

## Why the Classical Concept of God is Biblical

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Many alternative religious movements deny that the Bible supports the classical concept of God ... In this appendix I will argue that the classical concept of God is the model which best captures the concept of God found in the Bible.

### UNDERSTANDING THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD

*Classical theism* has long been the orthodox theistic position of all branches of the Christian church, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox. Because there are variations within this tradition, I will present a bare bones version of it, mentioning when appropriate differing views within the tradition.

Although there are numerous attributes of God that we could examine, for our present purposes it is sufficient to say that the God of classical theism is at least (1) personal and incorporeal (without physical parts), (2) the Creator and Sustainer of everything else that exists, (3) omnipotent (all-powerful), (4) omniscient (all-knowing), (5) omnipresent (everywhere present), (6) immutable (unchanging) and eternal, (7) necessary and the only God, and (8) triune: one God, three persons. Because volumes have been written on these attributes, I can only hope in this essay to present a brief summary of what they mean and where they are taught in Scripture.

#### Personal and Incorporeal.

According to Christian theism, God is a personal being who has all the attributes that we may expect from a perfect person: self-consciousness, the ability to reason, know, love, communicate, and so forth. This is clearly how God is described in the Scriptures (e.g., Gen. 17:11; Exod. 3:14; Jer. 29:11).

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\* This appendix is adapted from chapter 2 of a forthcoming book on Mormonism and Christianity by Francis J. Beckwith, Norman L. Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, and Jerald and Sandra Tanner [*The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* (1998) Eugene, OR: Harvest House]. All Scripture references in this appendix are taken from the Jerusalem Bible unless otherwise indicated.

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God is also incorporeal. Unlike humans, God is not uniquely associated with one physical entity (i.e., a body). For this reason, the Bible refers to God as Spirit (John 4:24) and Jesus says of his resurrected body, “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39, KJV, emphasis mine). This is why the Bible also teaches that God is not a man (Num. 23:19), that He is invisible (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27), that not even heaven and earth can contain Him (1 Kgs. 8:17), and that no mere human person has ever seen or can see God (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). In addition, if God is creator and sustainer of everything else that exists as well as being omnipotent, immutable, and omnipresent (see below), it is difficult to see how such a being could be physical.

## The Creator and Sustainer of Everything Else That Exists.

In classical theism, all reality is contingent on God—that is, all reality has come into existence and *continues* to exist because of Him. Unlike a god who forms the universe out of preexistent matter, the God of classical theism created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

As we shall see below, the Bible refers to God as a being who has always existed (e.g., Gen. 21:33; Exod. 3:15; Deut. 33:27; 1 Chron. 16:36; Job 36:26; Psalm 90:1–4, 102:12, 24–27, 145:13; Isa. 40:28; Rom. 1:20). The Bible also teaches that everything that is *not* God or in God’s mind (e.g., numbers, ideas) has not always existed. Consider the following biblical passages (from JB):<sup>1</sup>

Nor is he dependent on anything that human hands can do for him, since he can never be in need of anything; on the contrary, it is he who gives everything—including life and breath—to everyone (Acts 17:25).

[F]or in him were created all things in heaven and on earth; everything visible and everything invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers—all things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created, he existed, and he holds all things in unity (Col. 1: 16,17).

All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him. To him be the glory for ever! Amen (Rom. 11:36).

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<sup>1</sup> For more passages that explicitly or implicitly teach this doctrine, see Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1907), 374–378.

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It is by faith that we understand that the world was created by one word from God, so that no apparent cause can account for the things we can see (Heb. 11:3).<sup>2</sup>

It is the same God that said, “Let there be light shining out of darkness” ... (2 Cor. 4:6).

“You are our Lord and our God, you are worthy of glory and honor and power, because you made all the universe and it was only by your will that everything was made and exists” (Rev. 4:11).

A number of things can be derived from these passages: (1) God has always existed; (2) the universe, including its matter, has not always existed; (3) God is the creator, sustainer, and *sole* cause of the universe, which means that the universe has no *material* cause; and (4) God created light out of darkness, which implies that out of nothing something was created. Conclusion: the Scripture teaches that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. Consequently, it is on God alone that everything in the universe depends for its existence.

## Omnipotent.

God is also said to be omnipotent or all-powerful. This should be understood to mean that God can do anything that is (1) logically possible, and (2) consistent with being a personal, incorporeal, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, and wholly perfect Creator.

Concerning the latter, these attributes are not *limitations* of God’s power, but *perfections*. They are attributes at their highest level, which are essential to God’s nature. For example, since God is perfect, He cannot sin; because He is personal, He is incapable of making Himself impersonal; because He is omniscient, He cannot forget. All this is supported by the Bible when its writers assert that God cannot sin (Mark 10:18; Heb. 6:18), cease to exist (Exod. 3:14; Mal. 3:6), or fail to know something (Job 28:24; Psalm 139:17–18; Isa. 46:10a). Since God is a perfect person, it is necessarily the case that He is incapable of acting in a less than perfect way — which would include sinning, ceasing to exist, and being ignorant.

