

**Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.**

**God: Great and Good (chap. 5)**

**God: Three and One (chap. 6)**

---

This week we're jumping into a rather broad topic, the doctrine of God. Olson's approach is helpful, as it avoids getting bogged down in a lot of minutia regarding particular attributes of God, and chooses to focus more broadly on two sets of two characteristics that must be held together in a seemingly paradoxical tension. The first set of ideas that we'll look at is God's greatness and goodness, which is often referred to as God's transcendence and imminence. The second set is God's three-ness and oneness, which deals with the unified diversity of God otherwise known as the Trinity.

Regarding the first set, Olson notes that "it is no overstatement to say that theologians and Christian traditions have almost always tended to begin with one of the two poles [that is, God's greatness or goodness] and relativize the other one in its light" (112). Put another way, greater emphasis may be placed upon God's transcendence (greatness) which, intentionally or not, results in less emphasis on God's immanence (goodness) or vice versa. Yet, however hard it may be at times, we must seek to hold both attributes together since we find both God in Scripture. In other words, we need to avoid the twin pitfalls of forming a God in our own image or forming a God that is in no way analogous to us. This is possible only by affirming that God is both great and good.

Again, this is no small or easy task, and so we need to recognize the difficulty of the endeavor in order to proceed with necessary humility. Olson describes the complexity well: "Goodness within relationship *seems* to imply need or at least genuine reciprocity if not interdependency. Greatness *seems* to imply independence and self-sufficiency. How can God be *both* self-sufficient, limitless power...*and* at the same time Savior of the world who is patient, compassionate, long-suffering, and kind?" (114)

Let's begin with what we could say is the dogma (essentials) regarding God's characteristics or attributes. To me it is simply the affirmation that God is great (transcendent, self-sufficient, present everywhere, all powerful, all knowing) and good (imminent, near, involved in the world to bring redemption through his love, faithfulness, mercy, justice, and wisdom). Or, as Olson put it: "The consensus of Christian belief about God... has always been that God is *both* transcendent in the sense of possessing a superior quality of being such that everything depends on God for its existence, *and* immanent in the sense of being graciously present in love with his creation" (119). Therefore, the diversity of views, which I would categorize as non-essential doctrines and opinions, are the natural result of people trying to "flesh out" how one can affirm these two seemingly paradoxical statements.

Let's begin with God's transcendence or greatness. The Bible clearly speaks about God being present everywhere—set apart, high and lifted up, enthroned in the heavens, all powerful, exalted above all things, etc. An early church theologian named Anselm of Canterbury once formulated God's transcendence/greatness this way: "God is the being than which nothing greater can be conceived." Put another way, God is greater than even our best thoughts.

While God's greatness is a biblical affirmation, and it is true that God is ultimately beyond our full comprehension in the present (thus, Paul's analogy of seeing through a glass dimly, 1 Cor 13.12), quite often those who begin with and place the most emphasis upon God's transcendence also accept a corollary perspective known as nominalism. Nominalism suggests that God's greatness defines his goodness, and therefore his actions cannot be compared in any way to human conceptions of good and bad. This idea was taken up by Martin Luther when he posited a hidden God behind the revealed God. In other words, Luther believed that though God reveals himself in one manner, but his true character and being remain hidden and ultimately unknowable—his actions are free of any restraints, conditioned and tempered by nothing and whatever he does is good and right (even if it seems contrary to what we would consider good and right and/or contrary to God's revealed character).

This kind of logic is found quite frequently in Reformed, Calvinistic perspectives, which suggest that our notions of good and right are so distorted by sin that we simply cannot understand any of God's actions by our conceptions of righteousness and justice. They believe God's standards are fundamentally different from ours, and whatever God does defines what is right and wrong. While it is true that God's actions are the standard of right and wrong, the Calvinist perspective often neglects to temper such statements by noting that God cannot do something contrary to his character. This is where the hidden God of Luther emerges to address this difficulty, and ultimately one is left with a fruitless search for the God who revealed himself most fully in Jesus the Messiah. If we cannot know God through his revelation in Jesus as a God of love and grace and mercy, then we are forever in the dark as to the nature and purpose of the God who remains hidden in the shadows.

