

WRITINGS OF JAMES M BOICE

by James M. Boice

A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by James M. Boice, compiled for study and devotional reading.

3 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. 00.00. Library/Content
2. S. On Knowing God
3. S. The True God

00.00. Library/Content

Boice, James M. - Library

S. Boice, James M. - On Knowing God

S. Boice, James M. - The True God

S. On Knowing God

On Knowing God by James Montgomery Boice

One hot night in the early years of the Christian era a sophisticated and highly educated man named Nicodemus came to see a young rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. The man wanted to discuss reality. So he began the conversation with a statement of where his own personal search for truth had taken him. He said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (John 3:2). With the exception of the word Rabbi, which was merely a polite form of address, the first words were a claim to considerable knowledge. Nicodemus said, "We know." Then he began to rehearse the things he knew (or thought he knew) and with which he wanted to begin the discussion: (1) that Jesus was continuing to do many miracles; (2) that these miracles were intended to authenticate him as a teacher sent from God; and that, therefore, (3) Jesus was one to whom he should listen. Unfortunately for Nicodemus, Jesus replied that such an approach to knowledge was wrong and that Nicodemus could therefore know nothing until he had first experienced an inward, spiritual transformation. "You must be born anew," Jesus told him (John 3:7).

Nicodemus's subsequent remarks showed at least an implicit recognition of his lack of knowledge in important things. For he began to ask questions, "How can a man be born when he is old? How can this be?" (John 3:4, John 3:9). Jesus taught him that true knowledge begins with spiritual knowledge, knowledge of God, and that this is to be found in God's revelation of himself in the Bible and in Jesus' own life and work, the work of the Savior.

Contemporary Crisis This ancient conversation is relevant to our day. For the problems and frustrations that Nicodemus faced nearly two thousand years ago are with us in our time also. Nicodemus possessed knowledge, but he lacked the key to that knowledge, the element that would put it all together. He knew certain things, but his search for truth had brought him to the point of personal crisis. That sounds familiar. Much is known in our time. In the sense of information or technical knowledge, more is known today than at any previous time in history. Yet the kind of knowledge that integrates information and thereby gives meaning to life is strangely absent. The nature of the problem can be seen by examining the two almost exclusive approaches to knowledge today. On the one hand there is the idea that reality can be known by reason alone. That approach is not new, of course. It is the approach developed by Plato and therefore assumed by much of the Greek and Roman thought after him. In Plato's philosophy, knowledge became knowledge of the eternal and unalterable essence of things, not merely knowledge of changeable phenomena. That is, it was a knowledge of forms, ideas or ideals. Our nearest equivalent would be the so-called laws of science. On the surface, this approach to knowledge through the exercise of supposedly impartial reason seems desirable, for it is productive — as the technical advances of our day often indicate. But it is not without problems. For one thing, it is highly impersonal knowledge and, as some would say, highly depersonalizing. In this approach reality becomes a thing (an equation, law or, worse yet, mere data), and men and women become things also, with

the inevitable result that they may therefore be manipulated like any other raw material for whatever ends. An example is the manipulation of poorer nations by rich nations for the sake of the rich nation's expanding economy, that is, the injustice analyzed and rightly condemned by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital* and other writings. Another example is that of communism itself which, in spite of its desire to better the lot of the masses, actually manipulates them for ideological ends. On the personal level there is the science of behavioral technology and the frightening teaching of a man like B. F. Skinner of Harvard University who claims that individuals must be conditioned scientifically for the good of society.

