

# Attributes of God

By John L Drury

I'm going to start a **series of indefinite length on various attributes of God**. This series is inspired by a seminar I am taking on Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of God. However, I will avoid any technical discussion of Thomas, and simply explain the attributes as classically formulated and raise a few questions about how they may be developed, reformulated, and in some cases rejected. So here goes...

## I. Simplicity

When speaking of God, we must organize our thoughts into distinct attributes regarding his nature. But once we begin to distinguish these attributes, we run the risk of introducing a division within our talk of God that does not correspond to God's singular unity. Nevertheless, we must speak discursively -- prodding along from point to point. In order to ensure that our discursive God-talk does not degenerate into a mere montage of irreconcilable attributes, we **must choose our starting point wisely**. Aquinas believes that **divine simplicity** is the best place to start, as it determines our understanding of all the attributes of God.

To see why simplicity is a good place to start, we must understand **the meaning of divine simplicity**. This attribute does not mean that God is simplistic in contrast to complex. God is certainly complex in the current sense of the word! Rather, simplicity classically conceived is set **in contrast to composite**. To be composite is to be an assembly of different parts; to be simple is to be wholly and completely what one is. God is simple (aka non-composite) because God is wholly and completely what he is, not admitting of parts or degrees.

The **implications of divine simplicity** for God's nature are far-reaching. Simplicity implies that the rest of God's attributes do not describe parts of God, but rather indicate God's whole character. So God's love does not describe part of God and his justice another part, nor does God move successively from love to justice, but God is his own love and is his own justice. Love and justice

characterize his being. More precisely, one might say that God characterizes his own being in terms of his love and his justice. The same can be said of another other divine attribute.

The question for us today is **whether simplicity is a good idea**. Is it a genuine attribute of the God revealed in Scripture? Is it a useful conceptual tool for describing the God we worship? These normative questions immediately raise the question of method: How do we determine its appropriateness? Does it need to be explicitly stated in Scripture? Or may it be implied by other Biblical affirmations (monotheism for instance)? Is it simply sufficient that it does not contradict Scripture? Because of its significance in the Christian tradition, the burden of proof lies on the one who wishes to reject divine simplicity. Yet, like any human affirmation about God, it is open to criticism -- at least in principle.

### **Any thoughts?**

Is my definition of simplicity sufficiently clear?

What is your initial reaction to the notion of divine simplicity?

On what basis might we evaluate the claim that God is simple?

If one were to reject divine simplicity, what would the ramifications for the rest of theology be?

## **II. Infinity**

Although the discussion of divine simplicity continues on the comment board, I will move along my series on the Attributes of God here. Feel free to participate in either or both discussions.

First, a note on the **organization of the series** as a whole. We are beginning (following Thomas Aquinas, the inspiration and silent conversation partner for this series) with the "metaphysical" attributes of God. These are what we shall call the "NOTs" and the "OMNIs". The "NOTs" are those attributes which remove from God properties belonging only to creatures, such as simplicity (not-composite), infinity, immutability, impassibility. The "OMNIs" are those attributes which are partial in us yet complete in God, such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. These two categories of attributes are "metaphysical" in that

they describe God in some relationship (whether negative or positive) to the physical world. I am not necessarily committing myself to the procedure of beginning with these; actually, I intend to perform a little reformulation of these by offering an alternative term for each. But alas, we must begin somewhere, and the NOTs and OMNIs are often what folks first think of when one mentions the attributes of God.

God is infinite. **Infinity** does not mean God is really, really big, although that is often what comes to mind. Infinity is not the enlargement of a known quantity, but its negation. Infinity means not-finite. In order to understand this attribute, then, we must understand what it negates.

What does word "**finite**" mean? "Finite" is the word we use to set limits on reality. The related term "definite" brings out this meaning. A "definite" table means this or that table, rather than just tables in general. Finite has an even broader use, however, in that it encompasses ideas too. The idea or concept of a "table" is finite; it does not include every possible idea, but only the ideas pertinent to the concept of "table." Given this definition, we can see that creation as a whole is finite. Finitude is an attribute of creation.

