

Chapter 6: The Doctrine of God: His Shared Attributes

In the preceding two chapters, we looked at the attributes of God that inform us as to how much unlike us he is. In this chapter, we'll consider the attributes of God which God shares with his creatures, namely human beings.

1. Personhood

The Bible presents God as a personal being, but oddly enough, never refers to him as a person. This is mostly an issue of vocabulary, though:

The first theologian known to have called God a "person" was Tertullian (fl. ca. 196–212), who picked up the word from Roman law and used it to translate the Greek term *hypostasis*, which occurs in Hebrews 1:3 with reference to the Father. In Greek usage, *hypostasis* means something like "identity," but the Latin *persona*, at least as it was used in the Roman law courts, included an additional dimension. A *hypostasis* could be perceived by an onlooker, but a *persona* was also capable of independent action. In that sense, it was a more accurate description of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are not just three elements in God that we observe, but acting agents.¹

God's personhood (or "personality"), then, refers to his ability and propensity to interact with his creation, particularly humankind, whom he made as his image. We are personal beings, and that aspect of our being is derivative of God's creative will in making us. For sure God is a transcendent person, and so on one level nothing and no one can truly relate to him, but he condescends to have relationships with us, being willing and capable of doing so. God's relating to humanity is seen most forcefully in the incarnation of the Son, the second person of the Trinity, as Jesus of Nazareth. As Bird notes:

The God of the gospel brings us into a personal relationship with himself. God is a personal being, a triune being no less, subsisting as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is not simply a "force" or the "ground of being," as in pantheism or deism. God is living and active and enters into relationships with others. That there are personal relationships within the Godhead means that relationality is essential for what it means for God to be God.²

2. Rationality

This attribute refers to the fact that God is a sentient being; he has a mind. Not surprisingly, Scripture refers to the mind of God (Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16) and God's thoughts (Pss 92:5;

¹ Bray, *The Attributes of God*, 81–82.

² Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 134.

139:17; Micah 4:12; 1 Cor 2:11). We as humans likewise have minds and thoughts, though our capacities are far below those of God (Isa 55:8-9).

Scripture conveys God has thoughts in other ways, particularly with respect to creation and his plan for human salvation. Both involved decisions and purpose of will, but the latter, the program of redemption, makes the point most acutely: “The sending of the Son into the world was the result of God’s plan, and at every stage Jesus reminded his disciples, and anyone else who would listen, that he had come to do the will of the Father who had sent him.”³ Indeed the fact that God has a will, or wills things be or not be, shows he is a rational being. God wills that people work in the ministry of the gospel (1 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1). God has a will for the believer’s conduct, given to us by revelation in his law or other preaching and teaching (Rom 12:2; Col 4:12; 1 Thess 4:3; 5:18; 1 Pet 2:15).

3. Holiness

In biblical thought, holiness fundamentally refers to separation from all that is common (“profane”), unclean, or impure. This is primarily a negative definition. Positively, holiness refers to that which is distinctively pure. God’s attribute of holiness thus separates him (makes him “other”) from all ordinary things and positively predisposed to his own sanctity, or “set apartness,” in terms of morality. That is, God is separate from sin, from that which is contrary to his own will. He is absolutely pure in his holiness. The Hebrew word (*qadosh*) refers to things marked off or distinct in quality, sacred. Bird comments, “God’s holiness is rather hard to define. Several suggestions are often given, such as God’s moral uprightness, integrity, set-apartness, or transcendence. God’s holiness encompasses all of these, but somehow is even more than all of them put together.”⁴

Scripture seeks to express the idea of holiness in a variety of ways. One is related to his transcendence—he is totally unlike anything else in creation. He is incomparable. Exodus 15:11 asks, “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” The classic passage in Isa 6:1-5, where the seraphim announce “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty” in the divine throne room is also illustrative. Places where God’s presence is experienced or said to dwell (e.g., tabernacle, temple) are set apart as holy. Holiness is intrinsic to God’s presence and nature (Lev. 11:44; Josh 24:19; Pss 99:3, 5, 9; Isa 40:25; Hab 1:12; John 17:11; 1 Pet. 1:15).

Humans, of course, are charged by God to be holy as God is holy (Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 1:16). God shares this attribute with us, making it a possibility, as we live in accord with God’s own will and character, directed by Scripture.

4. Righteousness

³ Bray, *The Attributes of God*, 87.

⁴ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 135.

