

THURSDAY MORNING GROUP

NONE GREATER

1. The Infinity and Independence of God

‘What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.’
A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p.8

Over the next 5 weeks, I am using material from Matthew Barrett’s book, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (2019, Baker Books: Grand Rapids) to look at some of those realities that make God, *God* – those characteristics of God that are essential to His divinity, without which God would not be divine. In’ his foreword to the book, Fred Sanders says:

‘Focussing on a preselected subset of things we like to remember about God (his mercy, intimacy, concern for us, attention to us, love for us), we let our thoughts about God orbit around that familiar center. We grow comfortable with a certain set of reassuring, familiar, and cozy divine attributes. There are no sheer cliffs, dizzying heights, or fathomless abysses in the doctrine of God we let ourselves settle into. It’s as if we have a doctrine of God that gets everything right except that it accidentally leaves out the sheer “godness” of God. But that means it gets everything wrong....

‘Theology is hard because once you realize how much greater God is ... you realize how much harder God is to talk about. The problem cannot be overcome simply by studying theology books and learning some new, more technical vocabulary... [P]icking up those terms, and using them to say more of the right things about God, is not enough. These words and concepts of the classical Christian doctrine of God are just markers along the way to reversing some deep-seated habits of thought. Those habits of thought mostly start out with a sentiment like “If I were God...” We are easily lulled into a style of theology that starts from ourselves and imagines some ways in which God must be like, but bigger and better.... The underlying problem is a theological style that, even in its reading of Scripture, works up from us to God.... It requires some truly counter-intuitive moves, because we really have to get out of ourselves to hear the message of God’s perfection and blessedness... What really matters most, though, is to start the journey. What matters is to join the company of those who are permanently shocked by the sheer godness of the God we thought we knew.’ (*None Greater*, pp. xi-xiii)

This week we are going to look at the *infinity* and *independence* of God. Note that these two words all begin with an *in-* These little particles are *negators*, and so these two words are saying something about who or what God is *not*. He is *not* finite or measurable; and He is *not* dependent. God’s independence is also called, by classic theologians, the *aseity* of God (*a-*, “from”; *se*, “himself”) and is used to condense into one word the truth that “He is and has of Himself, all that He is and has.”

Whilst human beings have been made in the image of God, it is not true that we can arrive at a knowledge of God’s divinity simply by looking at human beings. If we do that, we end up with a God who only has attributes that can be communicated to humanity. And there are such attributes or characteristics or qualities, else there would be no sense in the statement that we are made in God’s image. But there are things about God that are not communicated to humanity; there remains the Creator-creature distinction. And even in those characteristics which God communicates to us, there is more than a matter of *scale*; it is a matter of *essence*. It is one thing to say that human beings are created to love; it is another to say that “God *is* love.” God is not simply “loving at an infinite scale” – He *is* love itself. It is one thing to say that human beings are called to “shine like lights”; it is another to say that “God *is* light.” God transcends our characteristics altogether.

So, when we think about the “being-character-attributes” of God we are really talking about what have been called the *perfections* of God. This word tries to alert us to the fact that there is something *essentially* different between God and us, even whilst there is also some connecting points through the gift/fact that God made us in His own image. The essential difference is that God is all the perfections, all the time, and without limit. He is His perfections

in infinite measure. He is “the fullness of Being” (Anselm). The Westminster Confession of Faith says, “God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He has made, nor deriving any glory in, by, unto, and upon them.” That is a very full statement of the *aseity* of God!

God was not lonely, bored, or needy in any way when He created the world. “God is not dependent on the world for His existence, nor is he dependent on the world for his happiness and self-fulfillment... He is the fullness of life in and of himself.” (Barrett) He is in no way caused by another. The essential thing about human beings is that we have all that we have as a gift; all we have and are is caused by another. God is all that He is in Himself. “In Him we live and move and have our being.” The child’s question “If God created everything, who created God?” shows how *other* than us God is in this respect. Uncaused, His existence is grounded in Himself. Anselm says, “He alone has of himself all that he has, while other things have nothing of themselves. And other things, having nothing of themselves, have their only reality from him.”

God is perfectly happy and fulfilled in and of Himself. ‘God is infinitely happy in the enjoyment of himself, in perfectly beholding and infinitely loving, and rejoicing in, his own essence and perfections.’ (Jonathan Edwards) If He had never created the world, God would not have been “worse off;” he would have remained complete, content, and fulfilled. This is deeply linked to the truth that God is Triune. These three Persons, one in essence, have eternally subsisted as the one, undivided Godhead, in a community that is the essence of love. Theirs is an eternal, self-existent community of giving and receiving, praising and thanking, serving and honouring.

This means that our relationship with God is essentially one in which we never add to or activate something in God. There is a deep inequality or asymmetry in our relationship with Him. From His side the relationship is all giving, and from ours it is all receiving. God is not dependent on us for the outworking of His will; He is not served by human hands. In Acts 17:24-31, Paul speaks about these things:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.”

Being, then, God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Stoics would most likely have been among those listening to Paul’s preaching. They believed that nature is divine, everything having within itself the spark of divinity. The divine is so dependent on the created order that it is identified with the created order. God and the world are mutually dependent in this thinking. Paul’s words were a direct confrontation with them. And it is a confrontation that has its grounds in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus who has been appointed as the judge of all the world. Paul is saying that a significant part of Jesus’ ministry is that we know the godness of God.

The gospel depends on a God who does not depend on you. In Isaiah 40 and 44 the prophet satirises the worship paid to the idols. They are the product of human hands. If we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works, we must be saved by a fundamentally different kind of God to the idols. If he were not fundamentally different, we would have to be originators of

our own salvation. As we are the originators of our own predicament in sin, any God we “make” would bear the image of our own slavery. Salvation is the action of God outside of all our actions (even “faith.”) It is the action of God in the one true man, Jesus Christ, who was without sin, and yet who was made sin for us. Our faith in Christ is itself a gift, like the faith of Abraham (**Rom. 4:13ff.**) His faith was in a God who was completely independent of him. His own body gave no possibility of a future. But God, in whom he believed, is God who calls into existence things that do not exist, and who gives life to the dead. He is not dependent on the situation to provide a starting point! He acts independently of us, freely in Himself. The goal of grace is that we will be inducted into the perfectly happy and fulfilled community of the Trinity as beloved sons and daughters in Jesus Christ. And in that community, we will be full in worship of God. Revelation 4:11, 5:1-11.