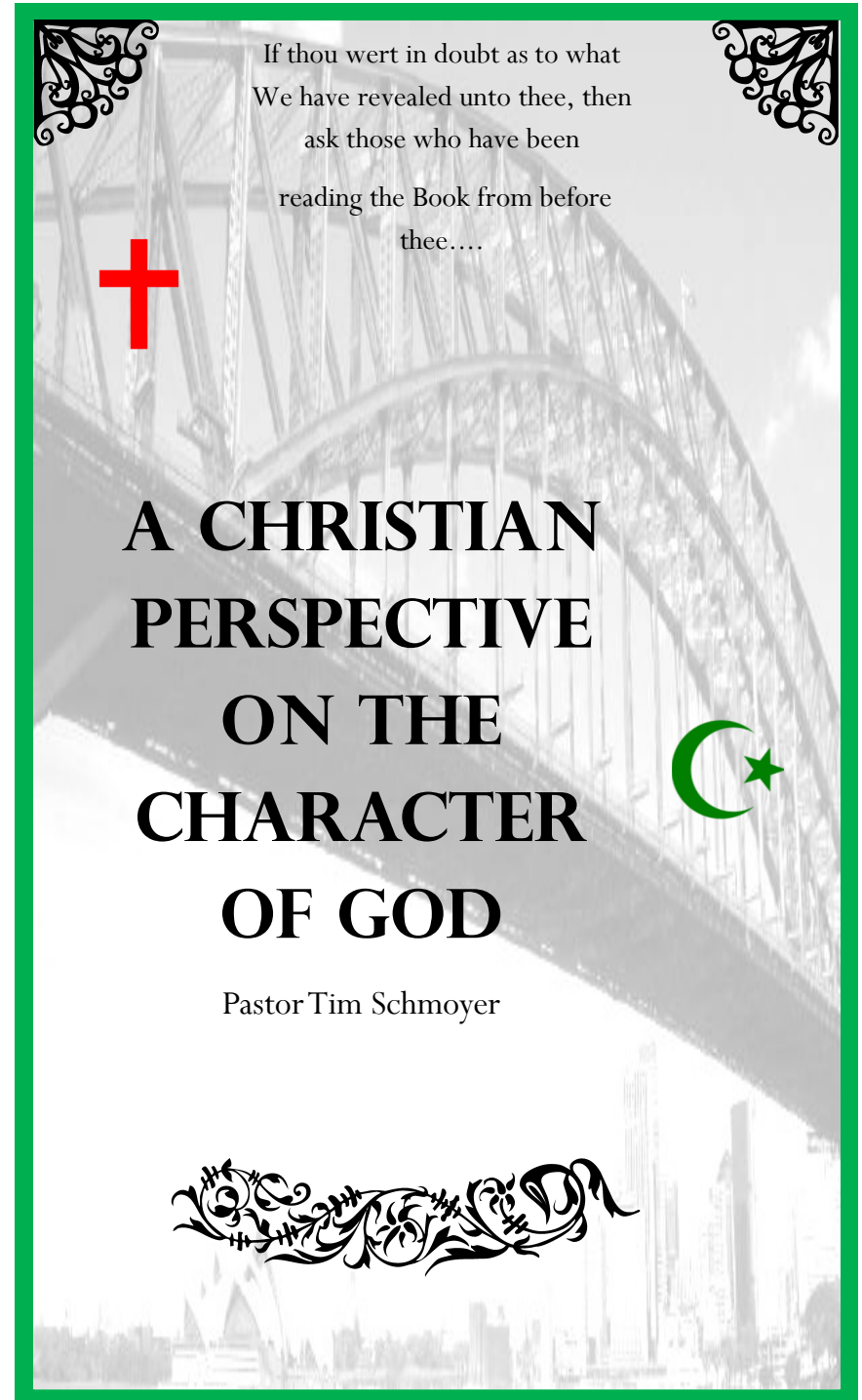




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If thou wert in doubt as to what
We have revealed unto thee, then
ask those who have been
reading the Book from before
thee....