Righteousness as an attribute of God is related to holiness. If we are righteous we are by definition walking in holiness, and vice versa. As Ryrie notes,

Holiness relates to God's separateness; righteousness, to His justice. Righteousness has to do with law, morality, and justice. In relation to Himself, God is righteous; i.e., there is no law, either within His own being or of His own making, that is violated by anything in His nature. In relation to His creatures He is also righteous; i.e., there is no action He takes that violates any code of morality or justice.⁵

Essentially, righteousness is "God's holiness applied to his relationships to other beings. The righteousness of God means, first of all, that the law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is."⁶ Whatever God does, then, is in accord with his own nature, reflected in his law. He is his own standard of moral correctness. He always acts in accord with what is right, defined by his own character. Scripturally, God is declared righteous (Psa 11:7). He loves righteousness and justice (Psa 33:5). Deut 32:4 tells us that all the Lord's ways are justice/just. Abraham's words in Gen 18:25 describe God's righteousness: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" God describes himself as his own standard: "I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right" (Isa 45:19).

The practical importance of passages like these is that they define righteousness as whatever conforms to God's own moral character. As with holiness, we can be righteous when our behavior, beliefs, and attitudes conform to God's moral character.

5. Just / Justice

God is not only holy and righteous; he is also just. The attribute of justice or "just-ness" is that God directs his relationships with his creatures in accord with what is right and exposes, opposes, and judges what is wrong: "As a result of God's righteousness, it is necessary that he treat people according to what they deserve. Thus, it is necessary that God punish sin, for it does not deserve reward; it is wrong and deserves punishment."⁷ In other words, attributes like holiness and righteousness are more often understood internally in God, whereas justice is the outworking of his holy and righteous nature. It is thus part of God's nature to ensure that his creations, especially humans, created as his imagers (Gen 1:26-27), are held accountable. Justice demands that what is sown is reaped. It is thus part of God's nature to punish sin and reward righteousness. That is justice. Passages like Deut 7:9-10; Psa 58:11; Rom 6:23; 12:19 illustrate justice.

6. Goodness

⁵ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 48.

⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 258.

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 204.

Just as the righteousness of God means God is the ultimate standard for what is right, so the goodness of God means he is the final standard for what is good. God's nature, being and actions are the final standard for what is good. This idea and self-definition is what is behind statements like that in Luke 18:19, where Jesus says "No one is good except God alone." Other Scriptures assign inherent goodness to God: Pss 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 135:3; 145:9; Nah 1:7; 1 Pet 2:3. It was God himself who assigned goodness to creation (Genesis 1). Scripture also tells us that God is the source of all that is good in creation (James 1:17). As with his justice, his goodness must be part of the way he relates to his creation: "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Psa 84:11), and "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:29).

As with other attributes, this raises the question of self-definition. What exactly is good? Grudem replies:

But if God is himself good and therefore the ultimate standard of good, then we have a definition of the meaning of "good" that will greatly help us in the study of ethics and aesthetics. What is "good"? "Good" is what God approves. We may ask then, why is what God approves good? We must answer, "Because he approves it." That is to say, there is no higher standard of goodness than God's own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character. Nonetheless, God has given us some reflection of his own sense of goodness, so that when we evaluate things in the way God created us to evaluate them, we will also approve what God approves and delight in things in which he delights. Our definition also states that all that God *does* is worthy of approval. We see evidence of this in the creation narrative: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*" (Gen. 1:31). The psalmist connects the goodness of God with the goodness of his actions: "You are good and you do *good*; teach me your statutes" (Ps. 119:68).⁸

Grudem adds elsewhere that "In imitation of this communicable attribute, we should ourselves do good (that is, we should do what God approves) and thereby imitate the goodness of our heavenly Father."⁹ In other words, God shares the attribute of goodness with us, and instructs us through his word how to live out goodness.

7. Love

1 John 4:8 famously tells us that God is love. This verse does not identify or label God as some abstract force. In the statement "God is love" both elements (God, love) are not equally and completely exchangeable and thus interchangeable in a way that the two elements in this statement are "the blue whale is the largest mammal on earth" (a statement whose interchange means exactly the same thing: "the largest mammal on earth is the blue whale"). "God is love"

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 197–198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

is not to say “love is God.” Rather, the statement of 1 John 4:8 is not completely convertible. Instead, the statement describes a quality. One element is a subset of the other. God’s essence or nature is characterized by love.