Moreover, it is quite common in this way of thinking to understand God's transcendent greatness in the sense of controlling (and thus, being responsible for) everything that happens. This leads questions such as, if God is sovereign and in control of every detail why does God allow so much suffering and evil in the world, and where did the initial impulse to sin come from if God (directly or indirectly) is the cause of all things? The response is often that "God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts not our thoughts," which, while true, is being interpreted here with a nominalistic mindset, reasoning that whatever happens is "God's will" and, therefore, it is good because God makes it happen. The result of this thinking, as I see it, is that our understanding of good and evil means absolutely nothing. And, in fact, most in the reformed tradition point to some "greater good" behind even the most horrendous evils, though the "greater good" is often never explained in a concrete and tangible way.

Even if they would not affirm this statement, the logic of nominalism and Reformed Calvinism requires that we see God as the direct cause of sin and evil, which causes one to wonder if we can even call it sin and evil if we accept this view? It's a rather circular argument. (1) Whatever God does is good and right and just. (2) God is the cause (directly or indirectly of all things). (3) There is sin and evil and suffering and pain and violence in the world. (4) There is some greater good, because (back to #1 again) God causes everything and whatever God does is good and right and just. C.S. Lewis responded to this sort of logic in his book *The Problem of Pain* saying:

On the one hand, if God is wiser than we His judgments must differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil...On the other hand, if God's moral judgment differs from ours so that our 'black' may be His 'white,' we can mean nothing by calling Him good; for to say 'God is good,' while asserting that His goodness is wholly other than ours, is really only to say 'God is we know not what.' And an utterly unknown quality in God cannot give us moral grounds for loving or obeying Him. If He is not (in our sense) 'good' we shall obey, if at all, only through fear—and should be equally ready to obey an incompetent Fiend. The doctrine of Total Depravity—when the consequence is drawn that, since we are totally depraved, our idea of good is worth simply nothing—may thus turn Christianity into a form of devil-worship.<sup>1</sup>

The problem, in my estimation, is that nominalism and a Reformed, Calvinistic application thereof, grossly undermines the goodness of God by rendering any revelation of God as speculative and uncertain at best (and misleading and false at worst), because the God revealed to us is not necessarily an accurate picture of God if we accept this logic. These ideas have led to an overemphasis on certain attributes of God that portray God as a divine tyrant waiting to crush anyone at a mere whim rather than the God revealed in Jesus who is pictured as a loving father running with open arms to embrace his son who returned home from the far country. Nominalism, in whatever form it is manifested, leads to insurmountable difficulties regarding sin, evil, suffering, and pain by leaving God "on the hook" (so to speak) for either directly causing or indirectly rendering certain the very things that the Bible says God opposes and is presently working to redeem.

---

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940), 28-29.

As I understand it, while God's goodness is certainly different than ours, it is a difference of degree not kind. This must be the case, because if what we consider goodness is completely different from what God considers goodness then, as Lewis argued, it means nothing to say God is good because we could just as easily say God is evil since we lose our ability to say anything meaningful about God. Put another way, this view denies a universal concept of goodness, positing a relativistic understanding in the sense that, as Olson notes, "An act is good because God declares it so; he does not declare it so because it is intrinsically good" (124). Once more, I find C.S. Lewis helpful:

