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Chapter 1

God's Self-Existence

And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain. And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations. (Exodus 3:11-15)

The translators set the words in Exodus 3:14, “I AM THAT I AM,” in capitals, for that is the name of God, and God’s memorial throughout all generations. “I AM,” of course, means “I AM the self-existent One.” I want to speak about God’s divine attribute of self-existence, or God’s selfhood. I’ll use both of those terms and probably some others. But before I go on, I ought to say a little bit about a divine attribute—what it is and what it isn’t.

Now an attribute of God is *not* that of which God is composed. The very fact that God is God indicates that God isn’t “composed” at all. You and I are composed. We’re composed of body, soul, mind, spirit, imagination, thought and memory. We’re a composition, because there was Someone there to compose us. God took clay and His own breath, and as an artist brings the paints to the canvas, God brought all of His genius to the matter and spirit out of which man is made and He composed man. And so the attributes of man are the component parts; they compose the man.

But when we talk about the attributes of God we have no such idea in mind at all, because He said, “I AM THAT I AM.” Anything that is composed has to have been composed by someone, and the composer is greater than the composition. If God the Father Almighty had been composed, somebody greater than God would have had to be out there to “make” God. But God is not made! Therefore, we cannot say that the attributes of God are the parts of which God is made, because God is not “made” of parts.

God exists in simple unity. I'm a unitarian and I'm also a trinitarian, you see. I believe in the unity of God. And when we say that God is One, if we're scriptural we do not mean that there is only one God, although that also is true. But we mean that God is One with Himself, without parts. God is like a diamond; the diamond is one with itself. God is like gold; it is one with itself—only that's a poor, cheap illustration. God is infinitely above all that.

God's attributes are not God; that is, I say that God is self-existent, but that's something that I posit about God—that isn't God. I say that God is holy, but holiness is not God. I say that God is wisdom, but wisdom is not God. *God is God!*

Would you like a definition of attribute as I shall use it? It is something which God has declared to be true of Himself. And one thing God has declared to be true of Himself is, "I AM THAT I AM"—I exist. Not "I will exist," or "I did exist," but "I do exist." The philosophy of existentialism begins with the propositions "I exist" and "There is no God." But the Christian believes that God is the original existence, that He said "I AM." And because God is, everything else that is, is.

An attribute of God is something we can know about God. It is knowing what kind of God God is. In this study of the attributes we'll try to teach what God is like.

Reason must always fall short of God. I was talking to one of the greatest minds in the evangelical world recently and I asked him, "You don't believe, do you, that all that God is can be grasped by our intellects?"

He responded, “If I didn’t, I would be an agnostic.”

I didn’t think to say it at the time, but afterward I thought, “Well, if you believe that everything that God is can be grasped by the intellect, you’re not an agnostic, you’re a rationalist.” That is rationalism, pure and simple—the belief that I can understand anything God says and anything God is, if there is a God. The idea that my brain is the criterion of all things, that’s rationalism. And rationalism almost always follows a rigid, hard orthodoxy, because it says, in effect, “I know God, I understand God, I can grasp God.”

But the truth is that God rises transcendentally above all that we can understand. The human mind must kneel before the great God Almighty. What God is can never quite be grasped by the mind; it can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit does not reveal what I am trying to tell you about God, then you only know *about* God.

The little song says, “More about Jesus would I know,” but it isn’t more *about* Jesus that the heart craves after, *it’s Jesus Himself!* It is the knowledge of God, not the knowledge *about* God.

I might know all about the Prime Minister of Canada, but I don’t know him—I’ve never met him. From what I hear and read and the speeches I’ve heard him make, I suppose he’s a fine gentleman. If I were to live with him awhile—travel with him, eat with him, talk with him—I suppose I’d get to know him. But now I only know *about* him, that’s all. I know about him—his age, background, etc.—but I don’t know him.

