

The Living God¹

Jaap Durand

1. Introduction

Currently, the issue of God is central to theological reasoning. Our first reaction to such an obvious statement can be one of surprise. What else can be central to theological reasoning than simply God? Is theology not the *Logos* about God?

Such a surprise and similar issues are justified. Ultimately, theology is indeed about God. Theology forms the heart of church dogma. In theology, decisions determine other disciplines in one way or another. But this is not all. That the issue of God is central to current theological reasoning is not as obvious as it would appear from the above. This was not always the case in the history of theology. Doctrines on the being of God and on the Trinity were the most consistent doctrines within the field of Dogmatics. Once theological reasoning about God was more or less established, there was hardly any mention of any theories beyond the basic framework. The actual theological dispute was considered to be within the field of God's works. This triggered a fatal gap between God's being and his works, between himself and his revelation. This resulted in theology often being a futile part of dogmatics, with hardly any or no link to other doctrines. This was especially the case in post-Reformation theology, where a speculative mediaeval theology coincided with Reformation Christology and soteriology.

Another approach typifies current theological reflection. A starting point is basically that theology must at all times maintain the unity of God and his revelation. Theology thus acquires greater mobility. It is more closely integrated with other doctrines within the field of dogmatics as a whole.

While we are undoubtedly grateful for this development, we should not overlook a potential threat in this instance. The emphasis on the unity of God's being and his works can easily turn theology into a way of

1 Translated from Durand, J. 1976. *Die Lewende God: Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel. 9–10; 46–48; 58–61; 71–76; 84–90; 98–99.

theologising where it does not seem that God is more than his revelation, and where there is hardly any trace of an individual's hesitation to talk about God. The Book of Judges (13:18) clearly warns against human overconfidence and presumption: 'Why do you ask my name, seeing he is wonderful?' Does the second commandment not simply mean that there is no likeness of God – that the church cannot tie him to dogmatic concepts and images? Can there be a greater deterrent for an all too easy theological interaction with God's secret than this? It is indeed about God's *secret*. God is incomprehensible. He is still greater than the most eloquent statements about him – *Deus semper maior!*

In light of this, theology should have kept silent about God, if it were not that the revelation is all about the self-disclosure of the incomprehensible God, if God did not give us the opportunity to talk about him *within the context and boundaries of his revelation*, without trespassing on the ban on images. In his words, theology must be saturated with the fact that God's self-revelation does not mean that he submits to man. In God's revelation, we are aware of his divine unfathomable nature, because in this instance, we come into contact with his immeasurable grace. This fact withholds theology from a purely theoretical speculation about God; but theology turns every statement about him into praise.

Theology thus fluctuates between the *courage* to make statements about God on the basis of the revelation, and *hesitation* because it is about the *God* of the revelation. Ultimately, this means that every statement about God can only be *a conversation with God*. Theology is thus simultaneously prayer and doxology.

It should be obvious, without further argument, that theology rarely, if ever, complies with the above requirements. The guidelines in this monograph do not assume this. An attempt will be made to derive something from the conflict between courage and hesitation in the theological dispute about God's secret. To some extent, this conflict not only forms the background to the dogmatic-historical section, but it is also a basic element of most of the topics raised in the second section.

2. Guidelines

In reflecting on the road we have travelled, we can now attempt to give some guidelines for a scriptural reflection on the relationship of God and his revelation.

Unlike the abstract idea of God in Hellenism, which views God as the in-himself-resting Being, we meet God on virtually every page of the Bible as the living and acting God. He is the *living* God who made heaven and earth (Acts 14:15). Unlike the passive idol, Yahwe is the acting God

(Isa. 46:7–11) who works; nobody can stop this (Isa. 43:13). In all these actions, God is the subject of his deeds. Nowhere in Scripture is there a conflict between God and his deeds; it is as if his activity is foreign to his being. He is the God of loyalty and justice; his works are complete (Deut. 32:4). His works have been known to him since eternity (Acts 15:18) and he is true in his ways (Rev. 15:3).

As his deeds imply the reality of God, his reality is known only through his deeds. God makes *himself* known through his multiple deeds; he is known as the living God (Jos. 3:10; Isa. 19:20–21). Juda learns his Name, that is, knows himself (Isa. 52:6). He can be rightly angry when Israel, which has seen his deeds for forty years, does not yet know him from these deeds (Ps. 95:8–11; cf. Hebr. 3:9–10). Every action by God that concerns man directly or indirectly is thus *revelation*. Just as there is no conflict between God's being and his works, there is no conflict between his being and his revelation. This already applies to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and more so to his final revelation in Christ. The revelation of the divine secret of salvation lies in Christ: God revealed in the flesh (I Tim. 3:16). He is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15); God lives physically in him (Col. 2:9); whoever sees him has seen the Father (John 14:9). The revealed mystery is merely the salvation events of God's personal coming to the world in the form of Jesus Christ, true God, and true human. The belief in God is not only a belief in Christ's acts of love and justice, but also, on the basis of these acts, a *certainty* that God is love and justice from eternity to eternity. When God *does* love, He *is* also love (I John 4:8–10). He revealed himself not only as the Father; he *is* the Father. Through the Holy Spirit, he declared Jesus not only as the Son (Rom. 1:4), but he himself is the Son (Rom. 9:5). The implication is that every dogmatic statement about God is the belief that the revealed God and God Self is one and the same God.