But this does not count against God’s omnipotence, since, as St. Augustine points out, “Neither do we lessen [God’s] power when we say He cannot die or be deceived. This is the kind of inability which, if removed, would make God less powerful than He is.... It is precisely because He is omnipotent that for Him some things are impossible.”<sup>3</sup>

When the classical theist claims that God can only do what is logically possible, he or she is claiming that God cannot do or create what is logically *impossible*. Examples of logically impossible entities include “married bachelors,” “square circles,” and “a brother

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<sup>2</sup> Since pre-existent matter would be the *material* cause of the universe, and since this passage teaches that no cause except God can account for the universe, this passage clearly teaches creation *ex nihilo*.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958), 5.10.

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who is an only child.” But these are not *really* entities; they are merely contrary terms that are strung together and *appear* to say something. Hence, the fact that God cannot do the logically impossible does not in any way discount His omnipotence.

But what about Luke 1:37, where we are told that “*nothing* is impossible with God?” (NIV). Addressing this question, St. Thomas Aquinas points out that this verse is not talking about internally contradictory or contrary “entities,” since such “things” are not really things at all. They are merely words strung together that *appear* to be saying something when in fact they are saying nothing.<sup>4</sup> Hence, *everything* is possible for God, but the logically impossible is *not* truly a *thing*.

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## Omniscient.

God is all-knowing, and His all-knowingness encompasses the *past*, *present*, and *future*. Concerning God’s unfathomable knowledge, the Psalmist writes: “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you” (Ps. 139:17,18, NIV). Elsewhere he writes, “Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (147:5, NIV). The author of Job writes of God: “for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:24, NIV). Scripture also teaches that God has total knowledge of the past (Isa. 41:22). Concerning the future, God says: “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isa. 46:10, NIV). Elsewhere Isaiah quotes God as saying that *knowledge* (not opinion or highly probable guesses) of the future is essential for deity, something that distinguished God from the many false gods of Isaiah’s day:

“Produce your defense,” says Yahweh, “present your case,” says Jacob’s king. “Let them come forward and tell us what is going to happen next. What could they tell us of the past to make it worth our notice? Or will you discourse to us of future things and let us know their outcome? Tell us what is to happen in the future, and so convince us you are gods. Do something at least so that we can note it and all see it. No, you are nothing and your works are nothingness; to choose you would be an outrage” (41:21–24).

God’s knowledge of the future is also asserted in the New Testament teaching that God foreknows who will be saved (see Rom. 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:1–2). Although there are

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 25, 3, as contained in *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 231.

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numerous other passages that imply and affirm God's knowledge of the future,<sup>5</sup> it is interesting to note that one can infer God's absolute knowledge of the future from His test of a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:22:

When a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh and the thing does not happen and the word is not fulfilled, then it has not been spoken by Yahweh. The prophet has spoken with presumption. You have nothing to fear.

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If, of course, God does not know the future and prophecy involves an extrapolation from current knowledge to a highly probable future event, as some philosophers and theologians have claimed (e.g., Clark Pinnock writes that some prophecies are "predictions based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present"<sup>6</sup>), it is within the realm of possibility that God could make a mistake. But if it is both true that He can make a mistake and that Deuteronomy 18:22 is normative for prophet status, then it is possible that Yahweh can speak a prophecy which does not come to pass and at the same time we would be perfectly correct in saying that Yahweh had not spoken, although our judgment would be false. In other words, in some possible world God does not speak for God. Hence, only if God has absolute knowledge of the future does Deuteronomy 18:22 make sense.<sup>7</sup>

## Omnipresent.

It is the Bible's explicit teaching that God is omnipresent:

Understand this today, therefore, and take it to heart: Yahweh is indeed, in heaven above as in earth beneath, he and no other (Deut. 4:39).

Yet will God really live with men on the earth? Why, the heavens and their own heavens cannot contain you [God]. How much less this house that I have built. (1 Kgs. 8:27)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For greater detail and more Scripture references than what is presented here, see William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 21–37; and Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 149–152.

<sup>6</sup> Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will*, eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 158.

<sup>7</sup> For a complete presentation of this argument from the Bible's test of a prophet, see Francis J. Beckwith, "Limited Omniscience and the Test for a Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36.3 (September 1993).