A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHARACTER OF GOD



Pastor Tim Schmoyer



I am very glad to welcome our friends from the Muslim Association of the Lehigh Valley. I look forward to an interesting evening of dialog. Feel free to write your thoughts down on the blank paper we have provided. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Transcendent and Immanent

We have an impossible assignment this evening. Who is God? What is He like? Christians and Muslims both agree that God is transcendent, that is, He is high and lifted up. He is unsearchable and unfathomable. King David, reflecting on God's majesty, wrote "Great is the Lord and highly to be praised, His greatness no one can fathom" (Psalm 145:3). Isaiah the prophet wrote "My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9). The Qur'an likewise says "There is none like unto Him" (al-Ikhlās 112:4). The task of speaking about an inscrutable (impossible to understand or interpret) Person seems like an impossible task.

However, we have reason to be thankful for God has not left us to our own devices in this task. Muslims, Christians, and Jews share a heritage which we may call "being people of the Book" that is, we have Divine Revelation which informs our journey to knowing God. We don't blindly wander in this journey; instead, God directs us to Him through His revealed Word. We therefore will endeavor tonight to discuss what God is like using His revelation.

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom
and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and
unfathomable His ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who
became His counselor?
Or who has first given to Him that it might be
paid back to him again?
For from Him and through Him and to Him are
all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen."
Romans 11:33-35

Jesus, God and Man

Christians believe that Jesus had to be fully God and fully man in order to reconcile the two together after sin entered the world. If He were only human like all of us, He would also have sinned. The Bible teaches that He went through every kind of temptation we go through, yet He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He being God and man was able to take the guilt of our sin, as John the Baptist said of Him “behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). We believe He had to be both so He could bridge the gap between us, to bring us back to God. Paul writes on this concept “there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 2:5).

Conclusion

I thank you for your attention and your thoughtful consideration of the ideas I presented. I look forward to hearing from my friend Rizwan regarding the character of God from the Muslim position. I look forward to your questions and the dialogue together. May God bless us all in the knowledge of Him. Allow me to conclude with a prayer of praise that Paul writes to summarize the theological portion of his letter to the Romans:

Numerous times God implores us “seek Me and you will find Me” (Deuteronomy 4:29, 1 Chronicles 28:9, 2 Chronicles 15:2, Proverbs 8:17, Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 11:9-10, Acts 17:27). In this invitation to seek God, we see God’s heart and His desire. God wants to be known. God wants the peoples of the world to know Him and to enjoy the bliss and refreshment of knowing Him and being His. The prophet Jeremiah adds to this invitation a very revealing requirement “when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). Not everyone finds God and the reason they do not is because they do not put their heart into it; there is no effort on their part and so they never come to the truth of God. So we have seen so far that God is transcendent (high and exalted, in one sense inaccessible) AND at the same time also immanent (close by, ever-watchful, concerned for us, and urging us to know Him). Muslims and Christians would both concede this seemingly contradictory dichotomy and we embrace it. God the lofty One desires mankind to know Him. So let us know Him and speak of Him more fully...

God is Holy.

We believe that God is set apart in moral perfection. Holiness means set apart or unique... God is wholly other and one-of-a-kind. Holiness also means moral perfection, no hint of wrongdoing, sinless, always right, no accusation of wrong could stick. God is pure, undefiled, unable to sin. In the Old Testament, God says “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exodus 33:20). God’s holiness is so pure, sinful humans die in His presence.

On two occasions God visibly reveals Himself to prophets and His grace sustains them through the glorious revelation. The prophet Moses is brought before God when God wrote the Ten Commandments on two tablets after Moses had shattered the first set. On this occasion in Exodus 34, God reveals Himself and His character. Moses' immediate reaction is to declare his sin and beg for forgiveness. Nearly a thousand years later, Isaiah the prophet is brought before the Lord in a vision. On this occasion in Isaiah 6, God reveals Himself and His character. Isaiah's immediate reaction (like Moses') was to declare his sin and beg forgiveness. The reaction of these two prophets gets at the point the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament made when he wrote "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). This same pattern of God revealing Himself and men confessing their sin is repeated with Jesus and Peter. Jesus reveals His power in a great catch of fish and Luke records "when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" (Luke 5:8). God is holy, set apart in His moral perfection. Those who see this about God always show contrition for their sin and seek His merciful forgiveness.