If creation is finite, and God as the creator is other than creation, then God must be infinite. So the logic goes. It seems true enough. But a **question** must be raised at this point: Is God here being defined by creation? Is our knowledge of God utterly tied to our knowledge of the world? If so, how do we know which things in creation ought to be negated? Surely some aspects of creation are held in common with God rather than opposed to him. How do we know which is which? Also, if infinity draws its meaning from contrast with the world, does this mean God needs the world in order to be infinite? Furthermore, what if a created infinity were discovered? Would this too be God? If not, then what does infinity really tell us about God if it does not identify him in distinction from the world? Finally, how are we to know whether this infinite being is the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Although I think these and other serious problems can be raised, there is still something true about divine infinity. If God is truly the Lord, then he certainly cannot be contained by anything, unless, of course, he chose to be so. More to

the point, infinity could be regarded as a conceptual restatement of the Biblical praise that **God is great**. "Great is the Lord," says the Law. "Great is the Lord," says the Psalmist. "Great is the Lord," says the Prophet. "Great is the Lord," says the Apostle. The greatness of God is a biblical theme. The God of the covenant is a great God. Greatness is a fitting attribute of God. It does indicate a comparison (God is *greater* than humanity, *greater* than other gods). But it is not limited to comparison. God is great whether or not there is anything small around with which to compare him. God simply *is* great. It is an attribute of his being. All his other attributes can be modified by this attribute: God's love is great, God's power is great, God's wisdom is great. [Note: this mutual modification of divine attributes is the payoff of the doctrine of divine simplicity]

I suggest that most of what is said about God with the term "infinite" can be said with the term "great." I also might say that what can be said by "infinite" that cannot be said by "great" should not be said at all. In other words, "infinity" may try to reach beyond the God who has revealed himself in the history of the covenant with Israel fulfilled by his Son Jesus Christ. This God has called himself "great." That's good enough for me.

Of course, as a traditional term, the burden of proof lies with one who wishes to reject it. I do not feel compelled to reject infinity as an attribute of God, although I am dubious about how we come to know his infinity. But don't be surprised if you find me saying "great" a little more often than "infinite." And when I say "infinite," I may be thinking "great."

### **Any thoughts?**

Is my definition of infinity sufficiently clear?

What is your initial reaction to the notion of divine infinity?

How do we know whether God is infinite?

If one were to drop the language of divine infinity, what would be the ramifications for theology?

### III. Immutability

We continue our series on the attributes of God with another of the famous NOTs: **immutability**. It seems like nowadays the language of immutability is found mostly on the covers of get-rich-quick books: "The 7 Immutable Laws of Real Estate Acquisition" and so on. But immutability has deep roots in the philosophical tradition. The idea that God is immutable comes from the contrast between him as creator and us as his creatures. For us, the norm (and bane) of our existence is that we are in perpetual flux and change. The secure bedrock or foundation of this chaotic creation, however, is the creator who is himself not subject to such flux and change. He is im-mutable, or **not-changing**.

The significance of immutability extends beyond the mere preference for continuity over change. As we learned in our first installment concerning divine simplicity, all of God's attributes characterize his being *in toto*. Thus the attribute of immutability conditions all the other divine attributes, such as love and justice and mercy. So the point is not only that God is immutable, but also that his character is immutable. God's love is unchanging, his justice is unchanging, etc.

This seems true enough on the surface, but there are some problems. I will outline one common objection, outline a possible response, then offer a thought experiment that may offer an alternative view of divine immutability.

#### *Common Objection:*

It seems that God is not immutable. Look at Scripture. God is repeatedly said to "change his mind." God is involved in history. He responds to his creatures. The praiseworthiness of the God of Israel is precisely his mutability: his ability to adapt in relationship to his beloved people. Immutability is a Greek philosophical concept that should be shed from a Biblical understanding of God.

#### *Possible Response:*

This objection bears witness to the deep truth that the God of Israel, the God who became human, is God precisely as the God who is involved in this history of his

covenant. However, the doctrine of immutability, properly understood, need not be rejected wholesale from a Biblically-rooted doctrine of God. Immutability speaks to the **constancy** of God. In the Biblical idiom, God is faithful to his promises. Even when we are unfaithful, God is faithful to his covenant. Is this not a laudable characteristic of God? Can such a belief really be dismissed as a "Greek philosophical concept" foreign to Biblical faith? Is not the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, precisely the God who is faithful to his promises in history. The term "immutability" bears witness to the fact that God's involvement in history doesn't undermine his trustworthiness. He is trustworthy within history.

*Alternative View:*

I think this response is a sufficient reply to the objection as stated. However, the form of the reply reveals that there is more than one way to talk about immutability. First and foremost, there is the question of the means by which we come to know whether God is immutable. Is immutability the mere negation from the creator of the mutability of creation? Or is it a characteristic of the history of God's self-revelation in history? Which is the **more reliable method**? This question, of course, applies to all the NOTs. But it is still a good question to ask.

