

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 69: God: the nature of God (2)

God's incommunicable attributes are exclusively true of God. "These are the badges of Divinity—that glory which He will not and cannot give to another" (Thornwell). "The incommunicable attributes of God, are such as there is no appearance or shadow of them in creatures" (Gill).

The attributes, perfections, or excellencies of God, are the essential and absolutely inseparable properties of his spiritual substance or nature. These may be distinguished into those called *communicable*, of which some faint, but infinitely defective resemblances, may be found among his creatures—as knowledge, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth—and *incommunicable*—as self-existence, absolute independence, absolute simplicity, infinity, unsuccessive eternity, unchangeableness, necessary oneness, and subsistence in three distinct persons—John Brown [*Systematic Theology*, 101-102]

Q. What is God? *A.* God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth—Shorter Catechism [Q.5]

The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of himself, infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself; a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, who only has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, and withal most just and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty—LBC [2:1]

I. The Nature of God

A. His incommunicable attributes

1. *God is simple.* By "simple" is meant God is singular. God is one undividable essence. "Simplicity is that perfection of God that excludes all complexity of His Being and attributes" (Kersten). "*What is Simpleness or Singleness in God?* It is an essential property in God, whereby every thing that is in God is God himself. Therefore without parts, mixture or composition, invisible, and impassible" (Ussher). The classic statement on God's simplicity is found in our confession: "God is a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions" (LBC). [1] He is a most pure spirit.¹ "God is Spirit" (Jn.4:24). He's not merely "a" Spirit but "is" Spirit. "While the spiritual essence of God is non-physical and formless, it is at the same time the most *real* substance of all...that which has no substance of any kind is nonentity...God is a real actual being" (Shedd). He is real spiritual essence. [2] He is invisible. "Now to the King eternal...invisible" (1Tim.1:17). "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom.1:20). [3] He is without body. "Now to the King eternal...immortal [incorruptible]" (1Tim.1:17). "He is not liable to decay or corruption; a simple

¹ God is the most simple being; for that which is first in nature, having nothing beyond it, cannot by any means be thought to be compounded; for whatsoever is so, depends upon the parts whereof it is compounded, and so is not the first being: now God being infinitely simple, hath nothing in himself which is not himself, and therefore cannot will any change in himself, he being his own essence and existence—Stephen Charnock [*Existence and Attributes of God*, 333]

uncompounded essence, incapable, therefore, of decomposition, and consequently permanent and eternal" (Clark). [4] He is without parts.² This asserts the unity and oneness of God. "The LORD is one" (Deut.6:4). "For there is one God" (2Tim.2:5). "He is free from all composition, and every thing in him is God himself" (Brown). God is one essence with each attribute identical with that essence. "The attributes are not parts of the essence, of which this latter is composed. The whole essence is in each attribute, and the attribute in the essence" (Shedd). [5] He is without passions. Man has passions. "Elijah was a man subject to like passions [a similar nature]" (Jas.5:17). "We also are men with like passions as you [the same nature]" (Acts 14:15). A passion is the soul's response to external influences. It is reactionary. It is the effect of a cause. "Passion implies passivity. It is the effect of an impression from without" (Shedd). God has no passions.³

(1) 1Tim.1:17; 1Tim.6:13-16

2. *God is unchangeable.* "What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable" (Shorter Catechism). "Immutability is that perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises" (Berkhof). [1] Person. All of God's attributes are immutable. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb.13:8). "Even reason teaches us that no change is possible in God, since a change is either for better or for worse. But in God, as the absolute Perfection, improvement and deterioration are both equally impossible" (Berkhof). *Objection:* Doesn't God change from being angry to loving when His people are converted? No, there is never any essential change in God. All that He was before our conversion, He remains afterwards. The change is in us not God. Thus what in God called for our damnation, now calls for our acceptance. "When the devils, now fallen, stood as glorious angels, they were the objects of God's love, necessarily; when they fell, they were the objects of God's hatred, because impure. The same reason which made him love them while they were pure, made him hate them when they were criminal" (Charnock). [2] Purposes. God's eternal purposes, decreed in eternity past, are unalterable and immutable. "God has determined all that ever was, is, or shall be; all come to pass according to the counsel of his will, and all his decrees are unchangeable" (Gill). "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath" (Heb.6:17). "But He is unique, and who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does" (Job 23:13). *Objection:* Doesn't God at times repent of His actions (that is, regret and change His mind concerning them)? No, God's actions are the outworking of His eternal and immutable decrees. Scripture expressly denies God repents, "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent (change His mind)" (Num.23:19). When Scripture says God repents (Gen.6:6), it's applied to Him figuratively (just as human body parts).⁴ "They are condescensions of the Divine Teacher to our narrow capacities" (Thornwell). [3] Promises. God's word is unchangeable in its threats, morality, and promises. "All flesh is as grass, and all the