You could say we are fallen and depraved. We are so depraved that our ideas of goodness count for nothing; or worse than nothing...Now [in this system] God has in fact—our worst fears are true—all the characteristics we regard as bad: unreasonableness, vanity, vindictiveness, injustice, cruelty. But all these blacks (as they seem to us) are really whites. It's only our depravity that makes them look black to us....The word *good*, applied to [God], becomes meaningless: like abracadabra. We have no motive for obeying Him....If His ideas of good are so very different from ours, what He calls Heaven might well be what we should call Hell, and vice-versa."<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to God's immanence or goodness, which emphasizes the fact that God has not created the world and removed himself from it in some deistic sense, but that God is involved in the world and is working to redeem it. Theologians who emphasize God's goodness often begin with God's fullest self-revelation in Jesus the Christ, finding in his life and teachings a picture of God as loving, involved, compassionate, gracious, fully of mercy and kindness, in sum, a God of extravagant love. This, they believe, is to be the interpretive lens for any and all formulations regarding God's character, purposes, and actions. It is not that those who emphasize God's goodness downplay God's greatness; it is that they allow God's goodness to inform how they understand what it means for God to be transcendently great. They reject Luther's idea of a hidden God behind the revealed God, as well as the Calvinistic solution of (logically) leaving God as the cause of both good and evil. In Olson's words, those who begin with God's immanence or goodness affirm that "Jesus is the sufficient clue to God's character as genuine love, care, compassion, and patience" (114), and build their theology of God on that basis.

This is my approach because I believe we must allow God's goodness to temper our understanding of God's greatness. God cannot act contrary to his character, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ. Therefore, I reject both nominalism and Reformed Calvinism since both, in my estimation, move away from a "Jesus-looking" picture of God by emphasizing divine transcendence to the point that any revelation of God is suspect at best and misleading at worst, and the theological presuppositions lead to a picture of God that is difficult to reconcile with the picture painted by the life and teachings of Jesus. Again, we must hold together God's greatness and goodness, though at times they may seem contradictory, while allowing the goodness to inform how we understand the greatness.

This brings us to the equally difficult issue of how God is both three and one, a.k.a. the doctrine of the Trinity. Let me begin by saying that the term Trinity or triune cannot be found in Scripture, and this was an idea that, while present in the Scriptures, was not formulated in a more structured way until decades after the writings. It arose from the biblical references to God as Father, Son (Jesus) and Spirit. So, you end up with three distinct entities all being referred to as God in the Scriptures placed alongside the Jewish confession of God as one (i.e. monotheism). Early church leaders begin wrestling with how the Bible can affirm that there is only one God (Deut 6) while also referring to three distinct persons as God. This effort to understand and explain the seemingly incomprehensible led to the doctrine of the Trinity as we know it today.

The dogma regarding this matter is that God is three persons and one divine being. Or as Olson put it, God is one "what" and three "whos." Everything else falls into the category of doctrine and opinion, which, while helpful and important to particular groups and individuals is not essential to the Christian faith.

---

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 31-32.

The statement God is one in three and three in one is easy to say yet quite difficult to comprehend. A serious dilemma arises when you try to understand and explain how something can be three entities and yet one entity at the same time. This has led scholars to distinguish between the “immanent Trinity” (that is, the internal three-in-oneness of God) and the “economic Trinity” (that is, the external manifestation of one God as three persons). These are important terms and concepts because they help make sense of views that the Church (by and large) has deemed unfitting (i.e. heretical). Yet, I want to emphasize once again that the term “heretic” should not be understood as a moral category in which those whose views fall outside the bounds of “orthodoxy” be deemed less godly or un-Christian. After all, “heretics” of the Church have always been Christians seeking to formulate their faith in a more intelligible manner. That being said, Olson sets forth three main errors in Trinitarian formulation, of which there are many variations.

First, we encounter the view known as *modalism*, which understands the Trinity as three modes or manifestations of the one God. Those who hold this view reject the concept of an “immanent Trinity”—that is, they deny that God is three distinct persons and one divine being—and affirm only an “economic Trinity” where God is one divine being who is expressed in the three different roles of Father, Son, and Spirit. This view has the same problems as Luther’s concept of the hidden God behind the revealed God that we discussed earlier. God’s self revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is made into a falsity since it is not true. In modalism, God is not ontologically three in one (that is, he is not a being that is Father, Son, and Spirit), but is likened to one who attends a masquerade ball and dresses up as someone else, only God wears three “costumes.”