More specific to immutability is the question of the referent. When we say God is immutable, does this refer to his *nature* or to his *will*? Are we saying God's nature is so constructed that he is incapable of change? Or are we saying that God's will is immutable, insofar as what he wills corresponds to what he does? Here is where the thought experiment comes in. **What if immutability is a characteristic of divine willing?** God wills to be certain way, and he is that way. God wills a covenant history, and it is enacted by his initiative. God wills a law to guide the life of his covenant-partners, and it is upheld (even in the face of our willing against it). God wills to become human, and so it comes to pass despite the apparent logical difficulty of an incarnation. The immutability of God's will seems to secure God's action in history, in contrast to the immutability of God's nature which seems to contradict (or at least condition) God's action in history.

Of course, even if this thought experiment succeeds, the question remains open: in addition to the immutability of his will, is God's nature also immutable? But this

raises a deeper question: **does God will his nature?** Does God decide what he will be like? Or is his character defined by something else (logical deduction, contrast with the world, etc.)? And if God is so defined, is this God really God? I must admit that an appeal to God's will when speaking of his attributes can be a bit scary. But it may be the way to go if the God of whom we are speaking is really God and not just a figment of our imagination (or, perhaps worse, the result of an equation).

### **Any Thoughts?**

Is my initial explanation of divine immutability clear?

Do you concur with the spirit of the common objection?

Does the reply satisfy the concerns of the objection while retaining an affirmation of divine immutability?

What do you think of my reformulation of divine immutability along the lines of God's will rather than his nature? Is this a wise road to go down, or are there consequences that I have not yet appreciated? What might those consequences be?

## **IV. Impassibility**

This week we come to the conclusion of the first part of our long series on the attributes of God. In this first part we have been discussing the **NOTs**: simplicity (non-compositeness), infinity (not-finite), immutability (not-changing). These attributes of God are discovered by traveling along the *via negativa*, the way of negation: negating from God's being aspects we know about our own created being which are unbecoming of our creator. We have asked whether this is the best road to travel, and in the process offered some alternative affirmations (unity, greatness, constancy) which attempt to retain the truth of these negative attributes while (hopefully) avoiding the problems.

The last of the NOTs is **impassibility**. Technically speaking, impassibility is a secondary aspect of immutability, for passion is a sort of change. But because of its significance in the history of Christian thought and its current controversial status, impassibility deserves special attention.

What does impassibility mean? **Impassibility is the negation of passion from God.** Now this might seem a bit odd at first. Are we saying that God is dispassionate, uncaring, and boring? Although this may be an impression or implication of divine impassibility, it is certainly not the intended point of the attribute. A little vocab lesson will help here. *Passion* in its technical sense is to be contrasted with *action*. To be in a state of passion is to be acted upon by another. **God is impassible in the sense that he is not acted upon by another but rather is the actor, or agent, of all his experiences.**

Although this clarification of the meaning blocks a shallow dismissal of impassibility, there are still **serious problems in attributing impassibility to the Christian God.** Why? The God we worship is precisely the God of Israel who responds to the actions of his people and, in the fulfillment of their history, became human in order to suffer and die. The central place of the passion of Jesus *Christ* in any *Christian* theology worthy of the name makes impassibility a bit difficult to maintain.

The early church fathers were acutely aware of these difficulties. Their commitment to divine impassibility made them reticent about saying that God experiences death. This commitment of course made them very careful and attentive to Christological formulation, putting our sloppy and unreflective talk of divine suffering to shame. It forced them to be very precise. One could even say that the common Christian commitment to impassibility was the elephant in the room motivating the development of Christological dogma (from Irenaeus' battle with the Gnostics in the 2nd century through Nicaea and Chalcedon to the Iconoclastic controversies of the 8th century). But for all its contribution to Christian faith, this precision took to its toll: **at the crucial point (the death of Jesus), the tradition consistently put some distance between God and Christ.**

Because I believe that Jesus is God and that Jesus suffered and died, I cannot accept impassibility in the strongest sense. However, **the attribution of impassibility to God is not without its grain of truth that must be retained.** As shown above, divine impassibility bears witness to the fact that God is first and foremost the agent of his experiences. In other words, God is free. God freely engages in all his actions and passions. God initiates his history with his



people. God is not drawn into relationship with creation as an outside force; rather, God creates the world in order to draw it into relationship with him. Now the history of this particular relationship includes God's passion: he undergoes suffering in the incarnation. But this passion is initiated by God's action. So we might even regard God's passion as a sort of action -- not out of an anxiety about attributing passion to the divine being, but out of a humble awe for God's free grace. God freely (without compulsion) engages in these actions and passions.

All this talk of freedom suggests that an alternative affirmation that retains the substance of impassibility while leaving behind its drawbacks is **divine freedom**. God is free. I am still open to the possibility of attributing impassibility to God, provided it is properly defined in accordance with the history of God's passion. But I am inclined to spend more of my energy proclaiming the freedom of God.