While we abide by the unity of God and his revelation, we must simultaneously, on the basis of God's word of revelation and not on the basis of an abstract philosophical theory on the incomprehensible and transcendent God, confess that God is more than his revelation. We can talk about revelation only if God does not coincide with his revelation. The reality of God is not solved in his deeds. Because he is more than his deeds, he can work. Because he is more than his revelation and precedes it, he can reveal himself. With this 'more', we do not want to introduce conflict between God's being and his revelation, as if God is still 'different' from what he himself reveals. It is simply the recognition that God himself does not mention in his revelation that he is a calculable God. In Exodus 3:13, when Moses asks him about his name, which boils down to a question about his being, he answers with a verb: 'I am what I am', or possibly also: 'I will

be what I will be' (v. 14). This is followed by: 'I am', or 'I will be', or even 'I will be there (with you)'. Based on these statements, we can gain the impression that Moses' question is rejected; this is likely if we compare it with Genesis 32:29 and Judges 13:18. We cannot express his being by name and as such get hold of him. Rather, Moses is referred to his *events*, his presence, his being there for the people of Israel. God does not reveal his inner being, but ensures that he is available, notably by his nameless name (Miskotte), and known from his deeds. In his devotion to man, God remains the free one over whom we cannot rule (cf. Ex. 19:12–13; 33:20–23). The message of the New Testament is no different. Although, in this instance, we witness God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, notwithstanding that Christ himself is the explanation of the nameless name of God (John 17:6), God is an inaccessible light (I Tim. 6:16). Whoever saw Jesus saw the Father; yet nobody can see God (I Tim. 6:16). The confidence to call God 'Our Father' is coupled with the confession that he is 'in the heavens' (Matt. 6:9). God's being goes beyond his revelation; yet there is nothing of God therein except God Self. Although we cannot enter the hidden depths of his being, we are also aware of a mystery that is disclosed (Col. 1:27). We are assured that what is known of God through his revelation does not conflict with what he is. Berkhof (1973:111)² attempts to explain this idea by using a geometric image: the revelation is not a voluntary segment from the circle of God's being, but a sector, a piece that reaches right into the middle. Irrespective of the size of the sector, it leads to the heart.

We need to explain how to judge correctly the merits of the theological statement that God is a Person. The easy self-evidence with which we talk about the 'Person' of God, not only in theological personalism, but also in general in the more orthodox theologies, makes it a very attractive concept to address, not in the least because we believe that there is a faithful rendering of the God image on nearly every page in the Bible. Yet we may not ignore the problems and objections in this matter. Two objections must be mentioned. First, the concept of 'person', as applied to God, occurs not only in the Holy Scripture, but also in Christian theology. The second objection is closely linked to the first. It can and does happen that a modern concept of 'person' is used as a formal category that defines God. The concept of 'person' obtains, in other words, a normative function within divinity.

The first objection is of no crucial significance. Theology cannot be a biblicist's repetition of Scripture. It has a hermeneutic function that endeavours to interpret the message of Scripture in an intelligible way. This implies the use of understandable terms that essentially cover what

2 H. Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof*, Nijkerk 1973:111.

is given in Scripture. Indeed, there is the risk that such terms can take on a normative function.

The validity of the second objection must thus be fully acknowledged. The only way in which this risk can be avoided is to note the original restricted set-up in which God's personality is mentioned in modern times. Ultimately, this is about a *defence formula*. Comprehensibly, this shows that we do not address God in the neuter form; this guards against God becoming an abstract idea or identifying him with some cosmic force. Unlike naturalism and pantheistic mysticism, the concept of 'person', as applied to God, renders the basic message of the Holy Scripture, namely that God is not 'something', but a living 'someone' who has a relationship with man. This relationship is not a given that emerges, as it were, by itself, as in the case of man's involvement with the forces of nature. The initiative comes from God. This relationship refers to his decision (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:9). He meets man as the willing, acting, living God. Because he calls man, man can call him. Because he calls man by his name, man can call him. Because he calls man by his name (Isa. 43:3), man can also call him by name (Isa. 43:3); he has a name (Isa. 42:8). The God of Scripture truly has a name. He is not an idea and thus nameless. As noted in paragraph 2.1, the name Yahweh is not a definition of God that equals him to an impersonal divine power. It is a real name, a personal name that cannot divulge the deepest secret of its bearer. In this name, the divine 'I' meets man somewhere (Isa. 41:4; 42:8; 43:11).

The above clearly shows why the relationship between God and man in Scripture is always described in personal terms, analogous to the relationship between human beings. This is the relationship between father and son (Hos. 11:1-4), between man and woman (Hos. 2:1, 15), and between lord and servant (Ps. 123:2). This is coupled with the anthropomorphic way in which the Holy Scripture talks about God. As an abstract principle or an impersonal power, God is totally beyond the field of view of the authors of the Bible.

