

# Who and What Is God? - Part 1

I have a quotation for you from a very prominent individual who is currently alive. Summing up a view of the world, as the 20th century came to an end, Hans Kung, a renegade Roman Catholic, said:

"No name has been so misused, defiled and mauled. Men have torn it apart into religious factions, have killed for it and have died for it.

"There is no comparable term to designate the supreme reality and yet it is so often used to disguise the worst impieties."

We don't necessarily credit too much to this man, but this is a very wise and a very appropriate observation about the name of God.

God's name is a name that has created discord. As Hans Kung said, men have torn it apart. They have defiled it. They have misused. They have mauled it. They have torn it apart it into religious factions. They have killed for it, and they have died for it.

Who and what is God? That's a challenging question. Do you really know who and what God is?

The challenge is the fact that this world is full of false knowledge. Unlearning false knowledge is always very much more difficult than learning new knowledge. To learn something new is very easy. To unpack and unburden yourself of what is wrong can be very much more difficult.

Part of the problem is always knowing the right question to ask. The consequent problem of that is that people often have the wrong point of reference. They start from the wrong point, and because of this, they come to a wrong conclusion.

The apostle Paul had something to say about this:

***Romans 1: 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.***

***20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,***

If you really want to know about God, there is a possibility, by looking at what God has done. But this world has rejected what God has shown them.

***21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.***

***22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,***

***23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.***

God lost His glory and His place. Why? Because they rejected God's place. They did not glorify Him as God. They were not thankful. They became futile in their thoughts.

This is Paul's estimation of the world two millennia ago! What hope does anybody have of ever knowing God, except by God revealing Himself to them? Any other way is impossible. The true knowledge of God is so lost to humanity that it is only by revelation, by God opening a person's mind, that it is possible for a person to really come to know who and what God is. The apostle Paul continues ...

***22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,***

Have you ever considered the way in which humanity became fools in terms of God? Have you ever considered the import of what the apostle Paul is saying here; the ways in which people immediately following the apostle Paul literally bought into that same foolishness in a very, very tragic way? He said:

***23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.***

We could go to a museum and look at the antiquities of Babylonia and Egypt. We can see the way in which they created their gods, and the forms in which they created their gods - exactly as the apostle Paul describes here. There is nothing different.

So who and what is God? Paul addresses this knowledge of God from creation, so let's go to the creation. Let's go to Genesis 1 ...

***Genesis 1: 1 In the beginning God ...***

... and we've already hit two snags. We are not going to deal with the first difficulty today - the Hebrew phrase translated "In beginning." People throw bricks at one another over that!

We will just look at the second word: *God*. What's the problem with the word *God*? Everything, because, according to the philosophers, God isn't what He should be. The word *God* in Hebrew is the word *Elohim* - and the problem is that the word is plural! It's a plural noun from the word *Eloah* which also means *God*. What do you mean by *plural Gods*? What do you mean by the plurality?

The theologians say that it can't be. Or it must mean *the plural of majesty*, just as the Queen might say: "We," representing she and her country, or she and the duke. So commentators have developed the idea of the plural of majesty. But the word is used with plural prepositions a little later in the chapter!

Why is it that the name "God" cannot be plural? Let's look at the basis of the study of God as has come down to us over the last two and a half thousand years.

The basis of the study of God is one word: theology - *the study of God*. No guesses as to what language it came from. It's not the Greek's fault that they gave us a language of philosophy. *Theology* simply means *the study of God*. Theology as we know it today really started with one particular man: Aristotle. We can't find him in the Bible. But he talked of a subject which he referred to as *Ta meta ta physic* - meaning: *that which is after or beyond the physical*. In mapping out the physical world, Aristotle looked at God being an extension of the physical world. He said the spirit world was simply an extension of the physical world.

So he established the rules of *metaphysics* - *that which comes after or before physics*. Metaphysics influences people's study of the Bible, as we will see. It has had a profound influence upon the study of the Bible.

When we talk about the nature of God, when we talk about who and what God is, we find ourselves talking in terms of metaphysical terminology. With metaphysics Aristotle sought to define the spirit world as an extension of the physical, by it being the negation of the physical world.

In other words, the physical world is made up of bits. We have 'x' number of people sitting in the audience today - all individuals, all separate, individual beings. In other words, physical human beings can be divided. We can look around the room and almost work out who is related to whom. In other words, the physical world is divisible.