### **Any Thoughts?**

Is my initial explanation of divine impassibility clear?

Do you agree with the criticism as I have outlined it?

Is my reformulation of impassibility in terms of divine freedom clear? Good? True?

At what point do you just drop a term if it requires such considerable redefinition?

## **V. Omnipresence**

This week we are entering a new phase in our series on divine attributes. We will turn our attention from the NOTs to the OMNIs. This shift is not only verbal (from im- to omni-), but also methodological. To discover the NOT attributes, we travel along the *via negativa* (way of negation), removing from God creaturely characteristics that do not befit him. To discover the OMNI attributes, we travel along the *via eminentia* (way of eminence), attributing to God creaturely characteristics which *do* befit him -- with the significant difference that they apply to him eminently (in the greatest possible degree). Hence the prefix omni, which means "all." So, by travelling along this path we will speak of God as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent.

We begin with **omnipresence**. To say that God is all-present is to say that God is present to all times and places. We know what it means for us to be present in one particular place at one particular time. But the creator's presence to his creation is not limited to this place at this time. God is present to this place and that place, at this time and at that time. God is all-present: present-to-all.

As the above description shows, the term "present" is conveniently ambiguous. **It refers to both time and place**. Present means here rather than there. But present also means now rather than then. This should not surprise us, considering time and space go together: we can measure one by the other, and our awareness of one carries with it an awareness of the other. When a teacher takes attendance and a student says, "Present," it refers to both their presence in the room and their presence at this time. They are here-and-now. That's what presence means. So by virtue of his omnipresence, God is here and there, now and then.

Of course, this raises an obvious **problem: What does it mean to say that God is present at a particular time and place?** Is it really so special to say that God was present with his people Israel? Is it really so special to say that God is immanuel in Jesus Christ? Is it really so special to say that God is present in a sacred time and space? It seems like the significance of God's particular covenant history with his people is undermined by this notion of omnipresence.

This problem is far from insolvable. The key is to think of omnipresence as **trans-presence**. God is not simply everywhere in the way that we are somewhere. God is not just a human being writ large. Rather, God transcends space and time, and so in his freedom may engage with time and place as he wills. So God may be present-to his creation in a multiplicity of forms. Omnipresence doesn't set a limit on God, making it necessary that he be "everywhere" in a strict sense.

Omnipresence bears witness to God's freedom from such limitation (either the limitation of being only here or the limitation of being everywhere). God is so omnipresent that he is even capable of being present to this time and place in a way that he is not present to that time and place.

This modification seems necessary for those who believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God. But one may rightfully ask whether such a modification of

omnipresence twists the term beyond its plain sense. **Would it be better to just drop omnipresence?** I don't think so (though I'd love to hear your thoughts on the matter), because I am still affirming the point of the term: God's transcendence of time and space.

Furthermore, we can avoid an outright rejection of the term by turning the meaning of omnipresence on its head. Omnipresence focuses on God being present to all. But I am a bit more interested in saying that all are present to God. In other words, all things are laid before God. The term usually used for this God's **eternity**: God simultaneously engages all of time. Omnipresence also points to this divine reality, just from a different angle. I personally prefer the language of eternity, but see no reason to eliminate omnipresence from my vocabulary -- provided it is understood in terms of God's history with us.

### **Any thoughts?**

Which way do you prefer: the way of negation or the way of eminence? Why?

Does my description of omnipresence make sense?

Do you think omnipresence is rightfully attributed to God?

How else might the attribute of omnipresence be reconciled with God's history?

## **VI. Omniscience**

During the discussion following last week's post on omnipresence, it was insightfully noted that omnipresence and omniscience seem to blur together. God's presence to all things and his knowledge of all things are related features of his being. The connection is even stronger if we speak of omnipresence as all things being present *to* God (as suggested last week). According to such an understanding, **omnipresence and omniscience are very close indeed.**

So what's the difference? Well, its important to remember that **the difference between each of God's attributes are strictly *logical* differences.** If we learned anything from the attribute of simplicity, it was that all God's attributes are unified within his one divine life. So God does knowing something today and become present to it tomorrow, nor is God righteous yesterday and gracious today. God is all his attributes all at once. We divide them up based on logical

distinctions that make sense to us. It makes sense to distinguish between God's knowledge and God's presence because they are quite obviously distinct domains of activity.

**Does this mean we should avoid making such distinctions entirely?** I don't think so, because it is an act of faithfulness and obedience to use our minds as far as we able. Taking cues from Scriptural revelation, we ought to think carefully about how to talk about God intelligibly. We should resist the temptation to throw up our hands and give up on God-talk. If we are to be faithful witnesses, then we should talk about God. Given that he has talked about himself, who are we to say we can't follow his lead and talk about him?