Some theologians are quick to point out that the anthropomorphic talk about God includes an unending proverb. They find it unacceptable to talk about God as a person, because this is based on this unending proverb. Suffice it to mention two remarks in this regard. First, all talk of man about God is anthropomorphic. Man cannot transcend his own world. For this reason, we cannot describe talking about God, who tries to avoid all possible human expressions and uses abstract concepts as non-human. Concepts such as 'the unconditional' (Tillich 1963) are, after all, concepts designed by man. Secondly, against the background of the said objection lies the unacceptable starting point that was rejected in paragraph 2.1,

namely, to distinguish between the actual God and the revelation God. No *other* God will hide *behind* the revelation. Whoever accepts this latter statement talks about God only in terms of a person. If we still doubt, we are finally faced with the incarnation of the Word. In the incarnation, all impersonal neutrality and abstraction ends when God reveals himself in the person of Jesus Christ as the Living Lord. In its Christological confession, the church spotted this point well. As a supernatural power, God does not take possession of man, Jesus of Nazareth. The person of the *Logos* takes on human flesh, and this person can tell Phillip: 'He who sees me, has seen the Father' (John 14:9).

By talking about God as a person, theology conveys the essential and irreplaceable moment in the Gospel when God and man are in a living relationship, in which God addresses man as *man*, *talks to* him, and takes him *into his community*. In this sense, we cannot object to the use of the term. It is also obvious that there are risks associated with addressing this, especially when, as Thielicke rightly warns, a specific concept of 'person' becomes the norm for thinking about God. Theological personalism does not escape altogether from this risk. On the one hand, while we deserve to interpret an essential aspect of the biblical proclamation, specific proponents thereof tend to base the being (person) of God on a personal view of reality, on the other. We must also agree with Barth that the mere statement that God is a person is meaningless, unless the concept is filled with what God revealed about himself. As mentioned earlier, dealing with the concept of 'person', in respect of theology, mainly fulfils a defensive function. It defends a false and non-scriptural image of God rather than answering the question: Who is God?

This does not yet settle a problem. Can we substantiate the statement that God is a person along with the classical trinitarian confession that God is one Being and three persons?

In summary: As far as the doctrine of the trinity is concerned, we can now note the following main aspects.

The fact that the doctrine of the trinity is addressed after the paragraph on the personality of God is simply for the purpose of methodology, for the sake of organising the subject matter. The place of the doctrine of the trinity in theology is not considered. There is the danger that the doctrine of the trinity will be viewed as an appendix to a 'general' theology. Such a 'general' theology is not Christian theology, because the God of Scripture revealed himself in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit as the Triune God. No Christian doctrine of God's Being and deeds is possible without implying the Trinity. The old doctrine of the trinity did not develop from a general image of God, but from the church's problem with the Scriptural

witness concerning the person of Christ. The widespread opinion that the doctrine of the trinity has to do with speculation is thus wrong. Indeed, the doctrine of the trinity can keep the dogmatics in its reflection on God from speculation because this has to do with the God who revealed himself in Christ. Not only does the doctrine of the trinity keep the dogmatics from speculation about God, but it is simultaneously the fundamental doctrine of the church that maintains the unity of God and his revelation. Against every form of modalism, in which the 'actual' God hides behind the various historical masks of his revelation, the confession of the basic trinity of God is the recognition that God reveals *himself*: we meet him in the revelation as the Triune, because of his being.

The doctrine of the trinity is not built only, not even in the first instance, on some of the New Testament's triadic texts (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13). This is the interpretation of the joint witness of the New Testament according to its own core: the person and deeds of Jesus Christ. Yet the triadic statements indicate that, already in the New Testament, the decisive step had been taken in the direction of a full trinitarian confession; the authors of the Bible started to draw trinitarian conclusions from their confession that Jesus is the Lord. Matthew 28:18 can hardly be viewed as merely a triadic formula. The baptism (see Eph. 4:5) occurs in the one name (cf. Acts 10:48) and the baptised becomes the property of the one Lord. The baptised do not have three Lords, but only one Lord. The trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit does not discard the unity, but is its form. Despite this clear trinitarian tendency in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 4:4–6; 1 Cor. 12:4–6), the doctrine of the trinity is not based on this scant text, but on the fundamental witness of the New Testament, namely that, in Christ, we have to do with God himself and that Christ is, indeed, God himself. This witness is irrefutably clear. Despite the classical proofs concerning the deity of Christ, which directly call him 'God' (John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13), the New Testament clearly mentions that we meet God himself in him. He is God with us (Matt. 1:23); in him lives the fullness of the deity physically (Col. 2:9); he is God revealed in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). He is one with the Father (John 10:30, 38) and is often called upon with the Father (1 Thess. 3:11) and sometimes alone (Acts 7:59–60; 2 Cor. 12:8). He takes part in the divine work of creation (Col. 1:16; John 1:3; Hebr. 1:2) and he was the subject of the apparitions of God in the Old Testament (John 12:41, with reference to Isa. 6). Against the background of this selection of texts and many more, it is significant that the earliest community – living at the time of the Old Testament! – gives Christ the title of Kurios, the name expressing the holy tetragram Yahweh. It should thus no longer surprise us that the Old Testament proclamation concerning the glory of

God also applies to him. He is the Lord of the glory (1 Cor. 2:8; see Tit. 2:13; 1 Peter 4:13; Mark 13:26; John 1:14; 2:11, and so on).

