

The Christian Conception of God
by R.A. Torrey (1856-1928)

God is light.

1 John 1:5

God is love.

1 John 4:8, 16

With God all things are possible.

Matthew 19:26

His understanding has no limit.

Psalm 147:5

We are to consider again today the Christian conception of God. We have seen that God is spirit, that God is a Person and that God has a personal interest and an active hand in the affairs of men today, that He sustains, governs and cares for the world He has created, and that He shapes the whole present history of the world.

1. THE INFINITE PERFECTION OF GOD

The next thing to be noted about the Christian conception of God is that God is perfect and infinite in all His intellectual and moral attributes and in power.

1. First of all, fix your attention on our first text: "God is light." These three words form a marvelously beautiful and overwhelmingly impressive statement of the truth. They set forth the Absolute Holiness and Perfect Wisdom of God. The words need rather to be meditated on than to be expounded. "In Him there is no darkness at all." That is to say, in Him there is no darkness of error, no darkness of ignorance, no darkness of sin, no darkness of moral imperfection or of intellectual imperfection of any kind. The three words, "God is light," form one of the most beautiful, one of the most striking, and one of the most stupendous statements of truth that ever was penned.

2. To come to things more specific, the God of the Bible is omnipotent. This great truth comes out again and again in the Word of God. One direct statement of this great truth especially, striking because of the connection in which it is found, occurs in Jeremiah 32:17, 27, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." Here it is Jeremiah who makes the statement, but in the 27th verse it is the LORD Himself who says: "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind.

Is anything too hard for me?"

In Job 42:2, we read these words of Job, when at last he has been brought to see and to recognize the true nature of the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted." In Matthew 19:26, our Lord Jesus

says: "With God all things are possible." Taking these passages together, we are plainly taught by our Lord Himself, and by others, that God can do all things, that nothing is too hard for Him, that all things are possible with Him. In a word, that God is omnipotent. A very impressive passage setting forth this same great truth is Psalm 33:6-9, "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."

Here we see God by the mere utterance of His voice bringing to pass anything that He desires to be brought to pass. We find this same lofty conception of God in the very first chapter of the Bible, that chapter that so many people who imagine themselves scholarly are telling us is outgrown and not up to date, yet which contains some of the sublimest utterances that ever were written, unmatched by anything that any philosopher or scientist or platform orator is saying today. The very first words of that chapter read: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1), a description of the origin of things that has never been matched for simplicity, excellency and depth; and two verses farther down, in the third verse, we read: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." These words need no comment.

There is here an excellency of thought in the setting forth of the omnipotence of God's mere word before which any truly intelligent and alert soul will stand in wonder and awe. There is nothing in poetry or in philosophical dissertation, ancient or modern, that for one moment can be put in comparison with these sublime words. Over and over again, it is brought out in the Word of God that all nature is absolutely subject to His will. For example, we see this in Psalm 107:25-29, "For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed."

Another description of a similar character is found in Nahum 1:3-6, "The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him." What a picture we have here of the omnipotence and awful majesty of God! Not only is nature represented as being absolutely subject to God's will and word, but men also are represented as being absolutely subject to His will and

word. For example, we read in James 4:12-15, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor? Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"

Happy is the man who voluntarily subjects himself to God's will and Word, but whether we voluntarily subject ourselves to God's will and Word or not, we are subject to His will and Word whether we believe it or not. The angels also are subject to His will and Word (Hebrews 1:13, 14), and even Satan himself, although entirely against his own will, is absolutely subject to the will and Word of God, as is evident from Job 1:12 and Job 2:6.

The exercise of God's omnipotence is limited by His own wise and holy and loving will. God can do anything, but will do only that which infinite wisdom and holiness and love dictate. This comes out, for example, in Isaiah 59:1, 2, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

3. The God of the Bible is also omniscient. In 1 John 3:20, we read, "He [God] knows everything." Turning to the Old Testament, in Psalm 147:5, we read, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." The literal translation of the last clause of this passage is, "Of his understanding there is no number." In these passages it is plainly declared that "God knows everything" and that "His understanding is infinite." In Job 37:16, Elihu, the messenger of God, is represented as saying that the LORD is "perfect in knowledge." In Acts 15:18, we read that God knows all His works and all things from the beginning of the world. Known to Him is everything from the vastest to the minutest detail. In Psalm 147:4, we are told, "He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name." While in Matthew 10:29, we are told that not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from the will of God. The stars in all their stupendous magnitude and the sparrows in all their insignificance are all equally in His mind.