There is also another problem with the attempt to know reality through reason alone. The approach does not give an adequate basis for ethics. It can tell us what is, but it cannot tell us what ought to be. Consequently, the extraordinary technical advances of our time are accompanied by an extreme and debilitating moral permissiveness which promises in time to break down even the values and system that made both the advances and the permissiveness possible. Interestingly, the same thing was also true of the Greek philosophers, who, although they were men of great intellect, on occasion led depraved lives. In recent years the failures of the rationalistic system have impressed themselves on a new generation with the result that many in the Western world have abandoned reason in order to seek reality through emotional experience. In the ancient world, in reaction to the impersonality of Greek philosophy, this was done through intense participation in the rites of the mystery religions. These promised an emotional union with some god, induced by lighting, music, incense or perhaps by drugs. In our time the same approach is surfacing through the drug cult, rediscovery of the Eastern religions, Transcendental Meditation and other supposedly "mind-expanding" practices. This modern approach also has several problems. First, the experience does not last. It is transient. Each attempt to achieve reality through emotional experience promises some sort of "high." But the "high" is inevitably followed by a "low," with the additional problem that increasingly intense stimuli seem to be necessary to repeat the experience. Eventually this ends either in self-destruction or acute disillusionment. A second problem is that the approach to reality through emotion does not satisfy the mind. Promoters of these experiences, particularly drug experiences, speak of a more intense perception of reality that results from them. But their experience has no rational content. The part of the human being that wants to think about such things and understand them is unsatisfied. The result of this situation is a crisis in the area of knowledge today, as in ancient times. Many thinking people quite honestly do not know where to turn. The rationalistic approach is impersonal and amoral. The emotionalistic approach is without content, transient, and also often immoral.

"Is this the end?" many are asking. "Are there no other possibilities? Is there not a third way?" A Third Way At this point Christianity comes forward with the claim that there is a third way and that this way is strong at precisely those points where the other approaches are lacking. The basis of this third approach is that there is a God who has created all things and who himself gives his creation meaning. Further, we can know him. This is an exciting and satisfying possibility. It is exciting because it involves the possibility of contact between the individual and God, however insignificant the individual may appear in his or her own eyes or in the eyes of others. It is satisfying because it is knowledge not of an idea or thing but of a supremely personal Being, and because it issues in a profound change of conduct. This is what the Bible means when it says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). And, "The fear of the LORD

is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Proverbs 9:10).

Here, however, we must be clear about what we mean when we speak of “knowing God,” for many common uses of the word know are inadequate to convey the biblical understanding. There is a use of the word know by which we mean “awareness.” In this sense we say that we know where somebody lives or that we know that certain events are transpiring somewhere in the world. It is a kind of knowledge, but it does not involve us personally. It has little bearing on our lives. This is not what the Bible means when it speaks of knowing God.

Another use of the word know means “knowing about” something or someone. It is knowledge by description. For instance, we may say that we know New York City or London or Moscow. By that we mean that we are aware of the geographic layout of the city, we know the names of the streets, where the major stores are and other facts. We may have gained our knowledge of the city by actually living there. But it is also possible that we may have gained our knowledge by reading books. In the religious realm this type of knowledge would apply to theology which, although important, is not the whole or even the heart of religion. The Bible tells us much about God that we should know. (In fact, much of what follows in this book is directed to our need for such knowledge.) But this is not enough. Even the greatest theologians can be confused and can find life meaningless.

True knowledge of God is also more than knowledge by experience. To go back to the earlier example, it would be possible for someone who has lived in a particular city to say, “But my knowledge is not book knowledge. I have actually lived there. I have walked the streets, shopped in the stores, attended the theaters. I have experienced the city. I really know it.” To this we would have to reply that the knowledge involved is certainly a step beyond anything we have talked about thus far, but still it is not the full idea of knowledge in the Christian sense.

Suppose, for instance, that a person should go out into a starlit field in the cool of a summer evening and gaze up into the twinkling heavens and come away with the claim that in that field he has come to know God. What do we say to such a person? The Christian does not have to deny the validity of that experience, up to a point. It is certainly a richer knowledge than mere awareness of God (“There is a God”) or mere knowledge about him (“God is powerful and is the Creator of all that we see and know”). Still, the Christian insists, this is less than what the Bible means by true knowledge. For when the Bible speaks of knowing God it means being made alive by God in a new sense (being “born again”), conversing with God (so that he becomes more than some great “Something” out there, so that he becomes a friend), and being profoundly changed in the process.