And so, when we talk about the attributes of God, we're talking about His essential essence, of which He says, "I AM." But we're talking only about that which the intellect can grasp. Thank God, there are some things the intellect can know about God. And even though we can't know, except by the Holy Spirit, about God, yet the mind is never better employed than when it is seeking to know this great God Almighty.

And if even the imperfect knowledge that you and I can have of our Father which art in heaven raises us to such rapture, and satisfies so deeply the roots of our being, then what must it be in that day when we look on His face! What will it be in the day when we no longer depend upon our minds, but when, with pioneer eyes of our souls, we look without mediation upon the face of God Himself! Wonderful! It's good to get acquainted with God now so that at the end of time you won't be embarrassed in His presence.

I'd like to point out something here: Everything that is true of God is true of the three Persons of the Trinity. Did you know that there was a time when the idea of Jesus being God—being truly God—was believed by one branch of the church, but not by another?

A man named Arius came along and began to teach that Jesus was a good man, a superior man, but He wasn't God. And the leaders of the church met together, a council, they called it. They studied the issue and they gave us the Athanasian Creed. Here's what they arrived at, and I'll never get over

thanking God for these wonderful, learned, godly men. They said, “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.”

I am a unitarian in that I believe in the unity of God. I am a trinitarian in that I believe in the trinity of God. And they’re not contrary one to the other.

We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.

For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.

I don’t know whether you’ll agree with me or not, but to me it is just like music to hear these old, godly, serious-minded church fathers set this out for all the ages. For the last 1,600 years, the church has feasted on this:

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.

The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.

Yet there are not three eternal, but one eternal.

As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.

So also the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty, yet there are not three almighties, but one almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

Now that's what we believe, my brethren: we believe in the three Persons, but one God.

The three Persons are three, but the one God is One. And this we believe. So when I talk about God, I mean the three Persons of the Trinity. You can't separate them—"not dividing the substance," said these old fathers. You can't have God the Father except you have God the Son; you can't have God the Spirit unless you have the Father and the Son, "for the Spirit proceedeth from the Father and the Son." So when I'm talking about God, I'm talking about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—not confusing their Persons, for there are three Persons. But everything that is true of the Father is true of the Son and the Holy Spirit. And everything that is true of the Son and the Holy Spirit is true of the Father. Let's get that settled before we go any further.

Self-Existent Selfhood

God is self-existent selfhood. Novation, the church father, said, "God has no origin." Just those four

words, “God has no origin,” would be an education to the average person. Origin, you see, is a creature word. Everything came from somewhere. One of the questions that every child asks is, “Where did I come from?” Then you have a job on your hands! It won’t be enough to tell him he came from Jesus, because when he gets a little older he’ll say, “How did I come from Jesus?”

Everything has an origin. When you hear a bird sing, you know that once that bird was packed in a tiny little egg. It came from somewhere; it came from an egg. Where did the egg come from? It came from another little bird. And that bird came from another little egg, and that egg came from another bird, and so on, back, back, back to the heart of God, when God said, “Let the heavens bring forth, let the earth bring forth, let the dry land appear,” as it says in Genesis 1.

Origin is a creature word. The trees had an origin, space had an origin, the mountains, the seas—all things have an origin. But when you come back to God, you come back to the One who has no origin. He is the Cause of all things, the uncaused Cause.

Everything is a cause and effect. For instance, a man walking down the street with his little boy is the cause of the little boy. But the man is also an effect, he was caused by someone else—his father. It’s cause and effect, cause and effect, down through the years, until you come to the Cause that is the Cause of all causes—God. God is the uncaused Cause of everything. He is the Origin that had no origin.

This same Athanasian Creed says:

The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.

The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.

The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

I want to think, pray, study and meditate on God and get to learn the language of the place where I am going. I'm going up there where the Father is, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. All the great company of the redeemed is there—the blood washed, the regenerated, the sanctified. And when I get there I want to be able to speak the language of that place—without an American accent!

I want to know the language of the place where I am going, and the origin of that language, the origin of heaven itself, is God. God Himself has no origin, but He is the originator of everything else. He is the uncaused Cause of everything. God is the original, the "I AM THAT I AM." The verb "to be" (as in "I AM") is the Latin root of the word "essence." God is the original, uncreated essence.