We are told further that everything has a part in His purpose and plan. In Acts 3:17, 18, the Apostle Peter says of the crucifixion of our Lord, the wickedest act in all the history of the human race: "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer." In Acts 2:23, Peter declared on the day of Pentecost (although the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was the wickedest act in all history) that, nevertheless, the Lord Jesus was "handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge." According to the Psalmist (Psalm 76:10), God takes the acts of the wickedest men into His

plans and makes the wrath of men praise Him, and the remainder of wrath He restrains. Even the present war [World War I] with all its horrors, with all its atrocities, with all its abominations and all its nameless wickednesses, was foreknown of God and taken into His own gracious plan of the ages; and He will make every event in this war, even the most shocking things designed by the vilest conspiracy of unprincipled men, utterly inhuman and beastly and devil-inspired men, work together for good to those who love God, for those who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

The whole plan of the ages, not merely of the centuries, but of the immeasurable ages of God, and every man's part in it, has been known to God from all eternity. This is made very clear in Ephesians 1:9-12,

He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.
And in Ephesians 3:4-9, we read,

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. God has no after-thoughts. Everything is seen, known, purposed, and planned from the outset. Well may we exclaim: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33). God knows from all eternity what He will do through all eternity.

4. God is also absolutely and infinitely holy. This is a point of central and fundamental importance in the Bible conception of God. It comes out in our first text: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." When he wrote these words John gave them as the summary of "This is the message we have heard from Him [God]" (1 John 1:5). In Isaiah 6:3, in the vision of the LORD which was given to Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died, the "seraphim," or "burning ones," burning in their own intense holiness, are represented as standing before the LORD with covered faces and covered feet, and constantly crying, "Holy,

holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty." And in 1 Peter 1:16, God cries to us, "Be holy, because I am holy."

This thought of the infinite and awe-inspiring holiness of God pervades the entire Bible. It underlies everything in the Bible. The entire Mosaic system is built on and about this fundamental and central truth. Its system of washings; the divisions of the tabernacle; the divisions of the people into ordinary Israelites, Levites, priests and high priests, who were permitted different degrees of approach to God under strictly defined conditions; insistence on sacrifices of blood as the necessary medium of approach to God; God's directions to Moses in Exodus 3:5, to Joshua in Joshua 5:15; the punishment of Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:16-26; the strict orders to Israel in regard to approaching Sinai when the LORD came down on it; the doom of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16:1-33; and the destruction of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3--all these were intended to teach, emphasize, and burn into the minds and hearts of the Israelites the fundamental truth that God is holy, unapproachably holy.

The truth that God is holy is the fundamental truth of the Bible, of the Old Testament and the New Testament, of both the Jewish religion and the Christian religion. It is the preeminent factor in the Christian conception of God. There is no fact in the Christian conception of God that needs more to be emphasized in our day than the fact of the absolute, unqualified, and uncompromising holiness of God. That is the chief note lacking in Christian Science, Occultism, Buddhism, New Thought, the New Theology, and all the base but boasted cults of the day. That great truth underlies those fundamental doctrines of the Bible--the Atonement by Shed Blood, and Justification by Faith. The doctrine of the holiness of God is the keystone in the arch of Christian truth.

5. God is also love. This truth is declared in one of our texts. The words, "God is love," are found twice in the same chapter (1 John 4:8, 16). This truth is essentially the same truth as that "God is light" and "God is holy," for the very essence of true holiness is love, and "light" is "love" and "love" is "light."

6. Furthermore, God is not only perfect in His intellectual and moral attributes and in power, He is also omnipresent. This thought of God comes out in both the Old Testament and the New. In Psalm 139:7-10, we read: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." There is no place where one can flee from God's presence, for God is everywhere. This great truth is set forth in a remarkable way in Jeremiah 23:23, 24, "'Am I only a God nearby,' declares the LORD, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the LORD."

