

# Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapters Five & Six

## "Who Is God?" and "What Is God Like?"

### Introduction

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If Chapter One of Christian Doctrine asked who does theology, Chapters Five and Six ask the most fundamental question theology can raise: who is the God we are talking about? Shirley Guthrie does not treat this as a settled matter. He opens it up with the care of a teacher who knows that the word "God" means very different things to very different people — and that Christians themselves often hold pictures of God that owe more to culture, childhood, and fear than to Scripture.

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These two chapters work together as a pair. Chapter Five establishes where Christians go to find out who God is — not to human philosophy or religious instinct, but to the specific, historical self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Chapter Six then explores what that revelation tells us about God's character: the qualities and commitments that define who God is and how God acts. Taken together, they lay the doctrinal foundation for everything else in the Christian faith.

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### Chapter Five: Who Is God?

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#### The Problem with "God" as a General Word

Guthrie begins by pointing out that the word "God" is essentially empty until it is filled with content. Everyone — ancient pagans, modern atheists, sincere Christians, and casual believers — uses the word, but they do not all mean the same thing. The question is not simply whether God exists, but which God we are talking about.

*"The Christian faith does not begin with a general idea of God and then ask whether Jesus is consistent with it. It begins with Jesus and asks what he tells us about God."*

This is Guthrie's central move in Chapter Five, and it is a significant one. He insists that the Christian knowledge of God is not arrived at by starting with a philosophical concept of a Supreme Being and then adding Jesus as an example. It works the other way around. Jesus Christ is the starting point. He is, in Guthrie's language, the decisive and definitive self-revelation of God.

#### God Is Known Through Self-Revelation

Guthrie is clear that human beings do not discover God by their own effort, reasoning, or religious instinct. God is not deduced from the beauty of creation or the depths of human longing, though

both of those may point in God's direction. God is known because God chose to make himself known — first through the history of Israel, and finally and fully in Jesus of Nazareth.

*"We do not know who God is by looking into our own hearts or by studying the world around us. We know who God is because God has come to us and shown us."*

This doctrine of revelation has practical weight. It means our picture of God must always be corrected by the biblical witness, not by our preferences or fears. Many people carry a God in their minds who is essentially an anxious rule-enforcer, or a distant cosmic force, or a therapist whose job is to make us feel better. Guthrie's Chapter Five calls all of those images to account before the God who shows up in Bethlehem, Galilee, and Calvary.

### **The Trinity: One God in Three Persons**

Chapter Five also introduces the doctrine of the Trinity — not as a theological puzzle to be solved but as the church's best attempt to describe what it has actually encountered in Scripture. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are not three separate gods, nor are they three masks worn by the same undifferentiated divine power. They are three distinct persons in one being, each fully God, bound together in an eternal relationship of love and mutual giving.

*"The doctrine of the Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle Christians are required to believe. It is the church's way of confessing what it has met in Jesus and experienced in the Spirit: the one true God who is in himself a community of love."*

Guthrie is careful to say that the Trinity is not a problem to be solved before we can get on with the Christian life. It is, rather, the shape of the Christian life itself — a life lived in relationship with a God who is, in his very nature, relational.

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### **Chapter Six: What Is God Like?**

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#### **The Danger of Half-Truths About God**

Chapter Six moves from the question of who God is to the question of what God is like — and Guthrie's opening warning is one every pastor knows from experience. People often hold onto one true thing about God and let it crowd out everything else. God is loving, they say — and then they cannot account for judgment. God is holy, they say — and then they cannot receive grace. Guthrie argues that we need the full picture, held together, not a single attribute inflated at the expense of the rest.

*"Every half-truth about God eventually becomes a whole lie, because it silences the other truths that give it meaning and balance."*

## **God Is Holy**

Guthrie begins with holiness because it is, in his reading, the most fundamental of God's attributes — not holiness in the sense of moral perfectionism, but holiness in the biblical sense of otherness. God is not simply a larger or better version of a human being. God is categorically different: the Creator, not a creature; the source of all life, not a dependent upon it.