Enough preliminaries. We should say something about **omniscience**. Omni means all, and science means knowledge. Omniscience is thus God's all-knowing. I personally don't find this attribute to be that objectionable. Omniscience simply means that God knows all things. It would seem that this is exactly the kind of affirmation one would be inclined to make in light of God's dealings with us revealed in Scripture.

However, **a common objection** is raised that should at least be noted. Some have suggested that if God knows the future, then the future is determined, and therefore omniscience undermines human freedom.

In light of this objection, some have recommended **an alternative understanding of omniscience**. One could grant that since the future has not yet happened, then the future does not "exist" in the same sense as the past and present. Therefore, God can be said to know all there is to know without knowing the future.

**I personally do not think the above objection sticks.** Why would God's knowledge of the future determine it? Surely God knows things according to their nature, so that he knows which things are determined and which are not. Surely God can know something without controlling it. If I have missed the force of this objection, please let me know. But until I am convinced by it, I see no need to retreat to the alternative understanding of omniscience outlined above. Anyway, God knowing the future seems to be the "good news" about omniscience as a

divine attribute.

**My own beef with omniscience is** not its classical definition but **its language**. As one of the OMNIs, it follows the *via eminentia* from the creation to the creator. I am suspicious of this line of reasoning. I would rather move from how the creator has engaged with us his creatures and learn from that how God is in himself. Omniscience sounds a lot like a human projection: we wish we knew more things (especially the future), and so we project this attribute onto God. The language of omniscience (and all the OMNIs) cannot easily escape this problem.

So what should we then say? How can we speak of God's knowledge? Scripture *does* speak of God's all-surpassing knowledge. The history of God with us hinges on God's gifts of promise and prophecy, both of which presuppose God's awareness of the future. The Bible repeatedly speaks of God's perception into the depths of the human soul, and it is such a perception as attributed to Jesus in the Gospels which signifies the deity of Christ. So we have every good reason to attribute something like omniscience to God. What linguistic alternative is there? I would recommend we reappropriate the language of **God's wisdom**. The wisdom of God in the Bible is not limited to God "knowing what is best for us" but also includes his knowledge of all things. God's providential care of the present in fact rests on his pre-eminent knowledge of the future. So God's wisdom seems to be an apt and sufficient alternative to the language of omniscience.

### **Any thoughts?**

Does my mention of the unity of God's attributes help or hurt the sensibility of our God-talk?

Does my definition of omniscience ring true?

Do you feel the force of the objection discussed above? If so, why?

Is the language of God's wisdom a sufficient alternative to the language of omniscience? What is lost in the transition? What is gained?

## **VII. Omnipotence**

Our ongoing series on the attributes of God is approaching a turning point. We began with the NOTs -- the negative approach to God's attributes. We then

turned to the OMNIs -- the positive approach. Both of these approaches are "metaphysical," in the sense that they begin with our knowledge of the world and try to think how God relates to us. Next we will turn to the attributes of character (love, mercy, etc.), which will consume us for the remainder of this series.

But first, we must add one last OMNI: **omnipotence**.

This may be the most well-known and most obvious divine attribute. Whatever God is, he must be the most powerful being imaginable, right?

In light of its familiarity - and also out of a desire to avoid a stylistic rut with this series - I think I will just raise a classic question about divine omnipotence and sketch some possible answers. You may have heard it before, but here goes:

### ***Can God create an object too large to move?***

Here are some classic answers to this classic question:

- 1) **No**. God's power extends to that which is logically possible. Omnipotence properly defined means that God is able to do anything that is not logically impossible. God cannot do something and also not do it. That's just logically impossible. God's power is not diminished by limiting it in this way.
- 2) **Yes**. God's power is exhibited precisely in his ability to limit himself in relationship to other creatures. God is able to create not only powerful forces but also free agents whom he cannot control. God's power is not limited but rather displayed by his free engagement with a free world. God need not coerce to be powerful.
- 3) **Yes and No**. The question reveals an absolute paradox that cannot be solved. If God is genuinely omnipotent, then he must be able *both* to create an object too heavy for him *and* to lift every possible object. This paradox may lead to three different conclusions: (a) God is not omnipotent because it would introduce contradiction into God's perfect being, (b) there is no God because the concept "God" requires omnipotence by definition, or (c) the contemplation of this paradox draws us into the mystery of the unknowable God, teaching us to affirm

both his power and his weakness.

