

## Chapter 4: The Doctrine of God: His Unshared Attributes: Part 1

In this chapter and the next two, we'll be discussing the attributes of God. By "attributes" we mean those qualities of God's nature that make him what he is. The attributes of God are permanent and intrinsic to his nature. In addition, God's nature as a triune Being (three Persons, one essence; Trinitarianism) is itself an attribute of God. Consequently, it should be noted that the attributes of God are qualities characteristic of all three persons of the Godhead.

### *Difficulties in Classification*

Theologians have classified God's attributes in varying ways. The difficulty in reaching a consensus in this regard is their relationship to each other. Some theologians divide their discussions between certain attributes (What God is like) and activities (What God does). Indeed, the attributes of God are distinguishable from God's actions and activities (e.g., is role as creator, sustainer, sovereign). In our way of approaching the attributes, God's activities will be considered in a subsequent chapter. Other theologians see certain attributes as absolute and others as relative. This typically has to do with attributes that uniquely belong to God (e.g., eternity, uncreatedness) and those he shares with his human creations (e.g., freedom, knowledge). Still other theologians segregate attributes that are intrinsic to God's moral goodness (e.g., holiness) into one category, while putting those that require an external object (e.g., mercy, shown to people) into another.

For our purposes, we'll be considering those attributes traditionally assigned to God alone (in no particular order), followed in the next chapter by attributes he shares with created beings he has made like himself. This distinction is not perfect, but it is at least serviceable. For example, omnipotence is an attribute typically reserved for God alone, but humans do possess and exercise creative power as a result of being created in God's image. Nevertheless, the distinction still allows us to divide the attributes into "How is God not like us?" and "How are we similar to God?" As we work our way through a basic understanding of these attributes, I'll occasionally note some theological tensions they create in relation to other attributes or statements in Scripture.

### *God's Unshared Attributes: How God is Not Like Us*

#### 1. Simplicity / Unity/ Perfection

In certain respects, this attribute could be viewed as fundamental to who God is. The simplicity of God refers to the fact that God is not made of constituent parts. That is, his nature is not the cumulative result of an assemblage of elements. God is not partly omnipotent, for example, and

partly omniscient. All the attributes of God exist in God in their optimal fullness at the same time. Moreover, if God were the sum total of attributes, it could be reasoned that those attributes pre-existed him and that God could thus be separated into components. This is not the case. There are no “parts” of God, of which he is the whole. All the attributes of God are completely equal in God. God is not a compound being. God is a completely unified being. As Deut 6:4 says, the Lord our God is *one* (cf. Eph 4:6). In this sense, God’s simplicity points us back to his self-existence. In another sense the attribute of simplicity means that all of God’s attributes “cross over” or interpenetrate each other. While we may attempt to do so for convenience, it is actually not possible to accurately and thoroughly consider one attribute of God as though it had nothing to do with other attributes. This will become more apparent as we continue.

## 1. Tension

The attribute of simplicity brings with it some difficulties. If we ask the question, “Does God possess his attributes?” the answer (in the context of divine simplicity) must be no, because the attributes are not mere constituent parts of God. If God could “possess” his attributes that makes it sound like those attributes are external components to God which God selects and adopts, adding them to himself as it were. But God is not an entity to which attributes can be attached. God is also not a composite of his attributes. If we ask, “is God independent of his attributes?” the answer must also be no. If they are intrinsic to his very nature, then he would not be God without them. This makes it seem as though God is not completely self-sufficient, yet he is (see “Independence” below). It is better, as one theologian has noted, that the attributes of God are internal to God himself. They are not things God chose to be, nor things he is compelled by externally to be. They are simply who God is.<sup>1</sup> “On this model, God does not *have* these qualities of love and righteousness. He *is* them. We do not say that God has the attribute of love, or that he is loving, or that he acts in a loving fashion. He is love. He also is righteousness, power, knowledge, and so on.”<sup>2</sup> We should think of the attributes of God the way we would consider the facets of a diamond. God’s essence (the diamond) is a unified whole; he is one. The attributes are not separate from God; they are different ways of viewing God, as are the facets of a diamond.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Incorporeality

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 212.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 212. The illustration is also from Erickson.