As clearly as the New Testament witnesses the divinity of Christ and his unity with the Father, it is also obvious that there is no mention of an *identity* between Father and Son. The Son is truly the Son, as distinguished from the Father (John 4:34; 5:19). This non-identity, however, is expressed not only in respect of the incarnation, but also in respect of him who is *sent* to be born from a woman (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3). The early-Christian hymn, which Paul quotes in Phil. 2:5, also refers to the self-emptying and self-humiliation of Christ to his being in the form of God and uses the predicate 'equal to' God (Phil. 2:6; cf. John 5:18).

This witness of Scripture concerning the non-identity of Christ and the Father, against the background of his divinity and unity with the Father, determines the origin of the doctrine of the trinity. The Christological starting point would only develop further towards pneumatology. The church also had sufficient New Testament witnesses for this. God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ takes place in the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can convey that Jesus is the Lord (1 Cor. 12:13). With our spirit, the Holy Spirit witnesses that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit is not a mere power of God, but it is God himself (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16). Yet this also applies to him who is sent (John 15:26), like the Son. Consequently, there was a time when he was not there (John 7:39). He is, therefore, the other comforter (John 14:16) who, besides the Father and the Son, is the source of all salvation (Rev. 1:4–5; 2 Cor. 13:13).

The most striking trait of the New Testament's witness of Christ is that it happens against the background of the Old Testament's key confession of God: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut. 6:4). Not only does Christ himself refer to this confession (Mark 12:29), but Paul can also tell the readers that there is no other God, except One (1 Cor. 8:4; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5; Eph. 4:6; Jacob 2:19). No impression is created anywhere that Christ's proclamation in the New Testament deprives this confession of power in any way. The ease with which Paul highlights both the divinity of Christ and the unity of God is so surprising in that he was convinced of the fact that the full unity of God emerged *in* the confession of Christ and the Spirit together with the Father. We find excellent examples of this impartiality and ease in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:4–6. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, the confession of the one God and Father is linked to the confession of the one Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, in Ephesians 4, the praise of the one Spirit (v. 4) and the one Lord (v. 5) precede the praise of the one God and Father (v. 6). The Spirit, the Lord, and God the Father:

this is one God who excludes any second or third. The trinity is indeed the form of the unity.

We noted that Christian religion cannot, without reserve, be called a theistic religion. Christianity can easily be viewed as one specific example of a category of religions that can be summarised under one name. The question is whether the same objections affect the term 'monotheism'. Is Christianity merely a variant of a specific type of religion besides, for example, Islam and Judaism? If this is the case, do these religions represent a strong monotheism more purely than Christianity itself? Even Schleiermacher, who labelled Christian religion as the highest form of monotheism, was aware of the fact that the term is inadequate to highlight the specificity of this religion. The inadequacy of the term is, however, not the only problem. The whole concept of monotheism is strongly Graeco-philosophical, with an unquestionable tendency towards Deism. Plotinus solves monotheism's concept of unity. God is the One who lacks quality. Because of this, there is an issue concerning the possibility of revelation, the possibility that God can break free from Himself without stopping to be the one God. While monotheism works with the numerical one as abstraction, the biblical idea concerning the unity of God goes further than that. God is not one because the number one is better than numbers two or three; God is one because he is the Only One. There is no second or third besides him. The unity of Yahweh is his unity (cf. 1 Con. 8:60; 2 Con. 19:15, 19; Isa. 42:8; Jer. 2:11). A similar thought is echoed in the New Testament concerning the unity of God. The issue concerning numbers has been an issue for centuries in the reflection on the Trinity. It originates from the abstract concept of unity of monotheism, which is basically foreign to the New Testament.

The doctrine of the trinity maintains the unity of God's being and his revelation. God is the God who reveals himself. We noted that God is still more than his revelation. He is never a predictable God. This idea also has consequences for the doctrine of the trinity. Can theology go further than merely confessing that the one God introduced himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Does Scripture give us room to ask about the *how* of the Trinity, rather than the *that* of the Trinity? The boundaries drawn by Scripture itself must give us an answer to this, even where the starting point for the doctrine of the trinity is consciously taken in the revelation, in order to highlight the unity of the trinity of both revelation and being, the reflection on the trinity can, where the boundaries of Scripture are not considered, express a speculative intrusion into the being of God. There is no doubt that this objection affects some of the modern views on trinity. By simply keeping to the boundaries of Scripture, we fully recognise that God is not immersed in his revelation.

In addition, with respect to the classical trinitarian formula of one Being and three Persons, we can raise the question as to whether this is not leaning towards speculation. It is obvious that the claim of speculation can be directed only at the specific terms used, namely 'being' and 'person', because they are not used in this sense in Scripture. The mere fact that the terms do not occur in Scripture with the same meaning does not make them necessarily speculative. The question is whether they indeed cover what is given in Scripture.