All this is leading us, step by step, to a better understanding of the word knowledge. But still another qualification is needed. According to the Bible even when the highest possible meaning is given to the word know, knowing God is still not merely knowing God. For it is never knowing God in isolation. It is always knowing God in his relationship to us. Consequently, according to the Bible, knowledge of God takes place only where there is also knowledge of ourselves in our deep spiritual need and where there is an accompanying acceptance of God’s gracious provision for our need through the work of Christ and the application of that work to us by God’s Spirit. Knowledge of God takes place in the context of Christian piety, worship and devotion. The Bible teaches that this knowledge of God takes place (where it does take place), not so much because we search

after God — because we do not — but because God reveals himself to us in Christ and in the Scriptures.

J. I. Packer writes of this knowledge, “Knowing God involves, first, listening to God’s word and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it, in application to oneself; second, noting God’s nature and character, as His word and works reveal it; third, accepting His invitations, and doing what He commands; fourth, recognising, and rejoicing in, the love that He has shown in thus approaching one and drawing one into this divine fellowship.”¹

Why Bother?

“But just a minute,” someone might argue. “All that sounds complicated and difficult. In fact, it seems too difficult. If that’s what is involved, I want no part of it. Give me one good reason why I should bother.” That is a fair objection, but there is an adequate answer to it. In fact, there are several.

First, knowledge of God is important, for only through the knowledge of God can an individual enter into what the Bible terms eternal life. Jesus indicated this when he prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). At first glance even this does not seem important enough to the “natural man” to make him want to know God at all costs. But this is because, lacking eternal life, he cannot begin to understand what he is missing. He is like a person who says that he does not appreciate good music. His dislike does not make the music worthless; it simply indicates an inadequate grounds of appreciation in him. So also those who do not appreciate God’s offer of life indicate that they do not have the capability of understanding or valuing what they are lacking. The Bible says, “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

It might help such a person to be told that the promise of eternal life is also the promise of being able to live life fully as an authentic human being. This is true, but it is also true that eternal life means more than this. It means coming alive, not only in a new but also in an eternal sense. It is what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

Second, knowledge of God is important because, as pointed out earlier, it also involves knowledge of ourselves. Our day is the day of the psychiatrist and psychologist. Men and women spend billions of dollars annually in an attempt to know themselves, to sort out their psyches. Certainly there is need for psychiatry, particularly Christian psychiatry. But this alone is inadequate in the ultimate sense if it does not bring individuals into a knowledge of God against which their own worth and failures may be estimated. On the one hand, knowledge of ourselves through the knowledge of God is humbling. We are not God nor are we like him. He is holy; we are unholy. He is good; we are not good. He is wise; we are foolish. He is strong; we are weak. He is loving and gracious; we are filled with hate and with selfish affectations. Therefore, to know God is to see ourselves as Isaiah did: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). Or as Peter did: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). On the other hand, such knowledge of ourselves through the knowledge of God is also reassuring and

satisfying. For in spite of what we have become we are still God's creation and are loved by him. No higher dignity has been given to women and men than the dignity the Bible gives them.

Third, the knowledge of God also gives us knowledge of this world: its good and its evil, its past and its future, its purpose and its impending judgment at the hand of God. In one sense, this is an extension of the point just made. If knowledge of God gives us knowledge of ourselves, it also inevitably gives us knowledge of the world; for the world is mostly the individuals who compose it written large. On the other hand the world stands in a special relationship to God, in its sin and rebellion as well as in its value as a vehicle for his purposes. It is a confusing place until we know the God who made it and learn from him why he made it and what is to happen to it. A fourth reason the knowledge of God is important is that it is the only way to personal holiness. This is a goal that the natural man hardly desires. But it is essential nonetheless. Our problems derive not only from the fact that we are ignorant of God but also from the fact that we are sinful. We do not want the good. At times we hate it, even when the good is to our benefit. The knowledge of God leads to holiness. To know God as he is, is to love him as he is and to want to be like him. This is the message of one of the Bible's most important verses about the knowledge of God. Jeremiah, the ancient prophet of Israel, wrote, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practice steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23-24). Jeremiah also wrote about a day when those who don't know God will come to know him. "And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

Finally, the knowledge of God is important in that it is only through a knowledge of God that the church and those who compose it can become strong. In ourselves we are weak, but as Daniel wrote, "The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action" (Daniel 11:32).