This attribute affirms what Jesus asserted in John 4:24, that God is a spirit. As such, some theologians prefer the term “spirituality” or “invisibility” for this attribute. Whatever the word choice, what is being communicated is that God is not part of material creation. He has no intrinsically material quality. He is not made of anything. While God can assume human form for the purpose of making his presence known (e.g., Ezek 1:26-28; Exod 33:18-23; 34:5-9; Isa 6:1-5), the human form is not his intrinsic essence. Incorporeality is also communicated by passages that have God being invisible (John 1:18; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15–16). While human beings and supernatural beings like angels possess an immaterial nature, they are not exclusively immaterial, incorporeal, and uncreated. We all as living humans have bodies that are intrinsic to who we are as human beings. The human dead prior to the resurrection are also perceived as having some physical form (Luke 16; Rev 6:9; 20:4). In the resurrection afterlife human beings will necessarily have “spiritual bodies” (1 Cor 15:35-58). Supernatural beings such as angels are by nature spiritual beings, but they are nonetheless created beings made of something (Psa 33:6; 148:1-5; Neh 9:6; cf. Job 38:4-7). Distinguishing between God and his created spiritual beings in this way is another reason to prefer “incorporeality” to “spirituality” in describing this attribute. Only God is made of nothing and, thus, uncreated. He is bodiless, incorporeal spirit.

### 3. Incomprehensibility

As with his simplicity, this is another candidate attribute for God’s fundamental nature (from our perspective). “Incomprehensibility” refers to the fact that God cannot be measured or assessed completely as to his nature and ways. As one theologian notes, “When we speak of the incomprehensibility of God, then, we do not mean that there is an unknown being or essence beyond or behind his attributes. Rather, we mean that we do not know his qualities or his nature completely and exhaustively.”<sup>4</sup> Scripture echoes this thought in Isa 55:9 (“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”) and Rom 11:33 (“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”).

### 4. Uncreated

This attribute is in some respects self-explanatory. God is the lone uncreated being in all of reality. He is without beginning (Gen 1:1; John 1:1-3). Other Scripture passages presume that God is prior to creation of all that is. For example, when the beginning of creation is mentioned in some passages, God is already there (Job 38:4, 12; Isa 48:13).

#### 4.1. Tension

God is not only uncreated, he is also unbegotten (or “un-generated”) by some external power or authority. The difference between “uncreated” and “unbegotten” is important with respect to God’s intrinsic nature. God the Father is unbegotten. No greater external power generated him or produced him. He has no parent, for he was not born. The same is true for the other persons

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<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 237.

(Son, Holy Spirit) of the one triune God, but both those persons are spoken of as being sent by the Father. There is thus subordination within the Trinity (see Chapter 7), but all three persons are eternal. Part of the tension is the old English translation tradition of the Son being “only begotten” (e.g., John 3:16). A century ago, this wording was the translation of Greek *monogenēs*, for it was thought that the Greek term was a combination of the adverb *monos* (“alone, only”) plus the verb *gennaō*, “to birth, beget.” Based on more recent scholarship and more Greek manuscript data, most scholars today believe this assumption misguided. The term *monogenēs* more likely comes from the adverb *monos* (“alone, only”) plus the Greek noun *genē* (“kind, type”). The term therefore means “unique, one of a kind” with no nuance of begetting or generation. More recent English translations of John 3:16 reflect this change in approach (e.g., ESV, NRSV: “only”; NIV 1984, NLT, LEB: “one and only”). Nevertheless, the Greek verb *gennaō* is used of the Son (Heb 1:5; 5:5), language that ultimately comes from the Septuagint of Psalm 2:7 (cf. Acts 13:33). (The Septuagint is the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament; it was used by Jesus and the apostles in New Testament citations of the Old Testament). The reason is that the eternal Son voluntarily assented to being sent to earth to be incarnated in the womb of the Virgin Mary and be born as Jesus of Nazareth. The *incarnate* Son is thus begotten, but the eternal Son is not.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Creator

God is the uncreated Creator. The Westminster Confession (4.1) says:

It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, (Heb. 1:2, John 1:2–3, Gen. 1:2, Job 26:13, Job 33:4) for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, (Rom. 1:20, Jer. 10:12, Ps. 104:24, Ps. 33:5–6) in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good. (Gen. 1, Heb. 11:3, Col. 1:16, Acts 17:24).<sup>6</sup>

The confession echoes the Scriptures. The God of the Bible is cast as the creator of all that is. Nehemiah 9:6 says, “You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.” The Bible refers to God as the creator of heaven and earth in a variety of passages (e.g., Gen 1:1-3; 14:19–22; Psa 8:1-3; Isa 42:5; 45:18; Mal 2:10; Col 1:16; Heb 11:3).