There are, however, problems with the terms used. The concept 'being', from the Greek *ousia*, is deeply rooted in Greek philosophy. The Latin equivalents of this concept are *essentia* (essence), *natura* (nature), or *substantia* (substance), the latter being the most common in the doctrine of the trinity: God is 'one substance' (*una substantia*). The problem with this concept is the Aristotelian idea of substance, from which it derives and according to which a specific substance or being has characteristics that take part in being. Applied to the doctrine of the trinity, it can lead to the wrong conclusion that the divine persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit take part in being or it can be used as a concept that includes the concrete persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. The latter idea leads to tritheism, whereas the former raises a fourth category, as it were, the divine being or substance, besides the Father, Son, and Spirit. The term can thus be upheld only if viewed as the expression for the real God, as an indication that everything that is not God must be excluded. Otto Weber's proposition, in agreement with Barth, that the concept of the 'Divinity' of God must be understood, is highly acceptable (*Grundlagen der Dogmatik* I 146).

The issue concerning the 'characteristics' (attributes?) of God is one of the most difficult in dogmatics. Yet, based on the above, some perspectives are given as to how to address this doctrine.

We noted that God is more than his revelation; that it is impossible to express his being by name in order to rule Him. His name, as an expression of his being, is after all wonderful (Judg. 13:18) and is beyond every human being's understanding. He is the *incomparable*: 'To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?' (Isa. 40:25; cf. Ps. 35:10; 40:6; Jer. 10:6). A similar thought is echoed in the New Testament when Paul states: 'For no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.' (I Cor. 2:11). In this instance, the *what* question about God is cut at the root. In light of this, we must indeed ask whether theology has the right to talk about characteristics, attributes, virtues, or perfections of God. Does the issue about the 'characteristics' of God coincide with the Aristotelian idea of substance, according to which a specific substance or

being has specific static characteristics? If so, is the question about the characteristics of something not always a *what* question? A *what* question is always a question about something within itself. Thus, the question about God's 'characteristics' is a *what* question, a question about God within himself. However, in theology, if we had to do with God within himself, theology could only have been a negative theology, in the sense that no pronouncement can be made about God. We can remain silent about God in himself, because only the Spirit of God knows what is in God.

A second problem is associated with such a view of divine 'characteristics'. If we distinguish between the being of a thing and its characteristics, we can in an abstract way consider this thing, despite its characteristics. However, the 'characteristics' attributed to God cannot be ignored. God is no longer God if he is not almighty. In order to evade this problem, Western theology maintains that God does not have 'characteristics' in the above sense (*in Deum non cadit accidens* – Augustine), but that every characteristic expresses the being of God (cf. above on Barth). If this is the case, it is undoubtedly clear that, in speaking about God's 'characteristics', we have to do with a *what* question.

With its doctrine on the characteristics of God, theology never meant to give a non-inclusive definition of the *what* concerning God. An indication of this is the distinction between characteristics resting and remaining in God, on the one hand, and the characteristics of God's work and relationship with the world, on the other. Strictly speaking, in the latter, not a *what*, but a *how* question is posed: How is God in his relationship with the created? In most of the divine 'characteristics' dealt with hereunder, it is also clear that this basically has to do with a relationship: love, grace, mercy, justice and truthfulness, among others. With the so-called characteristics resting in God, they get stuck at the *what* question concerning God's being itself. Although Bavinck, and later especially Barth and Berkhof, tried to reduce this strong distinction between resting (uncommunicable) and working (communicable) 'characteristics' as much as possible and to get away from the idea of God within himself, the terms (characteristics, attributes, perfections) they use are taxing, making it difficult for them to say that this does not concern a *what* question about God.

I Corinthians 2:11 makes any *what* question about God within himself impossible, thereby forcing faith and theology into complete silence about God. The Spirit that examines the depths of God (v. 10) reveals Christ as the wisdom of God (vv. 7–9; cf. 1:30) 'so that we may know what God out of grace gave to us' (v. 12). Unlike not knowing what is in God, we know about the grace of God. In this instance, we find the deepest thought in Melancton: 'To know Christ, is to know his generosity.' Calvin has similar

thoughts. Christian faith does not deal with God within himself, but with God in his revelation to us. In agreement with this, it is futile to examine the *what* (*quid*) that is God; we should rather ask: *How* (*qualis*) is God and what agrees with his nature (Inst. I, 2, 2)?

As far as God's attributes are concerned, it is not about a *what* question about God, but about a *why* question. Not: What is God? But: How is God? In God's self-revelation, the *what* of the being of God is not revealed, but his attributes toward us are. This is basically about relationship. Even in Scripture's 'is' statements on God, this relationship is clearer. John's (4:8) statement 'God is love' is not about a general pronouncement about God within himself, but about God's relationship, his love towards us that is revealed in the sending of his only born son (v. 9). I John 1:5 – God is light – offers a metaphysical answer to a *what* question about God. John's speech is directly linked to the revelation of the Word of life (John 1:1), which is the *light of the people* (John 1:4) and the *light of the world* (John 8:12). The fact that John's statements cannot be reversed (love is God or the light is God) confirms that this does not relate to general statements about God. In Scripture, God's statements are not there for the sake of themselves. They are still linked to thanks and praise, through prayer, message, or claim. We can also give an example from what is normally dealt with under the resting characteristics of God: his omnipresence. Psalm 139, the classical Scripture section concerning God's omnipresence, is directly linked to the comforting message – 'even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast' (v. 10) – that man cannot escape from God.