God’s love is put forth in a number of passages and his actions. Bird writes:

God’s love is closely related to his goodness, mercy, and faithfulness. His special covenant love is uniquely expressed in his devotion to Israel, Jesus, and the church (e.g., Exod 15:13; 34:6; Deut 7:9; Ezra 3:11; John 3:35; 5:20; 2 Thess 2:16; 1 John 3:1). Love prompts God’s redemptive acts of atonement and forgiveness (Pss 51:1; 98:3; John 3:16; Rom 5:8). God’s love for his people can be seen in the allegories of the rescue of an exposed infant (Ezek 16) and the marriage of Hosea and Gomer (Hos 1–3). God is the “God of love” (2 Cor 13:11) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8).¹⁰

We love because God first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19). We love because God shared this intrinsic part of his character with the humans he created.

The love of God is more than mere affection. The “love” in 1 John 4:8 is *agapē*, one of several Greek words for love, and one that is especially oriented to self-sacrifice. This word and other associated words of the same root occurs over three hundred times in the New Testament. It has God and his works as a distinctive focus, culminating in John 3:16, where God showed his love by sending the Son into the world to bring about salvation. Erickson summarizes this well:

In John 15 Jesus draws a contrast between a master-servant (or employer-employee) relationship and a friend-to-friend relationship. It is the latter type of relationship that is to characterize the believer and the Savior. It is clear that Jesus regards love as the basis of this relationship, for in describing it he uses the word “love” in either noun or verb form nine times in the span of nine verses (vv. 9–17). His vital interest in the believers is evident in verse 11: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” He goes on to state, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (v. 13). Yet Jesus laid down his life not only for his friends, those who loved him and appreciated what he was doing for them, but also for his enemies, who despised and rejected him. Our relationship with God is on a friend-to-friend rather than employee-to-employer basis. He died for his enemies, although he would get nothing from them in return. An employer may be interested in the welfare of an employee for what the employee can do for her. Jesus, however, is a friend. He is concerned with our good for our own sake, not for what he can get from us. God does not need us. He can accomplish what he wishes without us, although he has chosen to work through us. Thus, his love for us and for his other creatures is unselfish.¹¹

¹⁰ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 135.

¹¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 263.

8. Grace

Grace is an aspect of God's love, for its meaning and focus is on how God deals with people "not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity."¹² The basic difference, then, between the attributes of God's goodness and grace is that goodness involves not seeking one's own welfare, whereas grace means showing favor to the undeserving.

In the Old Testament, the grace of God is at times conveyed in English translation of the Hebrew term *hesed* ("loyal love"). When this grace is shown to those who did nothing to merit it (e.g., Israel in the Old Testament), God is said to be showing *hesed*. He is "lovingly loyal" to the covenant relationship he makes with undeserving Israel, whom he freely loved of his own accord (Deut 7:7-10). Scripture speaks as clearly about the grace of God as it does the love and goodness of God. In Exod 34:6 God is specifically described as being gracious: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness." Old Testament Hebrew also features another word (*hanûn*) that lends itself to the concept of grace. Translators typically render it as "graciousness" or "compassion" (see Exod 22:27; 34:6; Neh 9:17, 31; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; Joel 2:13).

Paul not only teaches us in the New Testament that salvation is by the grace of God (Eph 2:8-9), but also that "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:7-10). Titus 2:11 tells us that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people."

9. Mercy

This attribute can be nuanced and thus understood when juxtaposed to God's goodness and grace. As the goodness of God involves not seeking one's own welfare, whereas grace means showing favor to the undeserving, mercy involves withholding wrath from those who deserve it. God is merciful. He is tender-hearted and compassionate toward his people and the needy. Exodus 34:6 is again part of the biblical portrait of God: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful (*rahûm*) and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Deut 4:31 echoes the thought: "The Lord your God is a merciful God." Nehemiah's prayer contains these words as well: "You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them." The psalms contain several references to the attribute of God's mercy, Hebrew *rahûm*: Pss 78:38; 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8).

10. Freedom

¹² Ibid., 265.

When we think of how God shares this attribute with us, we think of free will, the uncoerced ability to make or refuse a decision. God's freedom certainly fits that definition, as there is no greater power who could coerce him into a decision. But God's freedom is more than this shared attribute. In the case of God, freedom means he is truly independent of all things he has made. Since only he is uncreated, this attribute of God speaks of how God transcends everything and everyone else in the exercise of his will, mind, and plans (Isa 40:13-14). He is completely free to do anything that is consistent with his own character and nature. God is in no way subject to an external power. He may be opposed, but it cannot be said that God is restricted in accomplishing his will.