Aristotle believed: "Therefore, by extension, the spirit world is not divisible." So you can't divide spirit up. The physical world, by being divisible, can be measured. It occupies space. The spirit world, by not being divisible, cannot be measured, and it doesn't occupy space. So there's a whole list of aspects that carries on from Aristotle's metaphysics.

Aristotle didn't devise all of this himself. He established the principles and people have developed it from that point onwards.

It has influenced "Christianity" right down to the 20th and 21st century. It still influences "Christianity" in the 21st century, but you probably never knew that Aristotle had anything to do with the word of God!

Yet Aristotle really laid the foundation whereby people claim to have an understanding of God. Metaphysics says that the spirit world is not divisible. It is not defined by space. It is not defined by time. It doesn't have a time dimension. It exists outside of space and time, and various arguments proceed from that.

Today, in terms of theology, we don't necessarily talk about metaphysics. We can't pick up a Bible dictionary and look up "metaphysics," and hope to find all the answers.

But have a look at systematic theology and ask yourself: "What is the basis of systematic theology?" Most systematic theology is based upon a foundation of metaphysics. If you study into systematic theology for a period of time, you will find that it uses terms such as *transcendence*. You may struggle through your Bible to find out what it means for God to be transcendent.

Yes, there is a means by which God is transcendent, but the problem is, it's not based upon metaphysics. There are Scriptures that talk of God being far off. But not because of metaphysics! God is far off because of sin!

There are Scriptures which deal with some of these words that are used in terms of systematic theology: immanence, omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotent. There are Scriptures that people feel speak to these terms. But that's not what they are there to describe. They are there for another reason. The problem is that people's concepts of the use of these terms are based upon a false concept.

The focus of systematic theology could be placed upon seeking to define the physical nature of God. People are very concerned about it. What is God like? People want to work out things in terms of the physical. They miss the whole point of what who and what God is. If you think that's bad, it gets worse!

What does the Bible tell us? Let's stop and consider something from God's word, so we don't get our minds too filled with Aristotelian metaphysics, or systematic theology.

The Bible does not describe the spirit world in great detail, but it does give us some insights into it. Those insights are enough to contradict the whole premise of metaphysics. Metaphysics says that spirit is not divisible. From that, we get people who believe in panentheism, in which God is throughout everything in the universe. "You have to be careful what you do to the wall, because God is in the wall." Panentheism means *God is everywhere because spirit isn't divisible*. Pantheism is another variation of it.

But there's something that you and I appreciate that contradicts the whole premise of metaphysics. What is it? There are different types or forms of spirit!

God is a spirit. As Jesus Christ said to the woman at the well, those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth. So it literally talks about two forms of spirit in one verse.

The angels, and the created spirit beings that worship before God's throne are described in the book of Hebrews as ministering spirits that are sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation.

The angelic world is a spirit world. But it's a very different spirit world than that of the Father and Jesus Christ. They are created spirits, whereas Jesus Christ and the Father are eternal; totally different.

What about the demonic world? Satan is a created archangel who rebelled and led a third of the angels in rebellion to God. Are those angels any different, as a result of their rebellion, from the angels that they were beforehand? Emphatically yes!

They are bad spirit, as opposed to good spirit in terms of the angelic world. What about the spirit by which they operate? On the one hand there is the Spirit of God and on the other hand, there is the spirit of the world.

What about the spirit in man? What do you know? You know enough to pull the carpet on metaphysics, because you know that there are different types of spirit!

Aristotle could never conceive of that. That was beyond him. Yet people still wrestle with this in terms of trying to understand God in this day and age. They still approach God from a metaphysical point of view. They can't see God outside of philosophy.

Spirit is divisible. Metaphysics is wrong. Physics is the study by the senses, of the senses. It's a study of things that can be sensed, or the study of the *sensible*. Metaphysics is the study of knowledge beyond the senses.

As A.J. Ayer described:

"Metaphysics is the study of pure nonsense" [Language, Truth and Logic].

When the philosophers call the shots, what can you do? Here is a man who had a problem with metaphysics, so he described it for what it really was: pure nonsense! Because it deals with things that are non sense!

Metaphysics redefines another word that is used in terms of God. It will help you appreciate how totally metaphysics has influenced even the way in which WE oftentimes consider God.

Metaphysics redefines another word that is used of God, that you would use to describe our religion, our appreciation of God. Have you ever considered yourself to be a monotheist? I think most people do. We describe ourselves as being monotheistic.

Monotheism refers to one God as opposed to many. *Mono* as opposed to *poly* - many. But would you be surprised to realise that there are different concepts of monotheism? There is the Greek view which, if I am not mistaken, is the one WE always think of. Why? Because that's the world we have grown up in. That's the world that has shaped us.