Do we prefer to talk about the capabilities of God instead of the characteristics? We must also guard against a misunderstanding that can arise in this instance, namely that there is a distinction between the being of God and his capabilities, as if God is different from his capabilities. God is still more than his revealed capabilities, but he is different. The revelation is about his true self-revelation. For this reason, Scripture can also describe the capability of God's love as that God is love. God is in a relationship with us as our Father – including his love, grace, mercy, trust, and patience – but he is that in this relationship. Therefore, Calvin, who rejects the *what* question about God and directs our thoughts to *how* God is, immediately adds: What agrees with his nature? There is no mention of division, in this instance, but of agreement between God's being and his capabilities.

It is obvious from the above that we cannot classify a distinction between what God is within himself (resting characteristics) and what He is for us (working characteristics), or between his static characteristics and his free deeds in the history of salvation. In fact, it is impossible to

talk about resting or working capabilities. This recognition is valid when we note that the identity speech of the Old Testament (JHVH is God) is irreversible. Nowhere in the Old Testament does an irreversibility occur (cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; 7:9; 10:17; II Sam. 7:28; I Con. 18:39; Ps. 105:7; Isa. 25:1; Joel 3:7, etc.). God is not a general concept that can be qualified, among others, as closer than JHVH. We cannot make an impartial analysis of what God is and thereafter state that JHVH is not so. Who God is, is out-and-out qualified by the name: JHVH, JHVH who makes Himself known only through his deeds (par. 2.1), in which he is in a relationship with the created. Finally, this means that we can know God's being and capabilities only from his revelation deeds in Jesus Christ. This includes that the fullness and tremendous power of the Old Testament revelation of God must wholly penetrate the New Testament, if we are to understand the New Testament revelation of God in all its dimensions. In addition, Christ clearly shows the ultimate significance of what is found in the Old Testament about God's action and salvation action. Consequently, when Scripture mentions God's wisdom, life or glory, the full sense of that wisdom can be known only when it is revealed in the secrecy of the cross (I Cor. 1:24); the full significance of life can emerge only where it appears in Christ as the Word of life (I John 1:1–3); the glory of God is abundant; it shines on Christ's face (II Cor. 4:4, 6); and it is known in the gospel as a service of the Spirit that justifies (II Cor. 3:8–9). In Christ, God told man truly everything that he said to man and this word is the word of the love of God, who, as love in the extreme (John 13:1), conquers sin on the cross. All other statements about God must be understood on the basis of the central statement that God is love.

It is thus obvious that God's omnipotence is not something that can be scrutinised on its own. In Scripture, it is about the omnipotence of his love whereby he achieves his aim (Gen. 18:14; Luke 1:37; Mark 10:27). Christ is the power of God (I Cor. 1:24); in Christ, God triumphs over the powers (Col. 2:15); he subjects everything to himself (Phil. 3:21), and he does what we pray and think over and above everything (Eph. 3:20). When, apart from Christ, we speculate about God's omnipotence and link this to a causality, this creates a tension between God's power and his love. It is only in Christ that God's love is not threatened by his omnipotence.

Scripture is not interested in a general speculation about God's relationship with space. Consequently, when God's omnipresence is mentioned, it is first about his presence, his presence in Christ as the Emanuel, the God-with-us (Matt. 1:23). God lives among us in Christ (John 1:14); he lives through his Spirit in the community (John 14:23; Eph. 2:22), and he will come to stay with us finally (Rev. 21:3). Based on the security of God's true presence in Christ, there is the security that he is the sovereign

Lord of time and space. He is fully present in the spatial Jesus (Col. 2:9), so that whoever meets this Jesus also meets the omnipresent Father.

Whatever concerns God's omnipotence and omnipresence also concerns his immutability. When Scripture addresses the immutability of God, it is not within the framework of a wise problem in which the static immutability of an absolute being is set against the mutability of a creature-like being-to-be. Scripture's message concerning the immutability of God is directly associated with his covenant. He bears his people from birth and remains the same until his old age (Isa. 46:3-4). As the Father of Lights, the Source of all glory and grace, there is no change or shadow of conversion in him (Jac. 2:17). This immutability does not exclude that he, as *living* person, reacts to man's actions. Scripture abounds in these divine reactions, but in this reaction, he remains true to himself (II Tim. 2:12-13). This immutable covenant of God is fully revealed in Christ. The incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) is God's reaction to the contingent fact of man's sin, but in this change, he simply remains the immutable God of the covenant. On the basis of his salvation in Christ, faith knows that God does not act randomly, but that he will react as he did in Christ. Jesus Christ is and will be the same yesterday, today and for ever (Hebr. 13:8). Scripture unfolds the meaning of all immutability statements: not the immutability of a rigid immobility, but of the living, acting God who remains true to himself and to us in Christ. If faith adheres to the name of Christ, it not only relies on God's fixed actions, but it simultaneously confesses that God remains the same from eternity to eternity before and after his deeds. The rise of a rigid immobility of God's idea means, however, no choice for a God-to-be. This would amount to trading in a foreign wise scheme of Scripture for another. An emerging idea, in which there is no room for God's immutability, places a question mark on the reliable identity of God. Then we would no longer be able to talk about the *living* God, but at most about the changing life or the developing history that appear to be divine.