God is Merciful

This expression of God's people humbly seeking God's forgiveness is in their reaction to His character. God's people know that God is most merciful, they therefore seek His mercy. Mercy, in the Old and New Testaments, is God's desire to withhold punishment that is deserved. Mankind

relations with Mary in order to produce Jesus (Sura 112:3, 19:35, 88-92). In the Qur'an, Muslims ask "How can God have a son when He had no consort?" (Sura 6:101) and "He has taken neither a wife nor son" (Sura 72:3). Conversely, Muslims believe that God spoke and miraculously produced a human fetus in the womb of Mary.

In fact, Christians agree with Muslims on this. Christians do not believe that God had relations with Mary. When the New Testament calls Jesus "the only begotten Son of God" it is in reference to His uniqueness, not of His biological origin. Christians believe that since Jesus is God, pre-existent from all eternity past, God brought about His human birth through the miracle of virgin birth so as to protect Him from the accusation that He was just a human (and not at all God). The Jews of Jesus day still dismissed Jesus as an ordinary man despite His miraculous birth, and wonder working, and compelling teachings. They still called Him the son of Joseph dismissively (Matthew 13:56, Mark 6:3, Luke 4:22, John 6:42). You may ask, "how did Jesus come to be in Mary's womb?" God created Adam and Eve instantaneously by miracle. What prevents Him from miraculously creating Jesus in the womb. My question for Muslims is if Jesus were a prophet like the other prophets, why did God go to the trouble of Jesus' miraculous birth? If He was just an ordinary man, albeit prophet, why did God to such great lengths? Mohammed is the greatest prophet, according to Islam, yet according to Islam, God did something far more unique with Jesus' birth story. Christians believe God went to the trouble because Jesus is no ordinary human or teacher or prophet, He is all that and more.

the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth” (Micah 5:2-4).

As mentioned earlier, John writes that Jesus “was with God and was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2).

Paul writes about Jesus “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

The author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews writes about Jesus “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they” (Hebrews 1:1-4).

Jesus, Son of God

Most of my cursory reading of the Qur’an shows me that Muslims are very concerned about what they think Christians mean when we call Jesus the Son of God. There are numerous references concluding Christians think God had

does wrong. That wrong, that sin, is deserving of God’s judgment. Yet God when He revealed Himself to Moses in the previously mentioned story from Exodus 34, reveals Himself in this way:

[Moses] “took two stone tablets in his hand. The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.’ Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. He said, ‘If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession’” (Exodus 34:4-9).

This word compassionate is rendered as merciful as well. Jesus told a story about the mercy of God towards us, His sinful people. A Father had two sons, the younger of which wanted his inheritance immediately. The Father reluctantly complied and the foolish son left home to squander his inheritance in a far off land. Once the money ran out, the son had no more friends, food, or shelter. To survive, he worked for a farmer by feeding the pigs. In the pig’s sty, he came to his senses and realized that even his father’s servants had

plenty of food and safe shelter. He returned home, planning to ask his father to become one of the household servants. But when the father saw his runaway son returning home, the father lifted his robes and ran to meet his son on the road. He embraced, kissed, and rejoiced with his returning son. The father returned home with his son and threw a huge party saying to everyone “this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:24). This story reveals God’s anxiousness to “forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin” as He had revealed to Moses 1,500 years earlier. Did the son deserve being restored by his father? In the pigsty he had been sunk in shame and degradation and brought shame on his father and family.

One of the questions I will raise to my Muslim friends tonight regards their definition of mercy. It seems in my cursory look into Islam, that Allah is merciful in that He helps the helpless. I believe that God does do this. However if that is the extent of His mercy, we need to point out that the God of the Christians and Jews is one that goes beyond helping the helpless; He helps the undeserving, He forgives sin and releases the guilty of their deserved punishment. This is our understanding of God’s mercy.

