in philosophy that any argument is only as strong as it is consistent. In other words, if an argument contradicts itself, it falls apart. This is the law of non-contradiction. If we desire to know who God really is, we must start looking for contradictions in our theology.

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In order to identify contradictions, it is necessary to have a starting point. Some of the contradictions might be obvious, such as “God cannot lie, but God can do anything, so God can lie.” The clear contradiction between what God says and what we believe about Him indicates a faulty belief or definition is present. However, it is vital that we recognize that our tendency will ALWAYS be to trust our worldview beliefs when they are precisely the assumptions that we are trying to examine. Therefore, evaluating what we believe about God requires a commitment to understand His nature. We can be absolutely certain there is no internal contradiction in the Trinity. Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit never get in a fight or disagree over anything. They didn’t do “rock, paper, scissors” to decide whether or not man and woman should have tails. There is not, never has been, and never will be, any type of conflict between Them. There was only one time we ever saw a conflict in any of the Trinity: in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, being fully human as He became, struggled with taking the sin of the whole world into Himself. Apart from

that aspect of the incarnation, God's nature is a complete and perfect unity of absolute reality. Who God is stands completely separate from all human perceptions, arguments, or beliefs. In other words, what we believe about God does not change Him in the tiniest way. In complete disregard for postmodern ideals, He is absolute. God is so real that everything else is a hologram in comparison. This gives us a place to start.

God is so real & absolute that everything else is a hologram in comparison to Him.

As human beings, we constantly change and become different than we were. However, God does not change; He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. He may change His mind, which we see Him do in scripture, but He never changes who He is. (It is significant that those times God changes His mind are in the context of interactions with people). The concept of God being absolute is hard to accept when we realize it also means that many of our doctrines are wrong. If God is absolute, then there are a lot of things that simply don't fit in His nature. There may be times when two views may seem contradictory to us while then are not to Him because our perspectives are finite and faulty; however, some things just have to be right or wrong. For example, many Christians believe in a Rapture while others do not. I think it is safe to say someone is wrong. There is no ongoing debate in the Trinity over whether to do it or not. I also doubt God would only take Christians who believed in it and tell the rest, "I know you followed me, but because you didn't believe in the Rapture, you have to stay there. Have fun." Likewise, He probably will not change His mind based on popular vote. The two views being so contradictory means one (or both) are wrong. Thankfully, our salvation does not depend on getting everything right; it depends on faith in Jesus. Still, our theology directly affects how we live our life and our faith in Him, so we have to do everything we can to correct wrong beliefs.

Our theology affects our life and faith, so we must desire truth above anything else.

God has given us a relatively large book of truth to help us evaluate our theology as well as our worldview. My thesis in this newsletter is that errors in our theology stem from errors in our understanding of God's nature—our beliefs about who He is. We can begin to identify these errors by evaluating what we believe in light of what He says about Himself. However, it is only going to succeed if we take into account how one aspect of His nature fits with another. For example, there are several absolute statements that God makes about Himself that describe His nature: He is unchanging. He is love. He is good. He is eternal. He is light. He is holy. He is truth. He is life. These are just the most obvious ones. There are many others. Our mission—should we choose to accept it—is to begin to examine each of these absolutes in light of the others so we can identify where we allow contradictions. For example, if God is love, and if God is truth and cannot lie, and if God is unchanging and is holy, then something cannot be loving and also be unholy. For example, there is simply not a situation in which adultery can be an act of love because if love is of God (rooted in His nature of being love) and He calls adultery sin (rooted in His nature of being holy, unchanging, and unable to lie), then adultery is unloving. There certainly may be aspects of love in the way two people feel about each other, but if "love" and "holy" do not agree, merging them violates one or both. Trying to make something loving and holy does not change what it is, but it changes us. Our efforts slowly affect our image of God. We thus redefine God's nature so our theology can justify our lifestyle. True, some things seem to change from Genesis to Revelation, but it is due to a greater understanding of God's nature, not any change in Him. His nature is absolute. If we see any contradictions within God's nature and our theology, they are ours—not His.