Second, there is the view known as *subordinationism*. This view recognizes three distinct persons (Father, Son, Spirit) within the one divine being known as God, but seeks to subordinate the Son and the Spirit to the Father. In other words, this view affirms both an “immanent” and “economic” concept of the Trinity, but in seeking to explain how one God can be three persons it makes the Son and Spirit into lesser, yet still divine, persons. The difficulty of this perspective comes in seeking to understand how this does not become three distinct deities. The biblical witness affirms that Father, Son, and Spirit are all fully and equally one divine being called God, not three deities ranked in a divine hierarchy like the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

This leads us to a third alternative known as *tritheism*. This view moves a step beyond subordinationism by suggesting that there are three gods—Father, Son, and Spirit. Tritheism often imagines God as one object composed of three distinct and separate entities that are somehow melded or joined together in a unity. For example, if we compared God to coffee with cream and sugar, we would be proposing a view similar to tritheism. While it is true that the cream and sugar dissolve into the coffee to form one drink, they are still three fundamentally distinct entities that have been combined. Seeing God in this manner would mean that there were three distinct divine beings that were somehow united into the Trinity, but you have then molded three gods into one rather than having one God (divine being) who is three persons.

So, now that you’re likely quite confused and wondering how we can possibly understand much less explain the idea of the Trinity in a coherent yet biblical manner, let me summarize two orthodox analogies Olson describes that have been suggested and nuanced throughout church history.

First, let’s look at the *psychological analogy*. This view begins with God’s “one-ness” and moves toward God’s “three-ness.” It was first set forth by an early church theologian named Augustine, and it is based on the presupposition that since humanity bears the image of God we ought to find something in ourselves that is in some way analogous to God’s triunity. Augustine offers up the human mind as an example of one entity composed of three distinct components—memory, understanding, and will. You cannot divide the three, as all are necessary and essential to what we call our minds, yet they function in distinct ways. As Olson put it, “together these three aspects or powers of the mind are one mind and yet they are distinct powers of mind” (147).

Second, the *social analogy*, which looks to human communities and social interaction for an analogy of the Trinity. This perspective begins with God's "three-ness" and moves toward God's "oneness." Those who hold this view, Olson reveals, believe that "there is an analogy, however dim and imperfect, between human groups at their best and the divine community of three persons who together make up one eternal Godhead" (149).

I think we can best explain the social analogy by contrasting it with the psychological. The psychological approach seeks to explain the Trinity ontologically. That is, it looks at God's triunity from the sense of God's existence and substance as a being. In other words, this approach focuses on the "immanent Trinity." By contrast, the social analogy approach seeks to explain the Trinity relationally, focusing on the "economic Trinity." As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann put it, "unity as one Godhead lies not in some underlying substance or subjectivity but in love, that is, community... [the Trinity is] a unity of interdependence and mutuality—rather than a substantial unity in which the persons are mere manifestations or dimensions of a single nature or underlying mind" (150).

The psychological analogy tends toward modalism (one God wearing three "masks") and the social analogy tends toward tritheism (three gods melded into one), so Olson suggests that we need to hold both analogies in tension in order to avoid either extreme. Ultimately, when discussing God we must approach the matter humbly and with a good deal of fear and trembling. God is a mystery, and while we must seek to understand God as best we can based upon God's self-revelation, we will never get it all figured out. As Olson put it, "how a single being can be faithfully and somewhat accurately described as *both* a single mind with multiple dimensions *and* a community of persons knitted together inseparable in a bond of love is beyond complete understanding. However, divine revelation requires that God be described in both ways" (154).

In the end, we need to remember Saint Augustine's tongue-in-cheek comment that "those who deny the Trinity are in danger of losing their salvation and those who seek to explain the Trinity are in danger of losing their mind."