<sup>8</sup> This passage does not mean that the doctrine of the incarnation — that God became man in Jesus of Nazareth — is unbiblical. On the contrary, the passage is merely saying that God cannot be limited or contained by a finite reality, such as a temple. But the doctrine of the incarnation does not contradict that. The doctrine is saying that God *took on* a human nature in addition to his divine nature. The doctrine is *not* saying that God's being was limited or contained by human nature. Hence, the passage in question is

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The house I am building will be large, for our God is greater than all gods. Who would have the means to build him a house when the heavens and their own heavens cannot contain him? (2 Chron. 2:5,6).

Since the God who made the world and everything in it is himself Lord of heaven and earth, he does not make his home in shrines made by human hands. Nor is he dependent on anything that human hands can do for him, since he can never be in need of anything; on the contrary, it is he who gives everything—including life and breath—to everyone. From one single stock he not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be. And he did this so that all nations might seek the deity and, by feeling their way toward him, succeed in finding him. Yet in fact *he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist*, as indeed some of your own writers have said ... (Acts 17:24–28, emphasis mine).

Since God is not a physical being that takes up space, it would be wrong to think of Him as a sort of gas that fills up the universe. In that sense, He is *not everywhere*, since God is not a thing, like water or air, that can take up space. Rather, God is everywhere insofar as He is not limited by a spatio-temporal body, knows everything immediately without benefit of sensory organs, and sustains everything that exists. In others words, God's omnipresence logically follows from His omniscience, incorporeality, omnipotence, and role as creator and sustainer of the universe.

## Immutable and Eternal.

When a Christian says that God is immutable and eternal, he is saying that God is *unchanging* and has *always existed* as God throughout all eternity. There never was a time when God was not God. The author of Malachi (3:6) quotes God as saying, "I, Yahweh, do not change...." According to theologian Alan Gomes, "Biblically, the word 'counsel' refers to one's intention resolution, will, or purpose. God's counsels are not subject to change, fluctuation, or failure."<sup>9</sup> And for this reason, the Scriptures teach that God's purposes are "unalterable" (Heb. 6:17). God says in Isaiah (46:10b): "My purpose shall last; I will do whatever I choose." Moreover, the Scriptures tell us that there was never a time where God was not God. God is an eternal being:

Before the mountains were born, before the earth or the world came to birth, you were God from all eternity and for ever (Ps. 90:2).

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consistent with the doctrine of the incarnation. For a philosophical defense of this view, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Alan W. Gomes, "God in Man's Image: Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the 'Openness' of God," *Christian Research Journal* 10 (Summer 1987): 18–24.

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Yahweh is an everlasting God, he created the boundaries of the earth. He does not grow tired or weary, his understanding is beyond fathoming (Isa. 40:28).

For thus speaks the Most High, whose home is in eternity, whose name is holy (Isa. 57:15a).

Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity—however invisible—have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made (Rom. 1:20a).

To the eternal King, the undying, invisible and only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen (1 Tim. 1:17).

Although God certainly seems to change in response to how His creatures behave—such as in the case of the repenting Ninevites (see Jonah)—His nature remains the same. No matter how the Ninevites would have responded to Jonah's preaching, God's unchanging righteousness would have remained the same: He is merciful to the repentant and punishes the unrepentant. Hence, a God who is responsive to His creatures is certainly consistent with, and seems to be entailed by, an unchanging nature that is necessarily *personal*.

Although the Bible teaches that God is *eternally* God, Christian theologians and philosophers dispute whether He exists *in* time (the temporal eternity view) or *out of* time (the timeless eternity view).<sup>10</sup> The important point, however, is that the Bible teaches that God never changes and that He has always existed as God.

## Necessary and the Only God.

Since the God of the Bible possesses *all* power (*see* above), there cannot be any other God, for this would mean that two beings possess all power. That, of course, is patently absurd, since if a being possesses all of everything (in this case, power) there is, by definition, nothing left for anyone else.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Bible teaches that humans at times worship some beings *as if* these beings were really gods (1 Cor. 8:4–6), there is only one true and living God by nature:

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<sup>10</sup> See Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 119–138; and Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 73–83.

<sup>11</sup> It is true that *by* His power God *grants* power to His creatures. But unlike this hypothetical other God, their limited power is always subject to His unlimited power. Thus God “possesses” all power in that all other power comes from, and is under, His power.

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You yourselves are my witnesses—it is Yahweh who speaks—.... No god was formed before me, nor will be after me (Isa. 43:10).

Thus says Israel's king and his redeemer, Yahweh Sabaoth: I am the first and the last; there is no other god besides me. Who is like me? Let him stand up and speak, let him show himself and argue it out before me. Who from the very beginning foretold the future? Let them tell us what is yet to come. Have no fear, do not be afraid; have I told you and revealed it long ago? You are my witnesses, is there any other God besides me? There is no Rock; I know of none (Isa. 44:6–8).

Well then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: we know that idols do not really exist in the world and that there is no god but the One. And if there were things called gods, either in the sky or on the earth—where there certainly seem to be “gods” and “lords” in plenty—still for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:4–6).