4) **No comment.** The question begins with a false premise and therefore should not be dignified with an answer. This false assumption is that God's power can be thought of in quantitative terms based on the analogy of created power dynamics. God is not human power multiplied to the  $n$ th degree. God's power is utterly unlike created power, as is shown by the Cross of Christ as the power of God. If we begin from the correct starting point (the revelation of God), we will avoid such speculative questions.

### **Any thoughts?**

What answer would you give to this question?

Do you agree with any of the above answers?

How might you tweak them to fit more nearly your thoughts on God's power?

Is there an alternative answer that is not listed above?

## **VIII. Love**

As a recent commentator noted "God is love. Does it get any simpler than that? Does it get any more magnificent? I think not." Thanks, anonymous, for supplying a segue to this **third and final segment of our series on the attributes of God.**

We began with the negative attributes (the NOTs) and then turned to the super-eminent attributes (the OMNIs). Now we come to what I will call, for lack of a better term, **the character attributes**. These terms attempt describe the quality of God's being and act. They are generally less "metaphysical" and thus require less explanation and/or criticism. However, they raise equally interesting and deep questions about who God is and how we come to know him.

We will start with that most famous appellation: **God is love.**

The love of God has earned its fame for good reason. It is one of the few things the Bible straightforwardly says God *is* (cf. I John 4:16). The Prophets state many divine attributes in the form of first person oracles. The Psalms declare many divine attributes in the form of second person praise. But the First Epistle of John

states the attribute of divine love in the form of a third person proposition. God is love. In light of its unique character as **a direct biblical statement**, the attribute of divine love must be attended to with all seriousness despite contemporary romantic distortions.

But the very form of the statement raises a serious question. **Can the statement "God is love" be revered to say "love is God"?** It is certainly grammatically possible, since the verb "is" can function as an equals-sign, implying that the subject and predicate nominative can switch places without any change in meaning. The formula  $5 + 7 = 12$  is exactly the same as  $12 = 5 + 7$ . That's the point of an equals-sign.

Although the phrase "love is God" may sound odd to some, **the substance of this reversal can be found sprinkled throughout our God-talk**. For example, we say that where there is love, God is there. We say that God is mysteriously present in the love between human beings. We wax eloquently about the superiority of agape and that we draw near to God when our love for others becomes agape in form. We talk about "seeing God" in the midst of loving acts. All these notions imply that God and love are equivalent terms: we can enter the proposition from either side and get the same result.

However, I would like to post a warning against reversing the statement "God is love." My warning is not because I do not believe God is present in genuine human love. It seems to me that divine omnipresence would take care of that. I raise a warning flag because I think it is crucial that in the case of divine love (as with every other divine attribute), **we ought to let God himself define the meaning of love**. The reversal of the phrase plays too easily into our inclination to control God by means of our pre-conceived definitions. A ubiquitous example of this kind of definitional control would be the rejection of a doctrine by identifying its inconsistency with divine love. This kind of argument is made so often that it makes one wonder whether love has been defined in a way that prevents the God of the Bible from ever fitting without significant remainder. When find ourselves cornered by such contradictions, we are better off going back to the drawing board in order to try to define divine love in accordance with the character of God revealed in the history of the covenant with Israel fulfilled in Jesus Christ.



In support of my warning, I dare to suggest that **this procedure of definition is actually the logic of the Biblical proposition** within its literary context. A few verses prior to saying "God is love," the First Epistle of John states clearly that God's love is revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God: "This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him" (I John 4:9). The apostle goes on to differentiate the content of this love from other human loves: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10). The apostle Paul concurs: "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Roman 5:8). So, at least the apostolic witnesses have tried their best to define divine love according to God's own self-defining action. Why should we do any different?

### **Any thoughts?**

Can you think of examples where the statement "God is love" has been implicitly or explicitly reversed?

Do you see the implications of this reversal as negative or positive?

What other implications might there be?

Do you have any examples of rejecting a doctrine by appealing to God's love?

If we take our cue from the history of God with us when defining divine love, what might we say about the meaning of the statement, "God is love"?

## **IX. Grace and Holiness**

As we continue the third and final phase of our series on the attributes of God, we will dedicate these last three weeks to three different pairs of character attributes: grace and holiness, mercy and justice, patience and goodness. There are numerous reasons for exploring these divine characteristics in pairs: (1) these attributes are easier to understand than the previously addressed "metaphysical" attributes, (2) they are less contentious and therefore less interesting unless brought into conversation with each other, (3) although not yet employed, the method of juxtaposing two seemingly contradictory affirmations is always an illuminating procedure, (4) such a procedure especially befits God, whose simplicity and perfection indicates that all his attributes describe him fully

and thus modify each other, and (5) believe it or not, it was my plan all along. So here goes.

