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# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2006

## Attributes of God (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



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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

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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?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 5:48 PM

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### 1 Comments:

At [9:11 AM, December 30, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

I loved this series. Thanks again for doing it.

As you know, I'm taking the basic format and using it for an

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"armchair theologians" series with my wednesday morning men's group. We did "not-compound" to start off this week.

Good discussion.

Thanks,

-David

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