We do not have a strong church today, nor do we have many strong Christians. We can trace the cause to an acute lack of sound spiritual knowledge. Why is the church weak? Why are individual Christians weak? It is because they have allowed their minds to become conformed to the "spirit of this age," with its mechanistic, godless thinking. They have forgotten what God is like and what he promises to do for those who trust him. Ask an average Christian to talk about God. After getting past the expected answers you will find that his god is a little god of vacillating sentiments. He is a god who would like to save the world, but who cannot. He would like to restrain evil, but somehow he finds it beyond his power. So he has withdrawn into semi-retirement, being willing to give good advice in a grandfatherly sort of way, but for the most part he has left his children to fend for themselves in a dangerous environment.

Such a god is not the God of the Bible. Those who know their God perceive the error in that kind of thinking and act accordingly. The God of the Bible is not weak; he is strong. He is all-mighty. Nothing happens without his permission or apart from his purposes — even evil. Nothing disturbs or puzzles him. His purposes are always accomplished. Therefore, those who know him rightly act with boldness, assured that God is with them to accomplish his own desirable purposes in their lives. Do we need an example? We can find no better one than Daniel. Daniel and his friends were

godly men in the godless environment of ancient Babylon. They were slaves, good slaves. They served the court. But difficulty arose when they refused to obey anything in opposition to the commands of the true God whom they knew and worshiped. When Nebuchadnezzar's great statue was set up and all were required to fall down and worship it, Daniel and his friends refused. When prayer to anyone but King Darius was banned for thirty days, Daniel did as he always did: he prayed to God three times a day before an open window.

What was wrong with these men? Had they fooled themselves about the consequences? Did they think that their failure to comply would go unseen? Not at all. They knew the consequences, but they also knew God. They were able to be strong, trusting God to have his way with them whether it meant salvation or destruction in the lions' den or the furnace. These men said, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). A weak god produces no strong men, nor does he deserve to be worshiped. A strong God, the God of the Bible, is a source of strength to those who know him. The Highest Science So let us learn about God and come to know God in the fullest, biblical sense. Jesus encouraged us to do this when he said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). This is true wisdom for everyone. It is the special duty and privilege of the Christian.

What is the proper course of study for one who is a child of God? Is it not God himself? There are other worthwhile areas of learning, it is true. But the highest science, the most mind-expanding area of all, is the Godhead. Spurgeon once wrote:

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can comprehend and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go on our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the... solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday and know nothing." . . . But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continuing investigation of the great subject of the Deity.²

Every Christian should confidently pursue this goal. God has promised that those who seek him will find him. To those who knock, the door shall be opened.

Notes 1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 32.

2. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Vol. 1, 855 (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), p. 1.

S. The True God

The True God by James Montgomery Boice

It is evident that we need more than a theoretical knowledge of God. Yet we can know God only as he reveals himself to us in the Scriptures, and we cannot know the Scriptures until we are willing to be changed by them. Knowledge of God occurs only when we also know our deep spiritual need and when we are receptive to God's gracious provision for our need through the work of Christ and the application of that work to us by God's Spirit.

Having established this base, we nevertheless come back to the question of God himself and we ask, "But who is God? Who is this one who reveals himself in Scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit?" We may admit that a true knowledge of God must change us. We may be willing to be changed. But where do we begin?

"I Am Who I Am"

Since the Bible is a unity we could answer these questions by starting at any point in the biblical revelation. We could begin with Revelation 22:21 as well as with Genesis 1:1. But there is no better starting point than God's revelation of himself to Moses at the burning bush. Moses, the great leader of Israel, had long been aware of the true God, for he had been born into a godly family. Still, when God said that he would send him to Egypt and through him deliver the people of Israel, Moses responded, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" We are told that God then answered Moses by saying, "I AM WHO I AM. . . . Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

"I AM WHO I AM." The name is linked with the ancient name for God, Jehovah. But it is more than a name. It is a descriptive name, pointing to all that God is in himself. In particular, it shows him to be the One who is entirely self-existent, self-sufficient and eternal.