For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).<sup>12</sup>

Since everything that exists depends on God, and God is unchanging and eternal, it follows that God cannot *not* exist. In other words, He is a *necessary* being, whereas everything else is contingent. Although there is no doubt that the Bible teaches that God is a necessary being, Christian philosophers and theologians do not all agree on the precise meaning of God's necessity.<sup>13</sup>

## Triune: One God, Three Persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity can be defined in the following way: In the nature of the one God there are three centers of consciousness, which we call persons, and these three are equal. Each human person is one *who* and one *what*; that is, there is one person per being. God is three *Whos* and one *What*; that is, there are three persons who are one Being. Although the term “trinity” is not found in the Bible, the doctrine is nevertheless taught there. (The word “Bible” is not found in the Bible either). “Trinity” is merely the term employed by theologians and church historians in order to describe the phenomena of God they find in the Bible.

The doctrine of the Trinity is arrived at in much the same way as a scientific theory. A scientific theory, for the most part, is a reasoned explanation of observed (or unobserved, in some cases) phenomena in the natural world. Analogously, the doctrine of the Trinity

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<sup>12</sup> Other passages include Isaiah 45:5,18,21,22; Jeremiah 10:10; John 17:3; and 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

<sup>13</sup> See Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 107–113; and Nash, *The Concept of God*, 106–13.



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is a reasoned explanation of what we observe to be the phenomena of God in the Bible. Just like saying “H<sub>2</sub>O is water” is not *adding* to water, saying “the God of the Bible is a Trinity” is not *adding* to what the Scripture teaches about God. This is why it is odd that Brigham Young University professor, Stephen E. Robinson, in *How Wide the Divide?*, criticizes some church creeds, which are belief-statements of what the Bible teaches, as being additions to the Bible:

As for [the Nicene creed] being a “summary” of the biblical view, my English professors made it quite clear that a summary may not introduce arguments or assertions not already found in the material being summarized. Show me ... *Trinity* in the New Testament and I have a problem, but there is no biblical passage or combination of passages that asserts what the Nicene Creed asserts. It is *not* a summary; it is an extrapolation.<sup>14</sup>

It is unclear what Robinson means. If he is saying that there is no passage or combination of passages in which the word “Trinity” appears, then he is correct. But since no one has ever claimed that the word “Trinity” appears in the Bible, Robinson attacks a straw man. On the other hand, if he is saying that there is no passage or combination of passages by which one may *infer* by the use of a sound argument the doctrine of the Trinity, then Robinson has an obligation to show us why the numerous scholars in church history who have argued for the Trinity are mistaken. He provides no such argument, but merely claims “that there is no biblical passage or combination of passages that asserts what the Nicene Creed asserts.” Thus, Robinson begs the question. Perhaps Robinson was not in English composition class the week when his professor reviewed the informal fallacies of straw man and begging the question.

Suppose a friend of Robinson, in conversation with the professor, made two claims: (1) Starbucks coffee is made from South American beans; and (2) South American beans are the best coffee beans. If Robinson were to infer from both these claims that “Starbucks coffee is made from the best coffee beans,” he would be inferring a correct conclusion. Would he be adding any new information to the two claims? Yes and No. No, in the sense that he would be only inferring from the claims the truth that is already present in the claims. He would not be creating a “new” truth. But yes, in the sense that he would be acquiring new knowledge he did not have before he drew the inference. In other words, Robinson would be more knowledgeable but there would be no new truth. That is to say, *nothing* is really being added to the two claims. The doctrine of the Trinity is arrived at in much the same way. It is an inference from truths already found in the Bible. The argument behind the doctrine can be put this way:

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen E. Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and An Evangelical in Conversation* by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 210.

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Reason 1: "The Bible teaches that there is only one God."

Reason 2: "The Bible teaches that there are three distinct persons called God, known as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Conclusion: "So, the three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are the one God."

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Let us take a look at how each reason is biblically justified.

## ***Premise #1: There Is Only One God***

With the exception of the Mormon Church, this premise is almost universally accepted by those who claim to be Christians. Since we have already seen above that the Bible teaches that there exists only one God, there is no reason to go over the point again.

## ***Premise #2: There Are Three Persons Called God***

### *The Father Is Called God*

That there is a person named the Father, who is called God, is acknowledged by a host of Biblical passages, such as 1 Corinthians 1:3, which reads: "May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace." (See also Romans 1:7; 1 Peter 1:17.) Because virtually no one disputes this point, this citation should suffice.

### *The Son Is Called God*

The Bible also asserts that Jesus of Nazareth is God. As the pre-incarnate Word (John 1:1–14), he is known in classical Christian theology as God the Son. In John 8:56–59 Jesus calls Himself "I am," equating himself with Jehovah God of the Old Testament (Exod. 3:14). Christ's participation in the creation of the cosmos necessitates that He is God (John 1:3 and Col. 1:16 cf. Isa. 44:24).