The Christological unfolding of the capabilities of God confirms the issue of distinguishing between uncommunicable and communicable 'characteristics', even in Barth's distinction between the perfections of God's freedom and love, or Berkhof's distinction between the characteristics of God's transcendence and candescence. This is a fake distinction, because Barth, Berkhof and Weber approach the characteristics of God's transcendence (freedom) from a Christological perspective and must still emphasise the unity of freedom and love, transcendence and candescence.

Based on these considerations, we must also reject the dialectics of Bruner's distance-creating holiness and community-creating love, especially where he applies it to the being of God within himself and sets

this off against his characteristics, as it concerns the world. Although Prenter (1967) formally deals with a distinction between holiness and mercy, the result of his doctrine of characteristics is different and has specific merit. When Prenter addresses the characteristics of God as anger and grace, it is not strictly speaking about a principle of classifying God's characteristics, but about a double point of view from which to consider God's capabilities.

We meet God, *without Christ*, in his anger (Rom. 1:18). Whereas God's omnipotence is visible in Christ as the omnipotence of his love, it can also be revealed as the unknown power of his anger (Ps. 90:11) that shatters rulers (Ps. 110:5) and moves man, without Christ, towards sin (Rom. 1:20, 24). In Christ, God's omnipresence is his boundless loving presence (Ps. 23:4); without Christ, this means the inevitability of his judgement: 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?' declares the Lord "'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord."

The above clearly shows that we cannot consider God's anger in terms of a static 'characteristic'. In his anger, God acts in a specific relationship with man, and this is God's characteristic. The question is: is this about the capability of God that agrees with his nature? If we want to maintain our point of view that God's revelation is self-revelation, then we must answer this question in the affirmative: if God reveals his anger, then anger is not foreign to God's being; then his anger is not, as Ritschl states, the sinner's subjective misunderstanding of God. But, if it is so, it creates a problem for us. Then anger is not a point of view from which we consider the capabilities of God, but it is itself one of God's capabilities.

Looking at Scripture, it immediately appears that God is not simultaneously the God of anger and the God of love. There is a moment in his anger, a life in his benevolence (Ps. 30:6); he will not remain angry for ever (Ps. 103:9); he averts (Isa. 12:1) or delays his anger (Isa. 48:9). He does not direct us to anger (1 Thess. 5:9). Should God confine his benevolence in anger, this would mean, to the believer's greatest concern, that God is changeable in his faith (Ps. 77:10–11). Finally, on the cross, where the terrifying depth of God's anger is noted in the God-forgotten Christ, it is revealed that not anger, but love, which determines God. For this reason, God's anger can be understood as God's only real and effective 'no' against sin. Since sin implies the rejection of the love of God, anger is simply God's love that stops him from being rejected (John 3:36; Matt. 18:32–34; Mark 3:5; Rom. 2:4–5). God's anger is not one of his capabilities, but the opposite of his *love*. In this reaction of his love, God's loving omnipotence becomes a destructive omnipotence; the boundless nature of his gracious presence

becomes the unavoidable nature of his judgement; his justice that builds one up and provides justice (Isa 11:4) becomes a punitive justice.

In order to give some direction to the problem of the relationship of God and suffering, we need to adhere to the distinction made at the start of this paragraph. On the one hand, the classical theopaschistic problem statement that is directly linked to the Christological issue of the unity of the Person of Christ in his suffering. On the other hand, there is the possibility that God can suffer, without this issue being called up by the Christological problem.

A detailed discussion of the Christological problem does not resort under theology as such and will be discussed under Christology. A few remarks suffice for our purpose. Berkhouwer's criticism touches the core of the matter. If God suffered on the cross, then we can question the confession of the suffering of the *human being* Jesus of Nazareth under God's anger. This soteriological criticism does not necessarily derive from the idea of a non-suffering God. Indeed, in its rejection of theopaschitism and its emphasis that the Son of God suffered after incarnation, the early church proceeded from the idea of God's susceptibility of suffering. But even if the church did not proceed from it, it would still have to arrive at the same formulation for soteriological considerations.

For these soteriological reasons, we must reject the modern theopaschistic thoughts as far as they base God's suffering on a conflict and paradox in the being of God himself. In this instance, the human nature of Christ also disappears; it is indispensable for the biblical doctrine of reconciliation. In addition, reconciliation is viewed as a drama that is played out in the being of God, and the cross is but a revelation of this drama. As such, the cross loses its character as a once historical reconciliatory action of God. Within such train of thought, it can no longer be true that reconciliation really occurred on the cross.

Our rejection of the theopaschistic thought that God himself suffered on the cross, without the express mention of the human flesh as the medium of suffering, does not mean the acceptance of an apathic God idea. This is not a wise choice for a God who is exempt from suffering and affliction. We cannot enforce such a choice upon ourselves because we are dealing with an abundance of biblical witnesses directed against every thought of indifference and loss of affection. This indisputable scriptural witness leads Berkhouwer to talk about divine compassion. Scripture tells us about God who is, in reality, involved with human life through his compassion and suffering. This God is compassionate and does not look down, unperturbed, upon the suffering of man; but in man's fears, he himself is afraid and, out of compassion, he saves man (Isa. 63:9).