These are abstract concepts, of course. But they are important, for these attributes more than any others set God apart from his creation and reveal him as being what he is in himself. God is perfect in all his attributes. But there are some attributes that we, his creatures, share. For instance, God is perfect in his love. Yet by his grace we also love. He is all wise; but we also possess a measure of wisdom. He is all powerful; and we exercise a limited power. It is not like that in regard to God's self-existence, self-sufficiency and eternity, however. He alone possesses those characteristics. He exists in and of himself; we do not. He is entirely self-sufficient; we are not. He is eternal; we are newcomers on the scene.

Self-existence means that God has no origins and consequently is answerable to no one. Matthew Henry says, "The greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God I am what I am; but God says absolutely — and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say — I am that I am."¹ So God has no origins; his existence does not depend on anybody.

Self-existence is a hard concept for us to grapple with for it means that God as he is in himself is unknowable. Everything that we see, smell, hear, taste or touch has origins. We can hardly think in any other category. Anything we observe must have a cause adequate to explain it. We seek for such causes. Cause and effect is even the basis for the belief in God possessed by those who, nevertheless, don't truly know him. Such individuals believe in God, not because they have had a personal experience of him or because they have discovered God in Scripture, but only because they infer his existence. "Everything comes from something; consequently, there must be a great something that stands behind everything." Cause and effect point to God, but — and this is the issue — they point to a God who is beyond understanding, indeed to one who is beyond us in every way. They indicate that God cannot be known and evaluated like other things can.

A. W. Tozer has noted that this is one reason why philosophy and science have not always been friendly toward the idea of God. These disciplines are dedicated to the task of accounting for things as we know them and are therefore impatient with anything that refuses to give an account of itself. Philosophers and scientists will admit that there is much they don't know. But it is another thing to admit that there is something they can never know completely and which, in fact, they don't even have techniques for discovering. To discover God, scientists may attempt to bring God down to their level, defining him as "natural law," "evolution" or some such principle. But still God eludes them. There is more to God than any such concepts can delineate.

Perhaps, too, this is why even Bible-believing people seem to spend so little time thinking about God's person and character. Tozer writes,

Few of us have let our hearts gaze in wonder at the I AM, the self-existent Self back of which no creature can think. Such thoughts are too painful for us. We prefer to think where it will do more good — about how to build a better mousetrap, for instance, or how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before. And for this we are now paying a too heavy price in the secularization of our religion and the decay of our inner lives.²

God's self-existence means that he is not answerable to us or to anybody, and we don't like that. We want God to give an account of himself, to defend his actions. Although he sometimes explains things to us, he doesn't have to and often he does not. God doesn't have to explain himself to anybody. No Needs The second quality of God communicated to us in the name "I AM WHO I AM" is self-sufficiency. Again it is possible to have at least a sense of the meaning of this abstract term. Self-sufficiency means God has no needs and therefore depends on no one.

Here we run counter to a widespread and popular idea: God cooperates with human beings, each thereby supplying something lacking in the other. It is imagined, for example, that God lacks glory and therefore creates men and women to supply it. He takes care of them as a reward. Or again, it is imagined that God needs love and therefore creates men and women to love him. Some talk about the creation as if God were lonely and therefore created us to keep him company. On a practical level we see the same thing in those who imagine that women and men are necessary to carry out God's work of salvation as witnesses or as defenders of the faith, forgetting that Jesus himself declared that "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Luke 3:8).

God does not need worshipers. Arthur W. Pink, who writes on this theme in *The Attributes of God*, says,

God was under no constraint, no obligation, no necessity to create. That he chose to do so was purely a sovereign act on his part, caused by nothing outside himself, determined by nothing but his own mere good pleasure; for he “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Ephesians 1:11). That he did create was simply for his manifestative glory. . . . God is no gainer even from our worship. He was in no need of that external glory of his grace which arises from his redeemed, for he is glorious enough in himself without that. What was it moved him to predestinate his elect to the praise of the glory of his grace? It was, as Ephesians 1:5 tells us, “according to the good pleasure of his will.” . . . The force of this is [that] it is impossible to bring the Almighty under obligations to the creature; God gains nothing from us.³

