



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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By Nature Like God

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We are created in the image of God. That's what the Bible says about us. But what does that mean? What significance do we attach to that bit of information?

I attach a great deal of significance to that bit of information. From believing it, I get a strong sense of who I am, and of what my true nature is. I have to conclude that I am by nature like God, and that is awesome to contemplate, especially when I think about who God is.

God is creator. God is love. God is life. God is spirit. If I am by nature like God, then, in some sense, I am all of these. How can that be? How can I, in any sense, be all these?

Actually, the questions are inappropriate. If I am by nature like God, then the qualities and characteristics of God apply to me, too. I am all of them. I am as God is. The more appropriate questions, then, are, "How do I more effectively express being by nature like God?" "How do I grow spiritually?"

The obvious answer is that I need to learn more about being by nature like God, and about my spirituality, and practice what I learn.

Spirituality isn't an easy term to define, nor to understand. When I use the term, I mean the wholeness, the full potential, of a person. Therefore, all of me is involved in my spiritual being and in my spiritual growth – my body, my mind, and my emotions – all of me. I want to grow toward wholeness, toward becoming all of which I am capable. I am a spirit being. The spirit of God is in me. I am alive. I want to experience the full meaning of that aliveness. I want to grow spiritually. I want to be ever more effective in expressing my spirituality. I want to be whole.

How do I do that?

First, by becoming thoroughly aware of God's nature.

How can I know the nature of God?

I have at least two resources. One is the Bible, and the other is human beings. I can find out about God from either or both of these sources. I have to acknowledge, however, that both sources are, at best, ambiguous. I also have to keep in mind that the Bible, however inspired it may be, was written by human beings who expressed their own understandings, points of view, and beliefs. Ultimately, I have to decide for myself what I believe the nature of God is, and, with that, to have some understanding of my nature.

I've already suggested that God is creator, love, life, and spirit – rather inclusive and ill-defined terms, yet expressive of so much about God. I don't get anything very concrete from them. Thereby, I point to a problem. When I try to think about the nature of God, and mine, I regularly lack concreteness. The words that describe the nature of a

living being, including God, just aren't concrete. So I have to work with my own meanings, however poorly I may communicate them.

I turn to the Bible and find that God has many attributes, some of which are positive and some negative.

God is in charge of God's creation. God is wise and knowing. God sees what God has made as good. God is understanding, and kindly, and merciful, and forgiving. God is patient and long-suffering. God is firm and considerate of the well-being of God's people. God suffers, feels disappointment and dismay, longs for God's people to experience the full measure of their nature in the image of God.

In fact, all the positive and constructive attributes that we find and can observe in human beings also belong to God. So, to reinforce what I find in the Bible, I can learn about the nature of God by observing human beings. Indeed, I can learn about the nature of God by being attentive to myself.

When I observe with care, I end up summarizing the nature of God in one word – and that is love. I don't know what the word means, and I do know what it means, especially when I think in terms of love without any strings. Then I know that love is an attribute of God, and not a response of God. I know that God loves, no matter what. In fact, all those attributes can be seen as ways that God responds to human beings since God is love.

I wish that I could say that the Bible never presents any other attributes of God than the positive ones. In fact, the Bible describes God as having many negative attributes, like wrath, punitiveness, arbitrary and capricious use of power, vacillation, and indecision. God can be persuaded and manipulated. It is difficult to know what God wants. God demands that people obey God, and isn't always clear about the rules. God threatens dire consequences when people fail to obey, whether or not they know what rules to obey. There is plenty of evidence in the Bible that suggests that God is, at times, a rather unsavory character who is to be feared and obeyed at all cost.

Human beings exhibit all those same characteristics.

The Bible also presents God as a decider. So are human beings. So one might say that it is in the nature of both God and human beings to decide how to manifest their nature. The preponderant message of the Bible, for me, is that God has always decided to manifest that love-without-strings that is God's nature.

Since I am by nature like God, I decide that I want to manifest the nature of God that is love. But I am not at all sure that I know how to do that. It is evident that my first step needs to be to become aware of the nature of God, and, thereby, to become aware of my own God-given nature. God is love. I am love. What do I do with that knowledge? What is the next step? How do I grow spiritually? How do I grow toward my wholeness?