These three passages, when carefully compared with one another, clearly affirm the deity of Christ. The last passage, Isaiah 44:24, states that God *alone* made all things. The first and second passages both affirm that all things were made through Christ. Therefore, if God *alone* made all things, and all things were made through Christ, it logically follows that Christ is in fact God. The text of Scripture, and the force of logic, leaves us with no other option (see Appendix A).

The Apostle John calls both God and Jesus *the First and the Last* and *the Alpha and the Omega* (Rev. 1:18,17; 22:13), and hence equates Jesus with God. Other passages of the New Testament which implicitly or explicitly affirm Christ's deity include Mark 2:5–7, John

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20:28–29, John 1:1–14, and Col. 2:9. Questions about the relationship between the attributes of God and Christ's incarnation are addressed in chapter 2.

## *The Holy Spirit Is Called God*

The deity of the Holy Spirit has been questioned by many religious groups that claim to be Christian. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) state that the term "Holy Spirit" merely refers to the "invisible active force of the Almighty God that moves his servants to do his will."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit is not only not deity, he is also *not a person*; it is an impersonal force that God actively employs. That is, for the JWs, the "Holy Spirit" is to God what a phaser is to Star Trek's Captain Kirk: an impersonal "it" directed by a personal being.

Therefore, it is necessary that we first show that the Bible teaches the personhood of the Holy Spirit. A sufficient condition for being a personal being is that he or she be a "rational, self-conscious" being.<sup>16</sup> A being is a self-conscious agent if he or she is able to engage in knowing, thinking, and communicating. The following passages clearly show that in Scripture the Holy Spirit is considered a person:

"And when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he [the personal pronoun] will show the world how wrong it was about sin, and about who was in the right, and about judgment [communication].... But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learned [knowing and thinking]; and he will tell you of the things to come [communicating]" (John 16:8,13).

One day while they were offering worship to the Lord and keeping a fast, the Holy Spirit said [communicating], "I [first personal pronoun] want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

In both these passages the Holy Spirit is described as engaging in self-conscious person acts: He communicates, thinks, knows, and is described in personal pronouns (i.e., "he" and "I"). Furthermore, there are several other passages that portray the Holy Spirit as exhibiting attributes that are exclusive of personhood. For example, the Holy Spirit is described as consoling (Acts 9:31), helping us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26), forbidding (Acts 16:6,7), and able to be lied to (Acts 5:3). Moreover, the Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph. 4:30) and insulted (Heb. 10:29), and is said to possess a will (1 Cor. 12:11).

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<sup>15</sup> "Let God Be True," rev. (1952), 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, Deluxe 2nd edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 1338.

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The Bible also plainly teaches the *deity* of the Holy Spirit by attributing to him characteristics that are possessed only by God. For example, the Spirit is described as *Eternal*, having no beginning and no end (Heb. 9:14). Moreover, he is described as *Omniscient* (1 Cor. 2:10,11), *Sovereign* (1 Cor. 12:6,11), and *possessing the wrath of God* (Heb. 3:7–12). In addition, Jesus tells us that to sin against the Holy Spirit is to commit an *eternal* sin (Matt. 12:31,32). In Acts 5:3–5, the Holy Spirit is clearly called God:

“Ananias,” Peter said, “how can Satan have so possessed you *that you should lie to the Holy Spirit* and keep back part of the money from the Lord? While you still owned the land, wasn’t it yours to keep, and after you had sold it wasn’t the money yours to do with it as you liked? What put this scheme into your mind? *It is not to men that you have lied, but to God.*” (emphasis mine)

Peter is equating a lie to the Holy Spirit with lying to God. In other words, to lie to the Holy Spirit *is* to lie to God. And since one cannot lie to a force or to a nonpersonal object, this passage also teaches the personality of the Holy Spirit as well as his deity.

***Conclusion: The Three Persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — Are the One God.***

Let us review our argument for the Trinity. First, we showed that the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Second, we found that the Bible tells us that there are three persons who are called God. Hence, the inescapable conclusion: the three persons are the One God. Theologians have called this the Trinity.

To further buttress this argument, there are several places in the Bible in which the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly implied. For example, concerning *Christ’s Resurrection* we are told that the Father raised Jesus from the dead (1 Thess. 1:10), the Son raised Himself from the dead (John 2:19–22), and the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). Yet, we are told in Acts 17:30,31 that *God raised Jesus from the dead*. Therefore, either the Bible contradicts itself or the three persons are the one God.