Tozer makes the same point. “Were all human beings suddenly to become blind, still the sun would shine by day and the stars by night, for these owe nothing to the millions who benefit from their light. So, were every man on earth to become atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what he is in himself without regard to any other. To believe in him adds nothing to his perfections; to doubt him takes nothing away.”⁴ Nor does God need helpers. This truth is probably harder for us to accept than almost any other. For we imagine God as a friendly, but almost pathetic, grandfather figure bustling about to see whom he can find to help him in managing the world and saving the world’s race. What a travesty! To be sure, God has entrusted a work of management to us. He said to the original pair in Eden, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). God also has given those who believe in him a commission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). True, but no aspect of God’s ordering of his creation has a necessary grounding in himself. God has chosen to do things thus. He didn’t need to do them. Indeed, he could have done them in any one of a million other ways. That he did choose to do things thus is therefore solely dependent upon the free and sovereign exercise of his will and so does not give us any inherent value to him. To say that God is self-sufficient also means that God does not need defenders. Clearly, we have opportunities to speak for God before those who would dishonor his name and malign his character. We ought to do so. But even if we should fail, we must not think that God is deprived thereby. God does not need to be defended, for he is as he is and will remain so regardless of the sinful and arrogant attacks of evil individuals. A God who needs to be defended is no God. Rather, the God of the Bible is the self-existent One who is the true defender of his people. When we realize that God is the only truly self-sufficient One, we begin to understand why the Bible has so much to say about the need for faith in God alone and why unbelief in God is such sin. Tozer writes: “Among all created beings, not one dare trust in itself. God alone trusts in himself; all other beings must trust in him. Unbelief is actually perverted faith, for it puts its trust not in the living God but in dying men.”⁵ If we refuse to trust God, what we are actually saying is that either we or some other person or thing is more trustworthy. That is a slander against the character of God, and it is folly. Nothing else is all-sufficient. On the other hand, if we begin by trusting God (by believing in him), we have a solid foundation for all life. God is sufficient, and his Word to his creatures can be trusted.

Because God is sufficient, we may begin by resting in that sufficiency and so work effectively for him. God does not need us. But the joy of coming to know him is in learning that he nevertheless stoops to work in and through those who are his believing and obedient children.

Alpha and Omega A third quality inherent in the name of God given to Moses (“I AM WHO I AM”) is everlastingness, perpetuity or eternity. The quality is difficult to put in one word, but it is simply that God is, has always been and will always be, and that he is ever the same in his eternal being. We find this attribute of God everywhere in the Bible. Abraham called Jehovah “the Everlasting God” (Genesis 21:33). Moses wrote, “LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God” (Psalms 90:1-2). The book of Revelation describes God as the “Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 1:8; Revelation 21:6; Revelation 22:13). The creatures before the throne cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). The fact that God is eternal has two major consequences for us. The first is that he can be trusted to remain as he reveals himself to be. The word usually used to describe this quality is immutability, which means unchangeableness. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

God is unchangeable in his attributes. So we need not fear, for example, that the God who once loved us in Christ will somehow change his mind and cease to love us in the future. God is always love toward his people. Similarly, we must not think that perhaps he will change his attitude toward sin, so that he will begin to classify as “permissible” something that was formerly prohibited. Sin will always be sin because it is defined as any transgression of or lack of conformity to the law of God, who is unchangeable. God will always be holy, wise, gracious, just and everything else that he reveals himself to be. Nothing that we do will ever change the eternal God.

God is also unchangeable in his counsels or will. He does what he has determined beforehand to do and his will never varies. Some will point out that certain verses in the Bible tell us that God repented of some act — as in Genesis 6:6, “The LORD was sorry that he had made man.” In this example, a human word is being used to indicate God’s severe displeasure with human activities. It is countered by such verses as Numbers 23:19 (“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?”); 1 Samuel 15:29 (“The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent”); Romans 11:29 (“The gifts and call of God are irrevocable”); and Psalms 33:11 (“The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations”).