We have seen that God has a local habitation, that there is a place where He exists and manifests Himself in a way in which He does not manifest Himself everywhere; but while we insist on that clearly revealed truth, we must also never lose sight of the fact that God is everywhere. We find this same truth set forth by Paul in his sermon to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill, Acts 17:24-28,

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

>From these passages we see that God is everywhere. He is in all parts of the universe and near each individual. In Him each individual lives and moves and has his being.

7. There is one other thought in the Christian conception of God that needs to be placed alongside of His omnipresence, and that is His eternity. God is eternal. His existence had no beginning and will have no ending; He always was, always is, and always shall be. God is not only everywhere present in space, He is everywhere present in time. This conception of God appears constantly in the Bible. We are told in Genesis 21:33 that Abraham called "upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God." In Isaiah 40:28 we read this description of the LORD: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom." Here again He is called "The everlasting God." Habakkuk, 1:12, sets forth the same conception of God. He says, "O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One."

The Psalmist gives us the same representation of God in Psalm 90:2, 4, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night." We have the same representation of God in Psalm 102:24-27, "I said: 'Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days; your years go on through all generations. In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.'"

The very name of God, His covenant name, LORD, sets forth His eternity. He is the eternal "I am," the One who is, was, and ever shall be (Exodus 3:14, 15).

II. THERE IS ONE GOD

One more fact about the Christian conception of God remains to be mentioned, and that is: There is but one God. The unity of God comes out again and again in both the Old Testament and the New. For example, we read in Deuteronomy 4:35, "the LORD is God; besides Him there is no other." And in Deuteronomy 6:4 we read, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Turning to the New Testament in 1 Timothy 2:5, we read, "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." And in Mark 12:29 our Lord Jesus Himself says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

But we must bear in mind the character of the Divine Unity. It is clearly revealed in the Bible that in this Divine Unity, in this one Godhead, there is a multiplicity of persons. This comes out in a variety of ways.

1. First of all, the Hebrew word translated "one" in these various passages denotes a compound unity, not a simple unity (1 Corinthians 3:6-8; 12:13; John 17:22, 23; Galatians 3:28).
2. In the second place, the Old Testament word most frequently used for God is a plural noun. The Hebrew grammarians and lexicographers tried to explain this by saying that it was the "pluralis majestatis," (Greek) but the very simple explanation is that the Hebrews, in spite of their intense monotheism, used a plural name for God because there is a plurality of persons in the one Godhead.
3. More striking yet, as a proof of the plurality of persons in the one Godhead, is the fact that God Himself uses plural pronouns in speaking of Himself. For example, in the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1:26, we read that God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." And in Genesis 11:7, He is further recorded as saying: "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." In Genesis 3:22, we read: "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'" And in that wonderful vision to which reference has already been made, in which Isaiah saw the LORD, we read this statement of Isaiah's, 6:8, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"
4. Another illustration of the plurality of persons in the one Godhead in the Old Testament conception of God is found in Zechariah 2:10-11, where the LORD speaks of Himself as sent by the LORD in these words: "'Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the LORD. 'Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.'" Here the LORD clearly speaks of Himself as sent by the LORD, thus clearly indicating two persons in the Deity.

5. Another indication of the plurality of persons in the Godhead in the Old Testament conception of God is found in the fact that "the Angel of the LORD" in the Old Testament is at the same time distinguished from, and identified with, the LORD.

6. This same thought of the plurality of persons in the one Godhead is brought out in John 1:1, where we reach the very climax of this thought. Here we are told in so many words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When we study the Deity of Christ and the Personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit, we shall see that the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit are clearly designated as Divine beings and at the same time distinguished from one another, and from God the Father. So it is clear that in the Christian conception of God, while there is but one God, there is a multiplicity of persons in the one Godhead.

This conception of God runs through the whole Bible, is from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. It is one of the many marvelous illustrations of the Divine unity of the Book. How wonderful is this Book, in that the unity of thought on this very profound doctrine pervades it throughout! It is a clear indication that the Bible is the Word of God. It contains a profounder philosophy than is found in any human philosophy, ancient or modern, and the only way to account for it is that God Himself is the author of this incomparable philosophy. What a wondrous God we have! How we ought to meditate on His Person! With what awe, and, at the same time, with what delight we should come into His presence and bow before Him in adoring contemplation of the wonder and beauty and majesty and glory of His being!