In *Christ’s Great Commission* to preach the Gospel, he instructs his disciples to “go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matt. 28:19). It is important to note that the Greek word “name,” used in this verse, is singular (*onoma*). It does *not* say, “in the *names* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” but rather, it says, “in the *name*....” In other words, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct *persons*, have only one name. This clearly implies the Triune nature of God. Furthermore, the Trinity is revealed at *Christ’s incarnation* (Luke 1:35) and *baptism* (Matt. 3:16,17), in the *Apostolic benediction* (2 Cor. 13:13), and in *Christ’s own teachings* (John 14:26; 15:26).

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It should also be added that all the creeds of the great councils in Christian Church history which deal with the doctrine of God imply or affirm the Triune nature of God.<sup>17</sup>

## QUESTIONS

Space does not permit detailed responses to the many questions that may be raised against the position for which I have argued in this appendix. For this reason, I have chosen to answer two questions I believe most directly challenge my case, both of which are found in Mormon literature. In order to cover as much material as space permits, my answers will be brief. It should be noted, however, that these and other questions have been answered elsewhere and with greater detail. I will refer the reader to those sources.

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### **Aren't There Passages in Scripture Which Teach the Mormon View of God?**

Some Mormons cite passages in the Bible they believe prove two important doctrines of Mormon theology: (1) God has a body, and (2) many Gods exist.

#### *God Has a Body*

Mormons sometimes argue that the Bible teaches that God has a body of flesh and bone. They quote such passages as Deuteronomy 34:10 (“Since then, never has there been such a prophet in Israel as Moses, the man Yahweh knew *face to face*” [emphasis mine]) and Exodus 33:21–23 (“And Yahweh said, ‘Here is a place *beside me*. You must stand on the rock, and when my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with *my hand* while I pass by. Then I will take *my hand* away and you shall see the *back of me*; but *my face* is not to be seen’ ” [emphasis mine]). There are several problems with this use of the Bible.

First, the Mormons cannot cite these passages to defend their position, for these passages refer to the God of the Old Testament (Jehovah or Yahweh), a being who Mormons believe is the *pre-incarnate* Jesus, a god *before* he acquired a physical body. Second, there are no biblical passages that either explicitly or implicitly teach that God is by nature a physical being (that is, no passage says, “God has a body of flesh and bone”), although there are passages (see above) that explicitly teach that God is by nature a Spirit. Even Robinson admits that he does “not expect to find the [Mormon] view of the Godhead or the corporeality of God described clearly in the Old Testament,” nor does he “argue that it was once there and has been removed,” although he does “maintain,” and I believe

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<sup>17</sup> For a collection of creeds, see John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd. ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982). See also J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978); Howard F. Vos, *An Introduction to Church History*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); and James Orr, *Progress of Dogma* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1901).

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incorrectly, “that the Bible makes no unambiguous statement about the materiality or immateriality of the Father, and that we may therefore think of him either as having a body or as not having body without ‘contadicting’ the Bible.”<sup>18</sup>

Third, in light of both my second point as well as the force of the case I have already made for the God of classical theism being the God of Scripture, it seems that the passages Mormons cite to prove God’s corporeality should be seen as either the use of physical language by the biblical authors to convey a particular meaning of God’s actions in human terms or instances in which God temporarily assumes a physical form (i.e., theophany). After all, if God is creator and sustainer of everything else that exists as well as being omnipotent, immutable, and omnipresent, it is difficult to see how such a being could be physical by nature. For a physical being who is limited by time, space, and other forces (which the Mormons believe about God) cannot be the creator and sustainer of everything exists (since he didn’t create everything and doesn’t sustain it), omnipotent (since the universe is “bigger” than He is), immutable (since He *became* God), and omnipresent (since He is in a particular place in space and time).<sup>19</sup> (For a discussion on how these attributes relate to the incarnation of God the Son, see chapter 2.)

The classical concept of God seems to make better sense of the Biblical text than does the Mormon view. For if the Mormon argument were taken to its logical conclusion then we would have to conclude that God possesses some very odd physical characteristics in addition to the human ones Mormons are quite fond of embracing. For example, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit manifested himself as a dove (Matt. 3:16), that God “covers you with his feathers, and you find shelter underneath his wings” (Ps. 91:4), that “our God is a *consuming fire*” (Heb. 12:29; Deut. 4:24), that God is a literal shepherd (Ps. 23), and that Jesus is a door (John 10:9), a loaf of bread (John 6:35,51), and a vine (John 15:1–5).

## *Many Gods Exist*

Although we have already seen that the Bible teaches that there is no other being who is *by nature* God except for Jehovah (or Yahweh), there are some passages in the Bible, which Mormons sometimes cite, that seem to teach the existence of many gods. Take, for example, the following:

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<sup>18</sup> Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Norman L. Geisler makes a more detailed argument for the claim that the attributes of the classical God hang together as well as serve to best explain the portrait of God found in the Bible. See Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* For a classic treatment, see Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977 reprint of the 1797 edition).