God is not derived from anything. Everyone is derived from someone else and everything is derived from some other thing. But when it comes to God, God is underived—uncreated. If God had derived from something else then that something else would have antedated God.

That's why one of the silliest expressions that was ever used in all the wide world is to say that Mary

is the “mother of God.” How could Mary be the mother of God, when God is the original essence? Mary wasn’t back there before God was. She’s the mother of the body of Jesus and she’s nothing more than that.

It was in the holy womb of the virgin Mary that the great God Almighty compressed Himself into the form of a Babe, and so we honor her and respect her highly, for she’s blessed among women as the one that God used as the channel to come into this world of ours. But before Mary was, God was! And before Abraham was, God was. And before Adam was, God was! And before the world was—the stars, the mountains, the seas, the rivers, the plains or the forests—God was! And God is and God will ever be. God is the originating Self. God’s selfhood is His holy being—His unsupported, independent existence.

God’s Selfhood and Prayer

Did you ever think about God without getting down on your knees and begging for something? Most of us, when we pray, we bring our grocery list and say, “Lord, we’d like this and this and this.” We act as if we were running to the corner store to get something. And God has been dragged down in our thinking to nothing more than the One who gives us what we want when we’re in trouble.

Now God does give us what we want—He’s a good God. God’s goodness is one of His attributes. But I hope that we’ll not imagine that God exists simply to answer the prayers of people. A businessman wants to get a contract, so he goes to God and

says, "God, give me." A student wants to get a good grade, so she goes to God and says, "Give me." A young man wants the girl to say yes, so he gets on his knees and says, "Father, give her to me." We just use God as a kind of source of getting what we want.

Our Heavenly Father is very, very kind and He tells us that we are to ask. Whatever we ask in the name of His Son He'll give us, if it's within the confines of His will. And His will is as broad as the whole world. Still, we must think of God as the Holy One, not just as the One from whom we can get things. God is not a glorified Santa Claus, who gives us everything we want then fades out and lets us run our own way. He gives, but in giving He gives us Himself too. And the best gift God ever gives us is Himself. He gives answers to prayer, but after we've used up the answer or don't need it anymore, we still have God. In God's self there is no sin. We creatures properly and rightly and scripturally have everything to say against self and selfishness—it's the great sin. But God's self is not sinful, because God was the originator of us all, and it is only our fallen selves that are sinful. Because God is the original, unfallen, holy God, God's self is not sinful. The poet says,

In Thy praise of Self untiring
Thy perfections shine;
Self-sufficient, self-admiring,—
Such life must be Thine;—
Glorifying Self, yet blameless
With a sanctity all shameless
It is so divine!¹

God loves Himself—the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father and the Son and the Father love the Holy Spirit. They understood this in the olden times, when men were thinkers instead of imitators and they thought within the confines of the Bible.

Incidentally, in discussing God's attributes I am not trying to think my way up to God. You can't think your way up to God any more than you can climb a ladder to the moon. You can't think your way into the kingdom of heaven—you go in by faith. But after you're in you can think about the kingdom of heaven. You can't think your way to England, but after you get there you can think about England.

So God loves Himself. And He loves Himself because He is the God who originated love. He is the I AM of love, the essence of all holiness and the fountain of all self-conscious light. The words "I" and "I am" always refer to the self. I knew a dear old brother—God bless him, he's in heaven now and he'll wear a crown so big that it'll come down over my shoulders, I'm sure—he'd been a missionary to China and he didn't believe much in saying "I." He knew that "I" meant self, and a fallen self is a sinful thing, so he would always say "one." And he'd say things like, "When one was in China one said this, and one did this." He meant himself—he was afraid to say "I." I suppose if he'd been writing Psalm 23, he'd make it read like this: "The Lord is one's Shepherd, one shall not want. . . ."

There's nothing wrong with saying "I" or "I am."

