

Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*

The doctrine of God is the central point for much of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived. It lends a particular coloration to one's style of ministry and philosophy of life.

Problems or difficulties on two levels make it evident that there is a need for a correct understanding of God. First is the popular or practical level. In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips has pointed out some common distorted understandings of God. Some people think of God as a kind of celestial policeman who looks for opportunities to pounce upon erring and straying persons. A popular country song enunciates this view: "God's gonna get you for that; God's gonna get you for that. Ain't no use to run and hide, 'cuz he knows where you're at!" Insurance companies, with their references to "acts of God" – always catastrophic occurrences – seem to have a powerful, malevolent being in mind. The opposite view, that God is grandfatherly, is also prevalent. Here God is conceived of as an indulgent, kindly old gentleman who would never want to detract from humans' enjoyment of life. These and many other false conceptions of God need to be corrected, if our spiritual lives are to have any real meaning and depth.

Problems on a more sophisticated level also point out the need for a correct view of God. The biblical understanding of God has often been problematic. In the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity created special tension and debate. While that particular topic has not totally ceased to present difficulty, other issues have become prominent in our day. One of these concerns God's relationship to the creation. Is he so separate and removed from the creation (transcendent) that he does not work through it and hence nothing can be known of him from it? Or is he to be found within human society and the processes of nature? Specific questions which have arisen in connection with this issue are: Does God work through the process of evolution? and Must God's transcendence be thought primarily in spatial categories? Another major issue pertains to the nature of God. Is he fixed or unchanging in essence? Or does he grow and develop like the rest of the universe, as process theology contends? And then there are the matters raised by the theology of hope, which has suggested that God is to be thought of primarily in relationship to the future rather than the past. These and other issues call for clear thinking and careful enunciation of the understanding of God.

Many errors have been made in attempts to understand God, some of them opposite in nature. One is an excessive analysis, in which God is submitted to a virtual autopsy. The attributes of God are laid out and classified in a fashion similar to the approach taken in an anatomy textbook. It is possible to make the study of God an excessively speculative matter; and in that case the speculative conclusion itself, instead of a closer relationship with him, becomes the end. This should not be so. ***Rather, the study of God's nature should be seen as a means to a more accurate understanding of him and hence a closer personal relationship with him.*** Then there need not be an eschewing of inquiry into, and reflection upon, what God is like. And then there will be no temptation to slip into the opposite error: so generalizing the conception of God that our response becomes merely a warm feeling toward what Phillips called the "oblong blur" (God unfocused), or what some have called "belief in the great whatever." Inquiry into the nature of God, then, should be neither a speculative pressing beyond what God has revealed, nor a mystical leap toward a hazy, undefined something.