Our first pair of divine characteristics is grace and holiness.

Let's start with **holiness**.

What does it mean to say that God is holy? A common definition of holiness that accounts for most of its Biblical usage is "**set apart for God's use**." This general definition is great for creatures, but how exactly would such a definition be applied to God? Is God set apart for God's use? That seems oddly reflexive.

I think this very oddity is illuminating. The attribute of holiness bears witness to God's **distinctness**, his **set-apartness**, his **otherness**. God is God. "God is not 'man' said in a loud voice," to quote a phrase. God is set apart from all that is not-God.

Although this may sound a bit empty, we must remember that what God *is* (in contrast to what he is not) has been revealed in the history of the covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So God's holiness doesn't just mean he is nothing like us; rather, **God's holiness refers to the distinctive shape of life God takes in the history of his dealings with us**. God is *this* God, and no other.

But to even speak of God's holiness in this specified historical way, we are affirming that God has actually chosen to enter in history with us. God has condescended to us, coming among us by becoming one of us. The term which characterizes **this act of condescension is grace**. God is gracious. He doesn't abandon us in our sin, but enters into our sinful condition to overcome our plight and bring us back into relationship with him. That God has done this is sheer grace: God was not compelled to join with us, but he does it anyway.

God is God. He is set apart from all that is not-God. And so out of reverence we declare that God is holy.

God is *this* God. What sets this God apart is that he cares for us humans. And so out of gratitude we declare that God is gracious.

### **Any thoughts?**

Do you have any misgivings about the procedure of pairing up divine attributes? Does talk of holiness in terms of God's set-apartness make sense? Does it befit God?

What is missing from my account of God's grace? Is the act of condescension get to the heart of the matter, or is there a better point of departure?

How might God's holiness and God's grace further illuminate each other?

## **X. Mercy and Justice**

Our reflections on the attributes of God continue with another pair of characteristics: **mercy and righteousness**. These two attributes of God are often set alongside each other, and so it is not controversial to treat them together. However, there is no consensus on *how* to treat them in tandem. Consider the following as one way to think through the matter of their interrelationship in God.

Let's look first at **God's righteousness**. What does it mean to say God is righteous? Righteousness is linked to matters of justice, rights and law. To be righteous is to be found in accordance with law. When we say that God is righteous, we are saying that his being and action are in full accordance with law. But what law? Since God himself is the standard of justice and the ultimate law-giver, this attribute must be necessarily reflexive: God lives according to the standard of *his* law.

With such an understanding of righteousness, it should be obvious why we might encounter some choppy waters when we turn to **God's mercy**. Mercy is most basically understood as withholding the execution of what is just or right. You deserve one thing, but get another -- that's the heart of mercy.

If mercy is so understood, **how can God be both merciful and righteous?** For God to be perfectly merciful, there must be a lessening of his righteousness. For God to be perfectly righteous, there is a definite limit set on his mercy -- if he can be said to be merciful at all.

There are **a number of solutions to this puzzle**. We could abandon divine righteousness. We could abandon divine mercy. We could say God moves from righteousness to mercy (maybe by means of some kind of crude OT/NT distinction). We could try to hold them together as inherently paradoxical affirmations that bear witness to God's mystery. We could just give up on the theological task altogether, opting to speak haphazardly of both attributes in so-called "balance."

In the contrast of these alternative solutions, my approach (big surprise!) would be to **redefine mercy and righteousness according to the history of God's dealings with us**. Where is God in his mercy and righteousness revealed? In Jesus Christ, God deals with us rightly and merciful.

In Jesus Christ, God's righteousness is not a subservience to an abstract law. God's right is precisely his freely chosen covenant of mercy whereby humble and even sinful human beings are brought into fellowship with God and each other. God doesn't speak his law into a vacuum, but gives his law to his people. That God even has a people is a consequence God's merciful decision. Thus, **God's mercy is the content of God's righteousness**.

In Jesus Christ, God's mercy is not a lessening of the demands of righteousness. God's mercy is executed by God's righteous right hand, whereby he takes sin seriously and opposes it as his enemy. That God is righteous -- that God takes a stand for what is right between him and us -- is good news for us. It is through his righteousness that God enacts his mercy. Thus, **God's righteousness is the form of God's mercy**.

So, when understood in tandem with each other and in correspondence to God's history with us, the divine attributes of mercy and righteousness bear witness to the character of God as the one who is in himself for us and with us.

### **Any thoughts?**

Have I misrepresented the general definitions of righteousness and mercy offered as foils at the beginning of this post?

Do my reformulations of mercy and righteousness sound right? On what basis

would you judge them?