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Yahweh said to Moses, "See, I make you as a god for Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother is to be your prophet" (Exod. 7:1).

God stands in the divine assembly, among the gods he dispenses justice (Ps. 82:1).

A careful look at these passages and similar ones, in their contexts, shows that they are *not* teaching that there are many gods by nature, but rather, that certain individuals (like kings and prophets) are looked upon by others as gods. It should be noted that in order to get Mormon theology out of the Bible you need much more than passages which say that some beings *were called* gods. After all, the devil is called "the god of this world," and clearly the Bible is not teaching that the devil is by nature divine. What you need are passages which state that there is more than one God by nature and that the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression is true, that human beings can achieve godhood like "all gods" who "have gone before you."<sup>20</sup> (See chapter 3.) In other words, what you need are passages that contradict what is already present in Scripture.

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## Isn't the Classical View the Result of Christians Using Greek Philosophy to Interpret the Bible?

Virtually every Mormon scholar answers this question in the affirmative.<sup>21</sup> According to Robinson, "Much traditional Christian theology has been wedded with Greek philosophical categories and assumptions."<sup>22</sup> Consider just the following, though much more can be said.<sup>23</sup>

First, it is not clear what Robinson means by philosophy or Greek philosophy. Surely he cannot mean that *philosophical reflection* has no place in theological reasoning, since his own assessment of traditional Christian theology is based on a philosophical judgment about the nature of knowledge and theology: Greek philosophy is bad for Christian

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Smith, Jr., in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., introduction and notes, B.H. Roberts, 2d rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Book Company, 1978), 6:306.

<sup>21</sup> Consider just the following citations, though many more could be marshalled: Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen C. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 42; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), 15; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 41; Blake Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 89; Kent Robson, "Omnis on the Horizon," *Sunstone* 8 (July–August 1983):21–23; Kent Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (May–June 1980): 23; and David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83:2 (1990): 105–107.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Richard A. Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983); and Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, 95–97.

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theology. Moreover, Robinson assumes the logical law of noncontradiction when he claims that Mormonism and traditional Christianity cannot both be correct theological systems in every way. Clearly, even if one believed that Mormonism is more biblical than traditional Christianity or vice versa, it cannot be that they are both correct theological systems in every way. Even though this assessment appeals to a logical principle first formulated by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, it would be wrong to dismiss it as “good Aristotelean thinking.” It is simply good thinking.

Perhaps Robinson is not attacking philosophy, but just Greek philosophy. But it is not clear what he means by “Greek” philosophy, since in one place he calls it “Platonic”<sup>24</sup> and in another place he calls it “Hellenistic.”<sup>25</sup> But this is very confusing, since Platonism can mean so many things. Robinson may be referring to the thought of the historical Plato, whose philosophy, some scholars argue, had changed in his later dialogues when compared to his earlier ones. It’s possible that Robinson may be thinking of the work of the neo-Platonists, including the pantheistic and mystical Plotinus, or he may mean the writings of St. Augustine, who employed Platonic language to explain many biblical ideas. Then again, Robinson may be referring to Philo, the Middle Platonists, or the Gnostics. Hellenistic thinking is even more diverse, since it includes the Platonists as well as numerous other philosophical systems including the materialism of Democritus as well as Aristotleanism in all its different versions.<sup>26</sup>

Second, aside from claiming that “the God of Christian ‘orthodoxy’ is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers,” Robinson does not explain why affinities with a pagan tradition would make one’s concept of God necessarily false. After all, Plato wrote about the Demiurge, a godlike being who shapes “the world out of pre-existent matter.”<sup>27</sup> He also believed that the soul pre-existed before it was born mortal.<sup>28</sup> Democritus held that “everything in the universe (including the human soul) is composed of different combinations of solid, eternal bits of matter called atoms.”<sup>29</sup> These beliefs are more consistent with Mormon theology than with classical Christian theology. Yet, it would seem odd as well as philosophically irresponsible that Robinson should reject Mormon theology on such a basis, since truth is truth regardless of where it is found. To dismiss something true simply because it has affinities with a pagan system is to commit the genetic fallacy. Mormon scholar and elder, John Widtsoe,

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<sup>24</sup> Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of these schools of thought, see Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World*; and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World*, 31.