The Greek idea is based on a horrible word called *ontology*. It is to do with being; that there is one being called God. It is, to reduce it to the simplest, a matter of arithmetic: one. The Greeks always felt that one could never be divided by zero. One is one and it always will be. That was their concern.

The Greek view of the world that arose out of metaphysics was of an ontological monotheism: that there is only one being called God. The emphasis is upon the mono - the one.

On the other hand, in the Hebrew world, they had a different concept of monotheism. It was, to reduce it to its simplest, described simply as supremacy or uniqueness.

I would like to read you a couple of quotes from the Encyclopaedia Judaica that tells us the way in which the Jews looked upon God as a monotheistic God. Breaking into a very long article on monotheism, it says:

"The *theos* stands for a God who is personal. The *mono* connotes essentially not arithmetical oneness, but oneness in the sense of uniqueness ... it excludes the existence of any other qualitatively similar being."

In other words, he is saying that our monotheism is based upon the quality, not the quantity! The emphasis is upon the *theos*, not upon the *mono*.

Let's look at a Scripture that speaks to that:

**Exodus 20: 1 And God spoke all these words, saying:**

**2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.**

"... This is the God that I am. I am a God who redeems people from bondage." The writer of the above article talked about God being very personal.

In verse 3 it moves into what is normally considered to be the very first commandment. It is actually the LAST PART of the first commandment.

**3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.**

"There is no one who is like unto Me. I am the only God that can save you from the land of Egypt. I am the only God that can bring you out of bondage."

The very fact that the commandment says that we are not to have any gods before God, is an indication that the monotheism of the Bible recognised that there were other things called gods. They were inconsequential.

It wasn't just the idols that God was talking of. He was talking about the ways we can create idols for ourselves in our own minds. We are not to create other idols, other gods, before Him.

Continuing from the previous quote from the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the writer said:

"The authentic meaning of biblical monotheism is the assertion that the *mono*, i.e. the unique, the ultimate, is *theos*, i.e. a personal being, and this is the distinctive and unique feature of biblical faith."

The fact that there is a unique God that is above all else is totally different from the metaphysical idea of monotheism.

Sometimes you might like to take the Scriptures that are used in God's word in terms of monotheism. You might like to read them and consider them in terms of what is being described here - the ultimate: in other words, the supremacy of God as opposed to the arithmetic God. The Scriptures will make sense!

Let's take an example from the apostle Paul. Paul talked to the Ephesians about the unity that they were to seek, and that we are to have within God's church. He tells us that we are to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

**Ephesians 4: 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;**

**5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;**

**6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**

As we read through that, it's very easy to get caught up with the "ones." Yes, there is one Lord. There is one faith. There is only one way. We don't exist in a world where there is a plurality of ways of coming to God. There are not a plurality of ways of salvation. There's one calling. There's one baptism.

But notice the way in which Paul talks of God the Father. He talks of one God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in all. He really is the supreme. This is the way in which we live. This is the God we worship: the God who is above all else. It's not based upon metaphysics. It's based upon what God Himself says.

Monotheism is a big subject. I want to help you appreciate a little more of what the apostle Paul was saying in Romans 1:19-23. I want to give you a little section of what is almost the conclusion of the Encyclopaedia Judaica's article on monotheism. The writer says ...

"The notion of the arithmetical unity of God arises against ... pluralistic formulations found in other religions, such as the dualism of the Zoroastrian, Manichean, or Gnostic formulations and the trinitarianism of Christianity.

... that's when metaphysical monotheism came into its own. He carries on by saying:

"The notion of the ontological uniqueness of the Godhead arises mainly when Judaism conceives and expresses itself in the philosophical-metaphysical domain, i.e. when its God becomes the god of the philosophers."

To put this another way, he is saying that we have rejected true knowledge, and we have surrendered to the philosophers. Judaism today operates on the basis of ontological monotheism. In other words it has bought into metaphysics. Why and when? It bought into it to deny the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Under Jewish thought, there was no great problem that Jesus Christ could be the Son of God. Ethical monotheism, or unique monotheism (whichever name the Jews liked to use for it) that existed at the time of Christ, allowed for other beings in the Godhead.

The Jews didn't have philosophical connections over Psalm 110 where it said:

***Psalm 110: 1 The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."***

They didn't have a great philosophical debate over how one like the Son of Man could approach the Almighty (Daniel chapter 7). How could this be? They didn't get into those great debates because they accepted the Godhead as being much more open than the Greek world could ever provide for.

