



# The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685  
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill  
[administrator@latimertrust.org](mailto:administrator@latimertrust.org)  
[www.latimertrust.org](http://www.latimertrust.org)

## **Biblical Truth for Today's Church**

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

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### **LATIMER COMMENT 22**

#### **WE BELIEVE IN GOD**

WE BELIEVE IN GOD (A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, Church House Publishing, £3.50)

#### Background

We Believe in God is the latest(1987) report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission. It follows two earlier reports, Christian Believing, which appeared in 1976, and Believing in the Church, which was published in 1981. The first of these caused widespread dismay in the Church at large, because it was felt that fundamental Christian doctrines were being denied by the Commission. The second was generally regarded as more moderate and positive in its approach, though it still did not address itself directly to the actual content of Christian belief. The third report, composed by a Commission which overlaps only partly with the one which composed the second, and not at all with the one which produced the first, seeks to address itself to the fundamental question of belief in God, and what this involves for today's Christians.

#### Content and Method

The report is longer than Christian Believing but shorter than Believing in the Church. It is written in a semi-popular style which is calculated to appeal to the educated layman as well as to the clergy. In fact, much of what it says, though semi-technical, is not theologically technical, and there are places where the educated layman may feel more at home than the average clergyman!

There are nine chapters of roughly equal length, each of which was written by a different member of the Commission and then approved by the rest. The first chapter is an introduction which outlines the way in which a doctrine of God might be formulated today. It seeks to achieve a balance between inherited tradition and contemporary experience, though it is the latter which exerts the more dominant role.

The second chapter deals with epistemology (the doctrine of knowledge), and contains a long discussion of scientific method, using Newton and Einstein as two typical examples. The argument is that rigorous scientific precision is neither possible nor necessary in many disciplines, including theology. Reasonable certainty and confidence can be had without absolute proof, and this is what we must aim to achieve in formulating a doctrine of God.

The third chapter deals with the questions of language and personality. Scientific, poetic, devotional and metaphysical language are all discussed in turn, and then there is a short section of the nature of personality and its importance for faith. Chapters 4-6 are largely concerned with Biblical evidence for a doctrine of God. The Bible is characterised as revelation, though this is later qualified by statements which describe it as a distillation of many different perceptions of the Divine. Great weight is placed on its narrative and historical character, and something is said about the eschatological dimension. There is a section on inner inconsistencies and apparent contradictions in Scripture, with a conclusion which points to the finality of Jesus for interpretation.

There then follows a chapter on the God of Jesus, which turns out to be a summary of Old Testament and Intertestamental teaching. The former concentrates on the being of God (one, holy etc.) but the latter mentions only the expectation of visionary experiences, the development of Messianic hopes, and the belief in the resurrection of the dead, none of which directly concerns the being of God. Of Jesus' own teaching, little is said except that he addressed God as Father and preached the coming of the Kingdom of God. The chapter on the God of the Disciples expands the New Testament teaching to include a belief that Jesus was the Son of God, the Word and Wisdom of God, and the Revelation of God in the world. This revelation is carried on today by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 7 concentrates on the Trinity and marks a new departure in the report as a whole. Instead of semi-technical scientific and linguistic discussion, we are taken immediately to the experience of prayer. Prayer is presented as participation in a divine dialogue conducted in principle by the members of the Trinity. This is followed by a chapter on knowing God through encounter and response, which also gives a prominent place to the theme of prayer and is based on the deeper spiritual principle of obedience. The last chapter is entitled "The God in Whom We Trust" and makes a stab at dealing with the complex issue of theodicy, including the suffering and victory of God in Christ.

### Analysis

Most readers will probably feel instinctively that chapters 7 and 8 are the best in the report. They deal most directly with issues of spiritual experience, and are therefore easily understood by anyone who has a living spiritual life. There is little in either of them which is likely to excite controversy, and the Commission is to be commended on finding room in its report for an approach of this kind. The last chapter is more controversial, but the area which it attempts to cover is too vast for the space allotted to it, and ought probably to be the subject of a separate report at a later date. It is probable that many will warm to its remarks on the suffering and victory of God who will have been puzzled or angered by statements made earlier on in the report.

On the negative side, it must be said that the report relies too much on contemporary human experience. The earlier chapters frequently state that the number of people in the world - not all of them Christians, by any means - who continue to believe in a God even after the challenge of scientific atheism is an important reason, perhaps the main reason, for

continuing to take God seriously today! This is not the language of Christian faith, which maintains that God must be taken seriously even if there is nobody on earth who believes in Him!

A second criticism is the approach to the Bible. We would not expect the Doctrine Commission to be fundamentalist in its approach to Scripture, but it goes out of its way to highlight apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the text. Evangelical readers can hardly fail to be offended at this, especially as the report reflects a very one-sided approach to modern Biblical Studies. To put the major part of Jesus' teaching about himself in the chapter headed "The God of the Disciples" makes it clear that the Commission does not regard that teaching as coming from Christ himself, a position which then opens the door to a serious reduction of its significance for believers today.

Finally, the report never really tackles the question of revelation. Does God speak to man and reveal himself to him or not? Whenever the report gets close to this subject it turns out that what we are really talking about is human perception(s) of God, not the Divine Voice itself. This is the heart of Evangelical disagreement with the approach this report adopts, and must figure as the main objection to it. Unless and until we can recover a sense of "Thus saith the LORD" when we read Holy Scripture, we are bound to emerge with both an inadequate understanding of the text and a reduced picture of the God in whom we believe.

Gerald Bray