11. Truthfulness

This attribute of God speaks not only to the fact that God cannot lie (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18), but also to his completely reliable consistency of character. He is the only true God (John 17:3). He cannot act inconsistently with himself and the attributes of his nature.

Another way of describing this attribute is God's faithfulness to himself and all he has decreed and planned. God is faithful (truthful) with respect to all his works and deeds (Deut 7:9):

God's faithfulness means that he is true and trustworthy and that his Word can be taken as reliable (Pss 33:4; 145:13; 2 Cor 1:18; 1 Pet 4:19). God's faithfulness guarantees that his plan and promise about the future will come to fruition (1 Cor 1:9; 10:13; 1 Thess 5:24; 2 Thess 3:3; Heb 10:23). The faithfulness of God is expressed in the faithfulness of Christ (Phil 3:8; Heb 3:5-6; Rev 1:5). Human beings can be praised for their faithfulness before God (e.g., Rom 4; Heb 11), and faith is the appropriate response to divine faithfulness (Ps 18:25; Rom 1:17). God creates faith in persons so that their faithfulness reflects God's own fidelity to his creation (Phil 1:29). Faithfulness remains a cardinal virtue of the Christian life since it expresses a key trait of God's own character (1 Cor 4:2; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22).¹³

12. Wisdom

God is not only omniscient (all-knowing; see the previous chapter) but he is also perfectly wise. I've chosen to include this attribute here because we as God's imagers can also be wise if we follow God's instructions for morality, justice, compassion, etc. Consequently, like the other attributes in this chapter, God may possess these qualities perfectly, but he shares them with us.

What is the distinction between God's unique omniscience and this communicable (shared) attribute of wisdom? Omniscience means God knows all things real and possible, or everything that can be known. Wisdom speaks of how God applies that knowledge. God translates his

¹³ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 135.

knowledge into decisions that are always wise. That is, God's decisions always bring about the best results from God's eternal perspective.¹⁴

Scripture refers to the Lord as "the only wise God" (Rom 16:27). Job 12:13 says very plainly that "with God are wisdom and might." His wisdom is in fact beyond our understanding (Rom 11:33). God's works are displays of his wisdom (Psa 104:24; Prov 3:19). God of course grants wisdom. The most obvious example is Solomon (1 Kings 5:12), but God grants wisdom broadly (Prov 2:6). More generally, though, it is the fear of the Lord that coincides with God making people wise (Job 28:28; Psa 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Christ is both the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24, 30). It is in him that the wisdom of God is hidden as a treasure (Col 2:3). Believers are given wisdom through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:8; Eph 1:17). If we lack wisdom we are to ask for it from God (James 1:5).

13. Order / Peace

In the New Testament God is characterized as being a God of "peace" (1 Cor 14:33). The Greek word translated "peace" is *eirēnē*. The passage is noteworthy in that the statement is designed as a deliberate contrast to the goings on at Corinth and the confusion created by the chaotic worship and misuse of spiritual gifts. In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, this word (*eirēnē*) is used to describe orderliness, or "being at peace." In 169 instances, the Hebrew term being translated by this Greek word is the familiar *shalôm*, which generally describes wholeness, peace, prosperity, and well-being.¹⁵ This description is what characterizes God. Moreover, 1 Cor 14:33 explicitly says that God is not a God of "confusion." He is not a God of disorder, chaos, and frenetic disturbance. He is a God of peaceful order, something reflected in other New Testament passages (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20). Grudem adds:

God's peace can be defined as follows: God's peace means that in God's being and in his actions he is separate from all confusion and disorder, yet he is continually active in innumerable well-ordered, fully controlled, simultaneous actions. This definition indicates that God's peace does not have to do with inactivity, but with ordered and controlled activity. To engage in infinite activity of this sort, of course, requires God's infinite wisdom, knowledge, and power.¹⁶

We have now surveyed the incommunicable (unshared) and communicable (shared) attributes of God. But there is more to the doctrine of God than his attributes. Perhaps the most incomprehensible thing about who God is concerns his triunity. It is to that concept we now turn.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 193.

¹⁵ *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (entry for *eirēnē*).

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 203.