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recognized this: "A rational theology is founded on truth, on all truth ... and 'A truth has no end.' In building a philosophy of life, a man, therefore, cannot say that some truth must be considered and other truth rejected. Only on the basis of all truth, that is, all true knowledge can his religion be built..."<sup>30</sup> So, whether one's theology is "Platonic" or not is irrelevant; the question is whether it is *true*.<sup>31</sup>

Third, the argument can be made that although Christian thinkers have used and continue to use the language of philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, to convey certain biblical truths, it is the Bible that reshaped Greek thought rather than the other way around. According to the church historian J.N.D. Kelly, "the classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God the maker of heaven and earth." The reason for this is simple: "The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the Church and paganism." Kelly goes on to say that "the doctrine of one god, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premiss of the Christian faith. Inherited from Judaism, it was her bulwark against pagan polytheism, Gnostic emanationism and Marcionite dualism."<sup>31</sup> Citing the work of Etienne Gilson, Norman L. Geisler writes:

[T]he Greeks never identified their ultimate metaphysical principle with God. This was the unique Judeo-Christian contribution to philosophy of religion. Thus, the reverse of the traditional objection is the case. It was the Judeo-Christian concept of self-existent, pure actuality (based on Exodus 3:14) that transformed Greek metaphysics.<sup>32</sup>

Reformed philosopher Cornelius Van Til provides an example, contrasting the unchangeableness (or "immutability") of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover (a "God" who does not interact with Its creatures) with the "immutability" of the God of the Bible:

[S]urely in the case of Aristotle the immutability of the divine being was due to its emptiness and internal immobility. No greater contrast is thinkable between the unmoved *noesis noeseos* of Aristotle and the Christian God.

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<sup>30</sup> John Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1929), 8, as quoted in Floyd Ross, "Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7.1 (January–February, 1982): 19.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 83, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 83, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, 96. The work of Gilson's cited by Geisler is *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), chapter 1.

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This appears particularly from the fact that the Bible does not hesitate to attribute all manner of activity to God.... Herein exactly lies the glory of the Christian doctrine of God, that the unchangeable one is the one in control of the change of the universe.<sup>33</sup>

So, even though both the classical Christian concept of God and Aristotle's God are "immutable," it is the Bible's testimony by which the Christian thinker ought to interpret God's immutability. In fact, many of the heresies in the early church are the result of trying to remake Christian theology so that it squares with certain Hellenistic philosophies.<sup>34</sup> Ironically, some rejected doctrines, such as the eternality of matter and the pre-existence of the soul, whose origin can be traced to pagan philosophies, are consistent with certain aspects of the *Mormon* worldview. Consider the comments of philosopher Paul Copan concerning some early church fathers who, like present-day Mormons, believed that matter is eternal:

In my mind, it seems doubtful that an un-hellenized Jewish student of the [Old Testament] would have formulated something analogous to a Middle Platonist cosmology on his own. What is clear is that these church fathers were strongly influenced by (Middle-) Platonism, which held firmly to belief in eternal formless matter. Their belief in God as an artificer was not due to Scripture's ambiguity on the topic but because of the strength of the philosophical grid within which they operated.<sup>35</sup>

Fourth, as we have seen, there is no doubt that Christian scholars through the centuries have used philosophical terminology and concepts to convey certain biblical and theological truths. And there is no doubt that Mormons have done so as well.<sup>36</sup> The question, however, is whether these truths are being accurately conveyed by the terminology and concepts. For example, the language of "rights" does not appear in the Scriptures, for such language has its origin in the political philosophy of such Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and John Stuart Mill. Nevertheless, one could say that the Bible teaches that rights exist. For instance, the

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<sup>33</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 210–11, as quoted in Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," 30.

<sup>34</sup> See Paul Copan, "Is Creation Ex Nihilo A Post-Biblical Invention?: An Examination of Ferhard May's Proposal," *Trinity Journal* 17NS (1996); Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; and Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," 28–29.

<sup>35</sup> Copan, "Is Creation Ex Nihilo A Post-Biblical Invention?," 92.

<sup>36</sup> For example, some thinkers, including Mormons, have noticed strong conceptual similarities between Mormon theism and other finite theisms and philosophical positions, such as nominalism, classical materialism, and process philosophy. See, for example, McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*; McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*; David Lamont Paulsen, *The Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1975); Ross, "Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought;" and Garland E. Tickmeyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Autumn 1984).

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command not to steal implies a “right to property,” and the command not to murder implies a “right to life.” Thus, it would not be wrong for a Christian to say that the Bible teaches a “right to property,” even though such a right is not literally spelled out in Scripture. In other words, the concept of rights is in Scripture though the language of rights is not.

Many Mormons are quite active in the Right to Life movement. In fact, I have worked with Mormons on behalf of the unborn, and some Mormons have used my book, *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights* (Baker, 1993), in defending the prolife position. Although rights language does not literally appear in the Bible, Robinson surely would not deny that the Bible teaches that the unborn have a right to life.

Consequently, if Christians use the language of philosophy to convey what they believe to be the biblical concept of God, they are justified in doing so *if* they have accurately conveyed what the Bible teaches about the nature of God. I believe I have met this burden by showing that the classical concept of God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Beckwith, F., & Parrish, S. (1997). *See the gods fall: four rivals to Christianity* (pp. 257–279). Joplin, MO: College Press.