God is Gracious

God reveals Himself to Moses as “merciful and gracious.” I would like to speak on God’s grace as well as His mercy. While mercy is God’s desire to withhold punishment that we deserve, grace goes far beyond. Grace is God’s desire to

Jesus Pre-existence

God revealed through the prophets of the Old Testament that God would become a man. It began with Adam and Eve in the garden. When God pronounced His sentence on the serpent and them, He said to the serpent Satan, “And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3:15). In this promise, God was saying that the serpent would be crushed by an offspring of man. The salvation of mankind is however too big a task for any mere mortal. Christians believe that this is the first of many promises foreshadowing the Redeemer, Jesus, curing mankind of sin.

Later in Isaiah, God tells us “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). This shows us that a human child will be born, but He will be called “Mighty God, eternal Father”. The Christians do recognize Jesus as human AND God, but this text is in the Jewish Scriptures.

Micah, too, prophecies the coming King who is Christ. “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity. Therefore He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel. And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of

also says that God is one. I bring this up to show that Jesus is either contradicting Himself OR that Jesus is claiming the three Persons are one God. Christians come to conclusion that it is the latter rather than the former.

Jesus Claims to Deity

Let's see some of Jesus' claims to Deity.

"I and the Father are One. The Jews picked up stones again to stone him." John 10:30-31

"Before Abraham was, I AM (Yaweh – the name of God in the Old Testament)" John 8:58

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we saw His glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-3, 14)

"I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.'" (John 6:38-40)

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (Revelation 22:13) compared with Revelation 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

give good things to those who do not deserve good. While mercy is not getting bad though we DO deserve it, grace is getting good though we DO NOT deserve it. Humans do not deserve paradise. "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). The psalmist has a low (but accurate) view of the human condition when he writes "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (Psalm 53 as referenced in Romans 3:10-12).

So any hope for our entrance into heaven hangs on the choice of God to be gracious rather than condemning. We deserve damnation for our sinfulness. God deserves satisfaction due to His holiness. Yet He decides to graciously forgive, like the father (in Jesus' story) who gladly embraced his runaway son that came home. God does not make us His servants, but His sons. He restores us to divine favor, the favor a father places on the son he loves, not because we deserve it, but because that is the character of God, most gracious and loving.

God is Love

One of the loudest statements in the Bible is that God is love. Not that He is loving, but that He IS love. John writes in his first letter about the command Jesus left His followers with. "Not a new command, but the one we had from the beginning... The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who

loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him” (1 John 2:7,9,10). And again in his second letter, John writes “Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another” (2 John 5). This command for followers of Jesus to love other people, stems from the nature of God Himself. He asks us to love because He is love. We see this in John’s first letter when he writes:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7-11).

This love is not *just* an emotion, although it is God’s emotion toward us. He has His feelings towards mankind, but then His feelings are put in to actions towards us. “This is how the love of God was manifested to us” John writes. Paul puts it this way “God demonstrates His own love towards us in this: Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8) and again “the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20). Jesus talks about God’s love in action in this way “For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal

life” (John 3:16). All of these Scriptures show us that God’s love is an active love. His character drives Him to act. There are many kinds of love in this world. I love my wife. I love pizza. I love my brothers. We demonstrate our love differently depending on the relationship. The word in all of these texts quoted above is the Greek word *agape* which is best defined as self-sacrificing love. I surrender my own best interest to seek your best interest. This is the way that God through Jesus loves mankind. For this reason, He invites His followers to love others this same self-sacrificing way.

Let me sum up what we have talked about so far. God is transcendent and immanent simultaneously. He is high and exalted while also being the near friend. God is holy set apart in moral perfection. God is most merciful, most gracious, and most loving. We could certainly say much more about God’s character. I chose the traits I felt were most helpful to our conversation tonight.

Trinity

The aspect of theology proper (the study of God) that separates Muslims and Christians the most is the Christian view of the Trinity. Muslims, Jews, and Christians all agree that God is One. Muslims call this the Tawhid; Jews call this the Shema, “Behold, o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Christians also believe this. Jesus quoted the Jewish Shema in Mark 12:28-30 and Matthew 22:37. Jesus claims to be God and equal with the Father but