Such statements are a source of great comfort to God’s people. If God were like us, he could not be relied on. He would change, and as a result of that his will and his promises would change. We could not depend on him. But God is not like us. He does not change. Consequently, his purposes remain fixed from generation to generation. Pink says, “Here then is a rock on which we may fix our feet, while the mighty torrent is sweeping away everything around us. The permanence of God’s character guarantees the fulfillment of his promises.”⁶ The second major consequence for us of God’s unchangeableness is that he is inescapable. If he were a mere human and if we didn’t like either him or what he was doing, we might ignore him knowing that he might always change his mind, move away from us or die. But God does not change his mind. He does not move away. He will not die. Consequently, we cannot escape him. Even if we ignore him now, we must reckon with him in the life to come. If we reject him now, we must eventually face the One we have rejected and come to know his eternal rejection of us. No Other Gods

We are led to a natural conclusion, namely, that we should seek and worship the true God. This chapter has been based for the most part on Exodus 3:14, in which God reveals to Moses the name by which he desires to be known. That revelation came on the verge of the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. After the exodus, God gave a revelation on Mount Sinai which applies the earlier disclosure of himself as the true God to the religious life and worship of the delivered nation.

God said, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:2-6). These verses make three points, all based on the premise that the God who reveals himself in the Bible is the true God:

1. We are to worship God and obey him.
2. We are to reject the worship of any other god.
3. We are to reject the worship of the true God by any means that are unworthy of him, such as the use of pictures or images. At first glance it seems quite strange that a prohibition against the use of images in worship should have a place at the very start of the ten basic principles of biblical religion, the Ten Commandments. But it is not strange when we remember that the characteristics of a religion flow from the nature of the religion's god. If the god is unworthy, the religion will be unworthy too. If the concept of God is of the highest order, the religion will be of a high order also. So God tells us in these verses that any physical representation of him is dishonoring to him. Why? For two reasons. First, it obscures his glory, for nothing visible can ever adequately represent it. Second, it misleads those who would worship him.

Both of these errors are represented by Aaron's manufacture of the golden calf, as J. I. Packer indicates in his discussion of idolatry. In Aaron's mind, at least, though probably not in the minds of the people, the calf was intended to represent Jehovah. He thought, no doubt, that a figure of a bull (even a small one) communicated the thought of God's strength. But, of course, it didn't do so adequately. And it didn't at all communicate his other great attributes: his sovereignty, righteousness, mercy, love and justice. Rather, it obscured them.

Moreover, the figure of the bull misled the worshipers. They readily associated it with the fertility gods and goddesses of Egypt, and the result of their worship was an orgy. Packer concludes,

It is certain that if you habitually focus your thoughts on an image or picture of the One to whom you are going to pray, you will come to think of him, and pray to him, as the image represents him. Thus you will in this sense "bow down" and "worship" your image; and to the extent to which the image fails to tell the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth. That is why God forbids you and me to make use of images and pictures in our worship.⁷ "My Lord and My God" To avoid the worship of images or even the use of images in the worship of the true God is not in itself worship. We are to recognize that the true God is the eternal, self-existent and self-sufficient One, the One immeasurably beyond our highest thoughts. Therefore, we are to

humble ourselves and learn from him, allowing him to teach us what he is like and what he has done for our salvation. Do we do what he commands? Are we sure that in our worship we are actually worshipping the true God who has revealed himself in the Bible?

There is only one way to answer that question truthfully. It is to ask: Do I really know the Bible, and do I worship God on the basis of the truth I find there? That truth is centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, as seen in the Bible. There the invisible God is made visible, the inscrutable knowable, the eternal God disclosed in space and time. Do I look to Jesus in order to know God? Do I think of God's attributes by what Jesus shows me of them? If not, I am worshipping an image of God, albeit an image of my own devising. If I look to Jesus, then I can know that I am worshipping the true God, as he has revealed himself. Paul says that although some knew God they nevertheless "did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Romans 1:21). Let us determine that this shall not be true of us. We see God in Jesus. So let us know him as God, love him as God, serve him as God and worship him as God.

Notes 1. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 284 2. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 34.

3. Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, n.d.), pp. 2 - Leviticus 4. Tozer, p. 40.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

6. Pink, p. 41.

7. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 41

Author

James Montgomery Boice held a B.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Theology from the University of Basel in Switzerland. He was the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and the author of many books, including the three volumes in the series, "Foundations of the Christian Faith". This article is taken from volume one of that same series, entitled *The Sovereign God*.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
 - 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net