God not only created the heavens and earth, and all things visible and invisible, but he is immanently present in creation to sustain it. Bird summarizes the biblical data:

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in Gerald Bray, *The Attributes of God: An Introduction*, ed. Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

God remains distinct from and other than his creation; yet he is also intimately and constantly at work within creation. In other words, God displays transcendence *from creation* and immanence *within creation*. God is particularly concerned with the well-being of humanity as they are the summit of his creating activity (Gen 1:26–27; Ps 8:4–6). God sends rain for the sustenance of all peoples (Job 5:10; 37:13; Ps 135:7; Zech 10:1; Matt 5:45). Human beings have the spheres of their existence fixed by the Lord (Acts 17:26). God determines the constancy of the universal laws of nature that govern the earth and seas: “I have ... made my covenant with day and night and established the laws of heaven and earth” (Jer 33:25). . . . What is more, God sustains all things through his Word; that is to say, the world is christologically held together as Christ “holds together” or “sustains” all things (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3).<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Eternality

Eternality is the attribute of having no beginning or ending. God’s eternity is expressed in passages like Psa 90:2 (“from everlasting to everlasting, you are God”) and Gen 21:33 (El-Olam means “God of eternity” or “everlasting God”). The verse speaks to God’s timelessness “before” and “after” the present perspective. God’s eternity also speaks of his being uncreated, adding the observation that, in his uncreatedness, God is also outside time, at least in his intrinsic nature or essence.

### 6.1. Tension

This wording (“intrinsic nature or essence”) is warranted because theologians who take Scripture as the word of God disagree over whether God remains timeless, having entered into a relationship with time once he created time and space and began to relate to his creation.<sup>8</sup> Gerald Bray notes in this regard:

In his essence, God is timeless and eternal, and because that essence has no contact with finite, created reality, it is unaffected by it. But as three persons, God is relational, and at that level he can and does enter into the time-and-space universe he has created. Whether it is correct to say that he ‘experiences’ it is open to question, because in normal usage ‘experience’ suggests a passive reception of something, and that cannot be the case with God, even in his persons. But whether he experiences it or not, he is certainly involved with it and acts within it. The incarnation of the Son would appear to be sufficient proof of that.”<sup>9</sup>

## 7. Immortality / Imperishability

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<sup>7</sup> Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 143-144.

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 218–33. Helm contends God remains outside of time, while William Lane Craig takes the alternative view.

<sup>9</sup> Bray, *The Attributes of God: An Introduction*, 55.

Immortality follows closely upon eternity. Whereas the latter term speaks of God having no beginning or ending, immortality is a statement of God's deathlessness—he cannot die; his existence cannot be terminated. Scripture plainly uses the language of immortality of God (Gen 21:33; Psa 102:25-27; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim 1:10; Heb 1:10-12). God has everlasting life and is free to dispense it to whom he will as part of the plan of salvation (Rom 2:6-7).

## 8. Immanence

The term “immanence” refers to God's close presence. More precisely, this attribute conveys the doctrinal idea that God is ever-present and active within his creation and human history. There is never a time when God is absent; he is always there, in the details of nature and life. This attribute is closely related to omni-presence, but the two differ on certain details (see below). The Scriptures presume God is present and active in all creation and human circumstance. Jeremiah 23:24 asks, “Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.” Paul, quoting a secular Greek philosopher to his audience at the Areopagus, told them to seek God because “he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28a). Job 34:14-15 tell us that “If [God] should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.”

### 8.1. Tension

This doctrine is not an approval of pantheism, a metaphysical system that merges God with nature so that the those two are one and the same. Rather, in biblical thought, the Creator and creation are firmly separate and distinct. God preceded nature and spoke the material creation into existence (Gen 1:1-3), being the originator of all things visible and invisible, whether in the earthly or heavenly realms (Col 1:16).

## 9. Transcendence

The attribute of transcendence is the polar opposite of immanence, for it refers to God's remoteness—his distance in character and nature from all that was created. Transcendence thus speaks of how God is separate, distinct from, and superior to, all that he has made. The best way to think about this attribute is to remember God as “high and lifted up” in biblical language. In many passages the Bible speaks of God's exalted status in comparison with creation and all that is in it (e.g., Job 28:23-24; Psa 113:5, cf. 123:1; Isa 5:16; 6:1-5; 55:8-9; 57:15). God's ultimate otherness is also shown in the biblical prohibition against idolatry. The Israelites were not to make any image that stood for God because God was completely other than anything in heaven and earth (Exod 20:3-6). Nothing could adequately portray his essence and character. He is quite above all things. Nothing comes close to representing his superiority to all that was, is, and ever will be.