But by accepting the Greek view of the Godhead, it was a very, very convenient way of saying that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God. Think of the time when Jesus Christ was brought before the Sanhedrin prior to being slain. The High Priest said, "Tell us PLAINLY, are you the Son of God?"

When Jesus Christ answered and said, "You are going to see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God," what did he then accuse Jesus Christ of? Did he accuse Him of denying monotheism? No.

He accused Him of blasphemy because the High Priest thought He was saying that He was equal to God. They considered it was perfectly possible for a person to be equal to God, "but just don't say it yourself, of yourself." That was when you got yourself into trouble. Don't say it of yourself. Let others do it.

There was another account where Jesus Christ was confronted and they were taking issue with Him, claiming He blasphemed.

***John 10: 34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods"?"  
35 "If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken),  
36 "do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"***

They had no answer to Him. So this aspect of monotheism became unified in the world sometime toward the end of the 1st century. Having rejected true knowledge, as the apostle Paul said, they then rejected what knowledge they had of God. It's a rather profound lesson of history.

If you reject knowledge of God, everything can be taken from you. Blindness can be given to you.

So the Jews who had a certain knowledge of God, in part, suddenly found themselves without that knowledge.

It wasn't just false Christianity that took the arguments of the philosophers, Judaism did as well. What was the impact upon Christianity? There were three centuries of bloodshed as people fought over the nature of God. The whole nature of God debate was based on the rejection of the knowledge of God.

In the last 2,000 years people having been living under a false premise as to who and what God is, because they seek to define Him in an incorrect manner. They seek to define Him according to the philosophical standards of the pagan world, rather than according to the word of God.

So let's look at the Word of God, and let's appreciate who and what God is.

The Bible discusses the character of the spirit world. It does not necessarily describe its "physical properties" but it describes its character in a very profound way. Let's go back to Genesis and let's rid ourselves of the preconceptions that have been imposed upon Christianity by metaphysics and philosophy. Let's just read Genesis for what it says, and let God explain Himself.

***Genesis 1: 1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***

That is the start of it. God is a creator, and the very first thing that God wants us to realise of Him is that He is a creating being. He is very concerned about that.

Verse 1 has been described as being the most majestic comment that is made in any creation epic that exists. People read Genesis 1 and they compare it with the Babylonian creation epics and various things of that nature from all around the world. They say that no other creation STORY has a statement that reaches the majesty or the glory of Genesis 1:1! There is nothing that comes near it!

God said that in the beginning He created the heavens and the earth. A little later in this chapter, He uses exactly the same word in terms of human beings. Once again He expresses Himself in the plural:

***26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ...***

He continues by talking about the responsibilities, the job description, that man has. Humanity was created in the image and in the likeness of God. God created humanity for a role that could best be described as being one of caring - a characteristic of God Himself; a characteristic of the God family, the Godhead.

In chapter 2, God sets that out in a little more detail for us. He shows His caring concern for His creation by saying:

***Genesis 2: 18 (The Tanakh) The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a fitting helper for him.***

If it wasn't good for man to be alone, what does this say about God Himself? Is He a lonely remote individual? I don't think so! If God realised His created work needed someone to be with it, a fitting helper, He understood something about companionship, about relationships.

As we continue, we see that God allowed a deep sleep upon the man ...

***21 ... and while he slept, He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place.***

***22 And the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman, and He brought her to the man.***

***23 And man said:***

***"This one at last is bone of my bones***

***And flesh of my flesh;***

***This one shall be called Woman,***

***For from Man she was taken."***

***24 Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife so that they become one flesh.***

God provides for us a very clear indication of one of the roles of His creation. Humanity was created to have a relationship with one other in terms of the family. We could look and see that even that family relationship is a model that God uses to describe His relationship with us as well.

What do we look forward to as God's church? We look forward to a marriage whereby we become the bride of Christ! Humanity was created to have a relationship one with another, principally through the family.

The Bible speaks of the marriage of the Lamb, but it was a long time before that that God showed to Israel the fact that He intended to enter into a marriage relationship with them at Mount Sinai. The covenant relationship into which Israel entered with God was a marriage relationship. God intended to have a relationship with humanity.

Humanity was created, not only to have a relationship with one another, but they were to have a relationship with God. It was to be an intimate relationship. Just as a relationship between a husband and a wife is to be an intimate relationship, so the relationship between God and His creation is to be an intimate relationship.