But when you say, "I am," you always put "am" in lower-case letters. But when God said, "I AM," He put it in capitals—there's a difference. When God says, "I AM," it means He did not derive from anywhere. He started the whole business—He is God. But when I say "I am," I'm a little echo of God.

I believe that God is very, very proud of His children. I believe that throughout the vast reaches of this universe God is happy to call His people His people. Do you remember what God said about Job? The sons of God—the angels—were all passing in parade, and who comes with them but Satan himself. The brass, the arrogance that he had—traveling along with the unfallen sons of God! And when he got out before the reviewing stand, God said, "Have you seen my servant Job? He is a good man and eschews evil. Have you seen my servant Job?" (See Job 1:8). He was proud of Job.

God is proud of His people, and He's proud to have us say, "I am" in a little echo voice, because He is the original Voice who said "I AM THAT I AM." The doctrine of man made in the image of God is one of the basic doctrines of the Bible and one of the most elevating, enlarging, magnanimous and glorious doctrines that I know. There's nothing wrong with self-respect, there's nothing wrong with saying, "I am" and "I will" and "I do" as long as we remember we're saying it in lower-case letters, as an echo from the original One who first said, "I AM."

Strange, isn't it, that God the Son was called the Word and God enabled man to speak. And he enabled no other creature to speak. Not the finest-bred

dog can talk, not the finest myna bird (they're supposed to talk, but they don't know what they're saying). Man alone can talk, because only man has this thing we call the *logos*—the Word.

The essence of sin is independent self. You see, God sat on the throne—the I AM. And along came man and said, "I will" and sought to rise above the throne of God. He disobeyed God and took the bit in his own teeth and became a little god in his own right. The sinful world says, "I am," forgetting that they are an echo of the One above and saying it in their own right.

Mussolini said, "I will make my life a masterpiece." What a masterpiece he was—that big, bloated, arrogant gorilla! And now he lies rotting in the clay and the worms are feasting on the man who used to stand on a balcony and make big, noisy, bombastic speeches. That is what sin is.

The definition of sin is fallen selfhood. God made us to be like planets—around and around they go, held by the magnetic attraction of the sun. In the same way, God is the great "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2). And around Him, warmed and healed and blessed and lighted by His Holy Person, all His creatures move—all the seraphim, cherubim, angels, archangels, children of God and watchers in the skies. And best of all was man, made in His own image. We revolved around God as a planet around its sun.

Then one day the little planet said, "I'll be my own sun. Away with this God." And man fell. That's what we call the fall of man. That's where sin came

in—sin reached up and took God's self and said, "I'll be self myself." And God was ruled out. As the holy apostle said, they did not like to have God in their minds, therefore God gave them over to vile affections (Romans 1:26). All the evil that the police, educators, doctors and psychiatrists are worried about now—deviancy, sodomy, exhibitionism and all the rest—all came as a result of man not wanting to have this God in his mind or in his heart, not recognizing Him as being God. He went out on his own to be his own little god.

Isn't that the way the average sinner acts? He's his own little god. He's the sun. He puts himself in capital letters and forgets that there's anybody up there that'll judge him.

Sin has symptoms and manifestations, just as cancer has certain manifestations. I've seen a few cancer victims in my time; my own father died of cancer. They have symptoms, but the symptoms are not the cancer; if you clear up the symptoms, you still have the cancer. Sin also has manifestations—many manifestations. Paul gives a list of them in Galatians 5:19-21: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like."

And yet, he didn't tell us sin at all, he told us the symptoms of sin. These things are all symptoms of something deeper: our asserting self. It is asserting my created and derived self, putting myself on the

throne and saying, "I am self: I am that I am."

I have read books on existentialism. I could shudder and grieve that men can be so tragically mistaken as they are, and yet I knew they were because I read my Bible. Existentialists say that man is—man wasn't created, man just *is*—and he has to start from there. He has no Creator, no planner, nobody that thought him out: he just *is*. They make man say what only God can say: "I am that I am." Man can say, in a modest humble voice, "I am," but only God can say in capital letters, "I AM THAT I AM." Man has forgotten that and that is sin.