² It is certain God is not composed of parts, in any sense; not in a *physical* sense, of essential parts, as matter and form, of which bodies consist: nor of integral parts, as soul and body, of which men consist: nor in a *metaphysical* sense, as of essence and existence, of act and power: nor in a *logical* sense, as of kind and difference, substance and accident; all which would argue imperfection, weakness, and mutability—John Gill [*Body of Divinity*, 33-34]

³ God has no passions. He stands in no passive and organic relations to that which is not himself. He cannot be wrought upon, and impressed, by the universe of matter and mind which he has created from nothing. Creatures are passively correlated to each other, and are made to be affected by other creatures; but the Creator is self-subsistent and independent of creation, so that he is not passively correlated to anything external to himself—William Shedd [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.1, 171]

⁴ When repentance is spoke of God it is to be understood improperly and figuratively, after the manner of men, he doing like what men do, when they repent, that is, undo what they have done; as a potter, when he does not like a vessel he has made, breaks it to pieces: so when it repented God that he had made man on earth, and Saul king, Gen.6:6; 1Sam.15:11, he destroyed man from of the earth, whom he had created; and took away the kingdom from Saul and his family, and gave it to another: in doing which he did not change his mind, but his operations and providences, and that according to his unchangeable will—John Gill [*Body of Divinity*, 40]

glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever" (1Pet.24-25).⁵

(1) Ps.102:25-28; Mal.3:6; Jas.1:17

3. *God is independent.*⁶ "Independence, self-existence, necessary existence, absolute being, are only so many different modes of expressing one and the same thing, and that thing is the negation of a cause...He is because He is." (Thornwell). "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex.3:14). All that God is, He is of Himself. [1] Self-existence.⁷ "For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself" (Jn.5:26). "God is self-existent, that is, He has the ground of His existence in Himself" (Berkhof). "The ultimate difference between God and other beings lies in the fact that creatures are derived, conditional, and dependent. However, God is not dependent. He has the power of being in and of Himself; He does not derive it from something else. This attribute is called God's *aseity*, from the Latin *a sei*, meaning 'from oneself'" (Sproul). [2] Self-sufficiency.⁸ "God contains within Himself the fullness of perfection and blessedness—that nothing can be taken from Him and nothing added to Him. He is His own satisfying portion, and the end and portion of all His intelligent creatures. He can never want; he can never be subject to unsatisfied desire; he can never be disturbed by care or solicitude. He is the perfect good" (Thornwell). [3] Self-contentedness. "God, having all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself, is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creature which he has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them" (LBC).

(1) Ex.3:13-14⁹ (Ex.9:14; 15:11; Deut.3:24; 33:26-27; 1Sam.2:2; Ps.86:8; 89:6-8; Isa.40:17-18, 25-28; Acts 17:22-29)

4. *God is infinite.* God is without limit or bounds. "The infinity of God is the divine essence viewed as having no bounds, or limits" (Shedd). "The heaven of heavens cannot contain You"

⁵ As an infinite and absolute Being, self-existent and absolutely independent, God is exalted above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are. So God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment—Charles Hodge [*Systematic Theology*, vol.1, 390]

⁶ By this perfection (impedence) he is at once essentially and absolutely distinct from all creatures. Creatures, after all, do not derive their existence from themselves but from others and so have nothing from themselves; both in their origin and hence in their further development and life, they are absolutely dependent. But as is evident from the word "aseity," God is exclusively from himself, not in the sense of being self-caused but being from eternity to eternity who he is, being not becoming. God is absolute being, the fullness of being, and therefore also eternally and absolutely independent in his existence, in his perfections, in all his works, the first and the last, the sole cause and final goal of all things—Herman Bavinck [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.2, 152]

⁷ Self-existence should never be taken in a positive, but a negative sense. No being can originate itself. The very notion is self-contradictory—for it involves existence and non-existence at the same time. All that is meant is the denial to the being of any origin at all. It has no cause, nothing anterior or superior on which it depends—J.H. Thornwell [*Collected Writings*, vol., 191]