Genesis 3 talks of that relationship with God:

***Genesis 3: 8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.***

"The Lord God," as He is described here, wanted to have a relationship with His physical creation, in the cool of the day, in the breeze, when it was pleasant to be out. But Adam and Eve had sinned by that point in time, and they hid themselves from God.

People always wonder why God has removed Himself. But God didn't remove Himself. Humanity removed themselves from God. They broke the relationship that God desired to have, and it is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we can move back into that relationship with God.

What sort of relationship was it that God wanted to have? Paul sets out very clearly for us the type of relationship that God desires to have with His creation. He said:

***Ephesians 3: 14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man,***

Paul described the Father as being the One from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. In other words, you and I are to be part of the very family of God.

In terms of metaphysics that is heretical! That's why, under metaphysics, you end up floating around on a cloud with a harp to pluck, or looking for a cup of water to cool your tongue in the flames of hades.

That's why people end up with such strange notions of a relationship with God - because of metaphysics. The apostle Paul wasn't influenced by metaphysics. He was influenced by the word of God. Writing later in the book of Hebrews he describes that relationship in a little more detail.

***Hebrews 2: 11 (New Revised Standard Version) For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,***

The New King James uses the ecclesiastical term "brethren," which says nothing apart from a reference of coming together in church. Paul was saying something much more FAMILIAL. The word he uses is not just a certain detachment - "We'll get together every Sunday," or "We'll get together every Friday," or wherever it is people might get together in the churches. It is family!

Jesus Christ, as our elder Brother, is not ashamed to call them brothers. The New Revised Standard Version takes a bit of artistic licence here and includes sisters.



***12 saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."***

So the whole purpose of God in creating humanity was to have a family relationship. Why? Because that is what God is! God created the family relationship to help us understand Him - and His being.

We look upon marriage as being a purely physical action. The reason that so many marriages fall apart is because they are entered into from a purely physical perspective: "What I can get out of it".

It's a business relationship. One party brings something to the marriage. The other party brings something else. As long as both meets the needs of both parties, it will work out well. That's not what marriage is really about at all.

Marriage is about creating a SPIRITUAL BOND that is a type of the Godhead. God is a family, and God wants to develop that family relationship.

So we might ask ourselves: "Who and what is God?" He certainly is a being that seeks to create. He is creating a family. He is creating relationships on the individual level, relationships that can only be governed by the word of God. That's the way in which successful relationships are governed - based upon the word of God - on the individual level and at the family level on the larger scale.

God is providing us an insight into His family. We could look at some other aspects, but time prevents that today. Perhaps it's wise for us to go back and rehearse what the apostle Paul said to the church in Rome:

***Romans 1: 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (the truth that God has revealed),  
19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.***

God has created in humanity a desire to belong. There is a sense of desiring to belong, a sense of relationship within humanity. It drives most human beings. They like to have friends. We see that in little children. They are very concerned about who is going to be their friend, and the relationships that they can build with one another. They can be very transitory at times. Yet the desire is there to build friendships.

God created that in us because He desires a relationship with us as well.

***20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,***

Marriage and the family are all portrayals of God, of the Godhead; of the relationship that exists between the Father and Jesus Christ at this point in time, and the relationship that He desires to have with His created being.

They are without excuse ...

***21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.  
22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,  
23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.***

Rather than seeking to be like God, they made God like themselves. They debased God. Rather than seeking to elevate humanity to be like God, they lost sight of it.

The apostle Paul wrote this to the church at Rome somewhere in the late fifties, early sixties. Within some

thirty or so years, his own people, the Pharisees, of whom Paul was one, were to fall prey to exactly the same problem. Why? Because they had rejected the knowledge of God. They bought into the same concept of who and what God is, that all the pagan world had, which false Christianity has subsequently, and which all humanity has been deceived by.

It is interesting to extrapolate out where monotheism takes you. You say you are a monotheist. We use this term frequently. We talk about Israel being the home of the three monotheistic religions in the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It's always talked about from the Greek perspective, from the philosophical point of view.

But if there is only one God, how can you ever commit idolatry? You can't. You might say it's a little more of the deception. "You can't break this commandment of God because there is only one God."

But we create idols all the time, of our own making, of our own hands, of our own minds. We fall prey and we sin. God says "I want you to learn the type of God that I really am: a Being that is different from everything that mankind understands."

You and I have the privilege, because of the calling we have, of being able to strip away some of the thousands of years of false knowledge. We have the ability to start to look at who and what God really is!

*... Peter Nathan  
19 July 03*

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