He can get into a state about Ephraim, when he hears his mourning (Jer. 31:20); he is truly concerned about Abraham's generation (Hebr. 2:16). It is interesting to note that Scripture describes God's pity in terms that make it undoubtedly clear that he feels obliged in one way or another. His compassion does something to him. He is concerned and afraid: he is in a state. His compassion is, in the full sense of the word, 'com-passion'.

We now need to describe the possibility of God's affliction and suffering not only in terms of sympathy. Sympathy derives from God's love that can also reveal another aspect, namely the potential affliction of resentful love. The book Hosea has an overabundance of this. One can also talk about the sadness of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30). The biblical message that God is the love of God implies the end of any idea of God. Whoever turns this God into a passive judge who only makes claims, interferes with the wonder of his mercy when he himself did not save his own Son, but *surrendered* himself for the sake of all (Rom. 8:32). We should not ignore this part of the text that has often been used as a key witness for a theopaschistic train of thought. God's love for the sinner did indeed cost him something! We have been bought *at an expense* (1 Cor. 6:20).

We may not approach Scripture in this regard from a preconceived wise idea concerning God's absence of suffering only then to declare it away with the statement that, in this instance, we deal with an 'anthropomorph', in the sense of a 'unique' way of speaking about God. It is notable that Scripture portrays God's mercy as one of the things that distinguishes Him decisively from man: 'I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you.' (Hos. 11:9). Whoever does not wish to take Scripture literally robs the gospel of its heart because *God's heart* can no longer be found there.

When we examine the current different forms of atheism, each one of them has to do with an urge to *replace* God. God's existence is confirmed. It is not clear and it is difficult to define obligation towards a power that is described with the usual, profane terms, and not with the loaded term 'God'. The fact that such a term is often indescribable emphasises that this is about a surrogate for God, with a fictional absoluteness. Man is viewed as being orientated towards the new (Garaudy), utopia (Bloch), self-transcending love (Gardavský), or merely towards himself and his freedom (Sartre). The substitution can also be more prosaic when, in positivism, a claim to absoluteness is ascribed to reason, healthy intellect, science, and other relevant concepts. Finally, substitution can also be 'theological' when, for example, in his contagious freedom, man substitutes Jesus for God (Van Buren). In a secularised world, such as one in which modern man

has lost sight of God, he cannot eliminate the conviction that his life is finally oriented towards a transsubjective power. This does not provide any proof of God, but for faith, this refers back to the fact that God does not leave man in peace (Rom. 1:18).

Atheism cannot be refuted with the so-called proofs of God (see Thomas Aquinas par. 1.1). In the last instance, the proofs of God do not prove 'God', but 'only the indispensability of a guarantor for our world' (my translation, MM).³ A proved God is not the living God, the Father who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, but an Aristotelian prime mover who serves as a guarantee for man that his world is not based on possibility, not accidental, and not merely a conglomeration of accidentally realised possibilities. Such a guarantee does not really differ from the transsubjective power we find in more than one atheistic field. There is no main difference between Comte's unchangeable law of nature and a God who started the process of natural sciences. God is not a metaphysical greatness who is proved to be *from* the world, but He is the God who *reveals* himself to the world and whom we encounter in the physical form and history of Jesus Christ. For the naturally sinful man, the proclamation of this God is absurd (1 Cor. 1:23). Therefore, the proclamation of God in the modern secularised world does not lie in the 'convincing words of human wisdom' (1 Cor. 2:4), but in the absurdity of the preaching of the cross.

The anti-metaphysical nature of this Christian proclamation of God is not an escape from atheism's issues concerning the world and nature. On the contrary, this God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is confessed as the *Creator* of heaven and earth. Therefore, theology will always guard against the temptation, in the face of atheistic critique, to use God as an hypothesis that must declare the inexplicable in the life of man and the world. To the cost of Christianity, theologians have accommodated God in the gaps of scientific knowledge. This means that, the more man himself can explain and the more gaps he can fill, the further he pushes God back. This kind of theology can ultimately destroy itself, when it can no longer find a place for God. In the words of Bonhoeffer, God is not a stopgap ('lückenbüsser'). He has to do with total reality and must be proclaimed as such within the context of a century of secularism and disbelief.

As self-destructive as the above, instead of proclaiming *God* in a secularised world, a theology succumbs to the absorptive power of secularism, with the hope of saving something from the gospel by using the slogan: God is dead, Jesus lives! A proclamation of Jesus that is not a proclamation of God is not a proclamation of Jesus, because Jesus is the Son who entrusts himself unconditionally to his Father in heaven. In fact,

3 O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik*, I, Neukirchen 1959:249.

it must be stated, against any form of secularistic theology, that there is no better time for the message of *God* than the century of atheism. According to Ebeling,⁴ those who have bread give it to those who do not have bread. The doctor visits the ill, the messenger of God visits the Godless.

We have already pointed out the postulated nature of atheism. God's proclamation to the atheist shows, without any doubt, that, in acknowledging or denying God, it is ultimately not about the theorising intellect of man. There are existential decisions. It is about a choice. We can only know God with our whole person and our whole life. To know him is to live with him.

4 Ebeling (*Wort und Glaube*, II, Tübingen 1969:377).