⁸ During a past eternity God was alone—self-contained, self-sufficient, in need of nothing. Had a universe, or angels, or humans been necessary to Him in any way, they also would have been called into existence from all eternity. Creating them when He did added nothing to God essentially. He changes not (Ma.3:6), therefore His essential glory can be neither augmented nor diminished. God was under no constraint, no obligation, no necessity to create. That He chose to do so was purely a sovereign act on His part, caused by nothing outside Himself, determined by nothing but His own good pleasure; for He 'works all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph.1:11). That He did create was simply for His manifestative glory—A.W. Pink [*The Attributes of God*, 11]

⁹ God's name, 'I AM', reflects his self-existence and eternal being. Thus, if we take the phrase 'I am that which I am' in its most natural sense, it affirms his eternity, self-existence, and simplicity. Expressed in the third person, it would be, 'God is what he is'—Greg Nichols [*What Does the Bible Say About God?*, 50]

(1Ki.8:27). "When we say that God is infinite we mean that He knows no bounds. Whatever God is and all that God is, He is without limit" (Tozer). "The LORD *is* high above all nations, His glory above the heavens" (Ps.113:4). Immensity is God's infinity applied to space, and eternity is God's infinity applied to time. "Immensity expresses His relation to space, as eternity expresses His relation to time" (Thornwell). [1] Immensity. "The immensity of God is his essence as related to space...By virtue of God's immensity, he is Omnipresent" (Shedd). God is always and wholly present, in every place. "God, as the infinite Spirit, is present at every point of space as a totality. He is not present in the universe by division of substance, but as a unity, simple and undivided...He is *all* in every place, similarly as the soul is *all* in every part of the body. The whole essence of God is here, is there, and everywhere" (Shedd). *Objections:* [a] What about His unique presence? He is uniquely present in heaven, in believers, and among His NT Temple. "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex.33:14). "For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name *is* Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, but also with him who has a contrite and humble spirit" (Isa.57:17). "The essential presence of God is the same everywhere; the influxive [influential] declarative [manifest] presence of God is special, and otherwise in one place than another" (Bates). [b] What about His absence from hell? "These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2Thess.1:9). This simply means God only makes His just wrath known in hell and not His powerful mercy and grace (Rev.14:10). [2] Eternity.¹⁰ "The Eternity of God is his essence as related to duration. It is duration without beginning, without end, and without succession" (Shedd). "You are from everlasting" (Ps.93:2). "His duration is as endless as his essence is boundless: he always was and always will be, and will no more have an end than he had a beginning; and this is an excellency belonging to the Supreme Being" (Charnock). "God is eternal because He is without beginning and end" (Ames). "I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God" (Isa.44:6). "Now to the King eternal" (1Tim.1:17). "He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, who alone has immortality" (1Tim.6:15-16). "God's eternity is that perfection of God whereby He is elevated above all temporal limits and all succession of moments, and possesses the whole of His existence in one indivisible present" (Berkhof). "He created *in the beginning*; He placed creation in time. Time belongs to the creature. God's Being, however, is eternal: *without beginning, without succession of time, and without end*" (Kersten).

Space must have its limitations because its existence is equal only with the universe. Where there is no creation, there can be no space nor time. But creation cannot be infinite, but must have its bounds, impossible as it may be for us to imagine the non-existence of space. In our mode of existence, space and time are so necessary that we cannot even deny their existence without using words which involve that existence. Thus if we say, 'Where there is not universe, there is no space,' the very words 'where' and 'there' involve the notion of space...When, therefore, we speak of God's immensity, we mean more than his filling all space, just as when we speak of his eternity, we mean more than his existing throughout all time—J.P. Boyce [*Abstract Theology*, 71]

(1) Job 11:7-9; Ps.90:1-2; Ps.139:7-10 ; Prov.15:3; Jer.23:23-24

¹⁰ The eternity of God is nothing else but the duration of God; and the duration of God is nothing else but his existence enduring. If eternity were anything distinct from God, and not of the essence of God, then there would be something which was not God, necessary to perfect God. As immortality is the great perfection of a rational creature, so eternity is the choice perfection of God, yea, the gloss and lustre of all others. Every perfection would be imperfect, if it were not always a perfection. God is essentially whatsoever he is, and there is nothing in God but his essence—Stephen Charnock [*The Existence and Attributes of God*, 285-286]