It is not your temper that is sin; it's something deeper than your temper. It is not your lust that is sin; it's something deeper than that—that's but a symptom. All the crime in the world—all the evil, the robberies, the rapes, the desertions, the assassinations—they're but the external manifestations of an inward disease: sin.

And yet, it is not to be thought of as a disease so much as an attitude, a derangement. There sat God upon His throne, the I AM THAT I AM, the eternal self-sufficient, self-existent One. He made man to be like Him and gave him a will—He said, "Man can do as he pleases." He meant for man to circle around the throne of God as the planets circle around the sun. And I repeat, man said, "I am that I am"—he turned away from God, and fallen self took over. No matter how many manifestations sin may have, remember that the liquid essence in the bottle is always self.

That's why it's not always easy to get people to become real Christians. You can get them to sign a

card, or make a decision, or join a church, or something like that. But to get people delivered from their sin is a pretty hard deal because it means that I've got to get off that throne. God belongs on that throne but sin has pushed God off and taken over.

Can you imagine it? The great God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, said, "This is My name throughout all generations, My memorial forever: I AM THAT I AM. I never was created; I was not made, I AM. I made you for My love. I made you to worship, honor and glorify Me. I made you to love you and hold you and give Myself to you. But you turned away from Me. And you made yourself god and you put yourself on that throne." That is sin.

That's why the Scripture says, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). What does "born again" mean? Among other things, it means a renewal, a rebirth, but it also means getting off the throne and putting God on it. It means that the self-existent One is recognized for who He is.

Reverently and humbly, I kneel before His Son, who died and rose and lives and pleads, and I say, "Oh, Lord Jesus, I give up. I'm no longer going to sit on the throne and run my own life. I'm no longer going to trust in my own righteousness, which is only a filthy rag. I'm no longer going to believe in my good works or in my religious activities. I'm going to trust Thee, the God of grace, the God who gave Thy Son to die." And so the new birth takes place and I trust the Lord Jesus Christ, the Man in the glory, my Savior and Lord. And thus I am saved.

Long ago there was one by the name of Lucifer, to whom God gave a position higher than any other creature—at the very throne of God. One day pride took over and he said, “I will arise, I will set my throne above God’s throne.” And he became proud and God cast him down (see Isaiah 14:12-14).

That’s the devil.

And it is the devil who is leading the world now, “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2), right out there among the leaders of society, our politicians, our literary men and all the rest. This is true not only in North America, but all over the world from the day Adam sinned. We’re guilty of offending His majesty, of insulting the Royalty that sits upon the eternal, uncreated throne. We’re guilty of sacrilegious rebellion.

It isn’t as if you’re doing Jesus Christ a favor by coming forward and signing a card with a big grin. It’s a matter of realizing that you’ve been occupying a stolen throne—one that belongs to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. You’ve been saying, “I AM THAT I AM,” in capital letters, when you should say meekly and reverently, “O God, I am because Thou art.” That’s what the new birth means. It means repentance and faith.

So what is God like? God is not like anything you know, in that God is self-existent and nothing else is.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,

From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.²

When heaven and earth were yet unmade,
When time was yet unknown,
Thou in Thy bliss and majesty
Didst live and love alone!
Thou wert not born; there was no fount
From which thy being flowed;
There is no end which Thou canst reach:
But Thou art simply God.³

Our Father in heaven, Thou art God and Thy name is I AM THAT I AM forever. In Thy lovingkindness Thou hast created me, but I have sinned. "All we like sheep have gone astray"—that's the essence of sin. We have all turned to our own way, and our own way will end in hell. And our Lord said, "If any man follow Me, let him deny himself." Father, I recognize Thy right to run my business, Thy right to run my home, Thy right to guide my life, Thy right to be all in all to me. "Not I, but Christ be honored, loved, exalted; Not I, but Christ be seen, be heard, be known." Not I, but Christ.