The second step has to do with what I am willing to allow myself to believe about myself.

On the basis of what has happened in my life to date, and my response to it, I have come to believe things about myself. For instance, if I have been taught that I have little value unless I obey the rules faithfully and/or have outstanding achievements, and if I have only occasionally lived up to what I thought was expected of me, I end up either believing that I have little value, or that I am always in danger of failing. Whatever I believe about myself, am I willing to be open to revising that belief? Am I willing to allow myself to believe differently?

Am I willing to allow myself to believe that I am by nature like God?

If I am willing, I can grow spiritually.

I remind myself that I am a spirit being. Spirit is the divine element in human personality. Spirit, in a manner of speaking, is the presence of God and the power of God within me. It is my identity with God. It is the life principle. I am a spirit being. I am alive. My life, by nature like God, is God's unconditional gift to me.

If I grow spiritually, I grow in my awareness of who I really am – gift of God.

To grow spiritually, I turn to my knowledge of me and what more I can learn. I set as my aim in life to grow daily toward the full expression of the life principle in me. I make use of the whole of me – my body, mind, and emotions. I give attention to attitudes and understandings. I stay in touch with how I feel, and why I feel as I do. I examine what I do and why I do it. I spend time in prayer, Bible study, and meditation. I identify my beliefs that are behind all that I think and feel and do. Where indicated, I revise those beliefs so that my thinking and feeling and doing will change. I use all of me to grow toward the full expression of the life principle in me.

I am well aware that growth is scary, and that I feel a lot of pressure not to grow. I remind myself that I am fully capable of using the whole of me to prevent my growing. If I do not guard against it, I allow my mind to play tricks on me and try to convince me that I can't change, or do not really want to. I affirm that I am unworthy. I insist that God puts strings on God's love. I deny that I am by nature like God. I fervently declare that I have to be good, keep the rules, and/or achieve something significant to rate being accepted by God – or by anybody. I blame sickness or weakness of body for keeping me from being what I could be. I see myself as victimized by life. I make it possible to remain unchanged. I use my body and my mind and my feelings to keep me from growing, or from manifesting the love of God that is in me.

Oh, yes, I am well aware that I can use all my resources to keep from growing spiritually, as well as to grow.

I want to grow spiritually, so I take the second step. I decide that I am willing to believe that I am by nature like God.

The third step is the implementing step. I decide that I want my life to manifest the loving nature of God in me, and I commit myself to learning how to do that.

There are resources. I've already mentioned Bible study, prayer, and meditation. I can also commit time and energy to looking into myself to be clear about my reasons for whatever I do and say. I can examine my behavior patterns. I can seek to identify my defense systems. I can be attentive to what is really going on with me. I can keep before me the question, "Is my life – the things I do and say and think and feel – a manifestation of the loving nature of God in me? If they are not, how do I change them?"

Let's say, for instance, that I have a friend. Saturday evening is our special time together. We watch TV. We go bowling. We sometimes work in his hobby shop. And lots of evenings, we just talk. I appreciate that friend and attach special value to what we do together.

I went to my friend's house one Saturday evening, and he was not there. He hadn't called to tell me of any change in plans. I didn't know what to think. On my way back home, I realized that I was getting very angry. How could he do this to me? Didn't our friendship mean anything to him? I was outraged!

I made no attempt to contact my friend and did not hear from him until the following Thursday. He was very apologetic, explaining that, on Saturday, he had responded to a crisis in the family of an uncle, and had only that day gotten back in town. He said that he had tried to call me before he left on Saturday but had not been able to reach me.

I was still smarting from my hurt and told my friend that I had other plans for the coming Saturday night. I was very aware of his puzzlement, but offered no explanation for my coolness.

You can pick the story up and write the conclusion. Certainly, my behavior didn't manifest the loving nature of God, and, unless I really take charge of myself, subsequent behavior won't either.

If I mean what I have said, it is time for me to recommit to my acceptance of the belief reality that I am by nature like God, and to my determination to grow spiritually so that I, day by day, manifest more completely that loving nature of God. I can do no less with my life.