## 10. Omnipresence

The claim that God is omnipresent means that he is everywhere present in his whole being at all times.<sup>10</sup> This attribute overlaps with God's infinity (he has no spatial limits), incorporeality (he is a spirit), and immanence (he is present everywhere in his creation and among his creatures). Scripture expresses this idea in a variety of ways. For example, "in Psa 139:7-12 David asked the question if there is anyplace one can escape from the presence of God. His answer is no, for His omnipresence is unlimited by space (v. 8), undaunted by speed (v. 9), and unaffected by darkness (vv. 11-12)."<sup>11</sup> Another example is the assertion that no temple made by human hands can contain God (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron 2:6; 6:18; Acts 17:24). In the words of Isa 66:1, God's throne is the heavens, and earth is his footstool. Jeremiah 23:24 asks, "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD" (cf. Acts 7:49).

### 10.1. Tensions

God's omnipresence certainly has a solid scriptural basis. Nevertheless, the attribute raises questions. First, while God cannot be "more" or "less" present anywhere as an omnipresent being, in the biblical storyline God's presence can be more immediate in certain instances. For example, when God met with Moses on Mount Sinai he was not less present in other locations. That is, the scene should not be taken as some "extra distribution" of God in one place as opposed to others. Rather, such scenes convey God's special covenantal relationship with his people. Telling the biblical story as one in which God acts in history on behalf of his people requires God to be more immediately present in certain episodes. The same can be said of God's presence being specially with Israel above the cherubim of the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:22; Num 7:89), or in the pillar of cloud or fire during the exodus and wilderness years (Exod 13-14; Num 12:5; 14:14; Deut 31:15). One might also say God chose to be more transparently present in such instances to encourage or teach his people.

Second, some might wonder how omnipresence works in relation to hell and final perdition. Is God present in hell? The question of course presumes that final perdition is everlasting and, in the event one opts for annihilationism, whether the final, eternal destruction of the wicked occurs at death or some time subsequent, such as the judgment at the end of days. Is God present with the lost in some intermediate state of afterlife suffering in that event? Revelation 14:10 suggests God is indeed present in the fiery place of punishment of those who take the mark of the Beast: "[The wicked person] also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb." While English translation includes the language of presence ("before"), the point of the passage may merely be that God is ever-aware of the wicked and their fate. Psalm 139:8 affirms God is present in Sheol, the afterlife realm of

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

the dead. Since hell is just part of afterlife place vocabulary, it would seem again that God is present in all afterlife places. But this can hardly be the same *kind* of presence that God enjoys with the afterlife believer, or with those believers in whom the Spirit indwells. As Bird notes:

Is God in hell? If hell is the absence of God and if God is omnipresent, then either God is in hell or else God is not omnipresent. My own suggestion to this conundrum is that hell is indeed an absence of God, but hell is characterized by the absence of his providence, grace, and goodness. Since God is an omnipresent being, he cannot not be omnipresent by necessity, so that God's presence in hell is a given, but it is perhaps expressed there in terms of his justice and lament for these creatures and their fate.<sup>12</sup>

Third, if God is one essence but three persons (i.e., a triune being; see #15 below), then it follows that his attributes are held by all three persons of the Trinity. If that is the case, how can it be said (or should it be said) that Jesus, God incarnate, had the attribute of omnipresence? The answer to this tension is found in Phil 2:5-8:

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This passage describes how the Son, the second person of the Trinity, voluntarily “emptied himself” of the equality he had with God before he came to earth as the man Jesus of Nazareth. This passage must be balanced with Col 2:9, which says that, in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” We will devote an entire chapter later to the matter of the two natures of Christ. For our purposes now, these passages help us see both the necessity of the Son of God retaining all the attributes of God, but surrendering the independent use of those attributes while embodied on earth as Jesus. It is best to ask *how* Jesus emptied himself; i.e., what does the language mean? Erickson writes of Phil 2:5-8:

While the text does not specify of what he emptied himself, it is noteworthy that ‘the very nature of a servant’ contrasts sharply with ‘equality with God’ (v. 6). We conclude that it is equality with God, not the form of God, of which Jesus emptied himself. While he did not cease to be in nature what the Father was, he became functionally subordinated to the Father for the period of his earthly life. Jesus did this for the purposes of revealing God and redeeming humanity. By taking on human nature, he accepted certain limitations upon the functioning of his divine attributes. These limitations were not the result of a loss of divine attributes but of the addition of human attributes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 670.



The same can be said of the relationship of Jesus to other attributes discussed previously and following below, such as omnipotence and omniscience.

These ten unshared attributes do not complete our picture of how God is not like us. We have several more attributes to consider. They will be the focus of the next chapter.