*"To say that God is holy is to say that God is God — completely other, completely beyond our control, completely free from every attempt to manage or manipulate or domesticate him."*

This matters because it rules out a quietly popular heresy in which God becomes our cosmic assistant, available to bless our plans and confirm our preferences. The holy God of the Bible is not managed by human prayer or obligated by human goodness. He acts freely, from his own will and character, and he is not impressed by our attempts to put him in our debt.

## **God Is Righteous and Just**

God's righteousness, Guthrie explains, is not simply a moral standard God upholds from a distance. It is an active, relentless commitment to setting things right in the world — to the liberation of the oppressed, the protection of the vulnerable, and the defeat of everything that destroys human life and dignity.

*"God's righteousness is not cold legal justice. It is the passionate commitment of a God who takes sides — always on the side of life against death, of the poor against their oppressors, of the victim against the violent."*

This picture of a just God has deep implications for the church. A congregation that worships a righteous God cannot be indifferent to injustice in its community. The character of God shapes the character of the people who follow him.

## **God Is Loving and Gracious**

For Guthrie, love is not simply one of God's attributes among others — it is the lens through which the others must be read. God's holiness is the holiness of a loving God. God's justice is the justice of a loving God. The two are not in tension; they are unified in the character of the one who, as the New Testament says simply and staggeringly, is love.

*"God's love is not a sentimental affection that overlooks what is wrong. It is a fierce, costly, self-giving love that refuses to let us go — even when it must confront us, correct us, and at great cost to itself, rescue us."*

Grace, in Guthrie's treatment, is the form that love takes toward people who do not deserve it — which is to say, toward all of us. Grace is not God's reluctant concession after we have done our best. It is God's first and last word, the movement of his heart toward human beings before we have earned anything or asked for anything.

## **God Is Personal**

Guthrie closes Chapter Six with an observation that is easy to miss but impossible to overstate. The God of the Bible is not a force, a principle, or an abstract ground of being. God is personal — which means God knows, chooses, speaks, listens, grieves, and loves. The relationship God offers is not a technique for inner peace but an actual relationship with a God who is genuinely, personally present.

*"To say that God is personal is not to say that God is a person like us. It is to say that God is at least as personal as we are — capable of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved, of genuine relationship."*

This is the God Guthrie has been describing across both chapters: not a philosophical abstraction, not a moral enforcer, not a distant watchmaker, but the living God who comes — in history, in Scripture, in Jesus, and in the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit — to be known by the people he has made.

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## **Christian Doctrine — Chapters Five & Six**

### **Discussion Questions**

Read each question before class if you can. There are no trick questions here — Guthrie's goal and ours is honest, careful thinking. Write your thoughts in the space provided and bring them Wednesday night.

### **On Chapter Five: Who Is God?**

**1.** Guthrie says most people fill the word "God" with content drawn from culture, childhood, or personal experience rather than Scripture. What picture of God did you grow up with? How has that picture changed — or how do you think it needs to change?

**2.** Guthrie insists that Christians must start with Jesus when they want to know who God is, not start with a general idea of God and then fit Jesus in. What difference does it make in practice to let Jesus define God rather than the other way around?

**3.** The doctrine of the Trinity says God is in himself a community of love — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternal relationship. How does that picture of God shape the way you think about human relationships and community?

### **On Chapter Six: What Is God Like?**

**4.** Guthrie says every half-truth about God eventually becomes a whole lie. What is a half-truth about God that you have seen cause damage — in a church, in a family, or in someone's personal faith?

**5.** God's holiness means God cannot be managed, manipulated, or domesticated. Where do you see people — including yourself — trying to put God in a manageable box? What does it cost us when we do?

**6.** Guthrie describes God's justice as passionate and active — always on the side of the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. How does that picture of a just God challenge or shape the priorities of a local church like San Pedro?

**7.** Guthrie says God's love is not sentimental — it is fierce, costly, and refuses to let us go even when it must confront us. Have you experienced love from God that felt more like confrontation than comfort? What did you learn from it?

**8.** If God is genuinely personal — knowing, listening, present — what does that mean for how you approach prayer? Is your prayer life consistent with the God Guthrie is describing? What would need to change if it were?