Has this exercise served to commend my preferred procedure (used throughout this series) of defining God's attributes in accordance with God's history with us in his covenant with Israel fulfilled in his Son, Jesus Christ? Does this particular example indicate any flaws or dangers in this procedure?

## **XI. Patience and Goodness**

This week we come to the conclusion of our semester-long exploration into the attributes of God. Before addressing our final pair of divine characteristics (patience and goodness), I would like to retrace our steps by means of an outline:

NOTs -

- I. simplicity (or unity)
- II. infinity (or greatness)
- III. immutability (or constancy)
- IV. impassibility (or freedom)

OMNIs -

- V. omnipresence (or eternity)
- VI. omniscience (or wisdom)
- VII. omnipotence (or power)

CHARACTERISTICS -

- VIII. love
- IX. grace and holiness
- X. mercy and justice
- XI. patience and goodness

Although reviewing the whole of our series has some inherent value, I have presenting this outline for a specific reason related to this week's post. The structure of our series relies upon a noteworthy **distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes**. This classical notion distinguishes between those attributes of God which can be shared with

creatures (communicable) and those which cannot (incommunicable). Our first two categories (the NOTs and the OMNIs) are traditionally considered to be God's incommunicable attributes, whereas our final category (the CHARACTER attributes) are considered to be communicable. Creatures, including human beings, cannot be called simple, infinite, immutable, impassible, omnipresent, omniscient, or omnipotent. But creatures, at least human creatures, can be called loving, gracious, holy, merciful and just.

This distinction is of particular interest to our final pair of character attributes: **patience and goodness**. As this week's image reminds us, patience and goodness are found among the gifts of the Spirit. As a human being is filled with the divine Spirit, she shares in God's communicable attributes. God "communicates" these attributes to us by grace.

Although I find this distinction interesting and instructive, I need to register one **criticism**. My criticism has two aspects corresponding to the two sides of the distinction. On the one hand, I don't think we can so easily discern which attributes are incommunicable. On the other, I don't think we can so easily assume that we share in any of God's attributes. Let me address each in turn, the second aspect dealing directly with patience and goodness.

The first side of the criticism has been implicit throughout my treatment of the "metaphysical" attributes (the NOTs and the OMNIs). I have tried to suggest alternative terms that avoid some of the methodological problems involved in metaphysical God-talk (see outline above). Note that each of these alternative terms is apparently more communicable than the metaphysical term it is replacing. Even the attribute of eternity will be given to human beings, as God has promised to give us eternal life. This is an gift of grace beyond our natural ability, but we will receive it nevertheless. **There seems to be a human way of sharing in many if not all of God's attributes**. So the distinction runs into problems because of the difficulty of identifying any inherently incommunicable attributes.

The second side of the criticism comes into sharp relief when speaking of the patience and goodness of God. At first glance, these two seem to be obviously communicable. We comfortably speak of both God and humans being good and

patient. So these must be communicable attributes. But the problem with such an easy assumption is that **the manner of God's goodness and patience is radically different than the manner of our goodness and patience**. Since I have already addressed this problem in connection with divine goodness in an earlier [post](#), I will focus my comments on patience.

We often speak of our being patient with God. We learn to be patient as we wait for God's timing. But can this really be thought of as sharing a divine attribute? Is our patience so similar to God's patience? When God is patient with us, he is not waiting on our timing. Rather, he is waiting for us to learn and grow, giving time and space for our freedom, even mercifully overlooking our sins. This is the meaning of divine patience. Human patience, in contrast, trusts in the Lord as he works out his good will. In other words, we are patient with God because he is good, whereas God is patient with us because he is good and we are not (yet). **Again, there seems to be a distinctively human way of sharing in God's attributes**. So the distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes again runs into problems because even the most obviously communicable attributes are shared with us in a way that differs radically from God.

The **bottom line of this criticism** is that the more crucial distinction is not between incommunicable and communicable attributes but between God's way of being his own attributes and the human way of sharing in God's attributes.

The **implication for our talk of patience and goodness** is that we should begin with God's patience and goodness and only then, with proper distinctions in mind, speak of our human patience and goodness. I suggest that such a habit of mind would apply across the board to all the attributes explored these last few months, though defending or applying this suggestion is beyond the scope of this already long post. I'll leave that task to you.

### **Any thoughts?**

What is your initial reaction to the distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes?

Do the two aspects of my criticism of this distinction hit or miss the mark?

Is the notion of a human way of sharing in God's attributes helpful?

Would you agree that there is a distinctively human way of sharing in any of God's attributes, provided he chooses to share them with us? Why or why not? Does my description of God's patience as ordered to the working out of his goodness ring true? Why or why not?

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