

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#25—Theology Proper—Part IV¹

The Attributes of God—Part I

Paul Karleen

October 7, 2007

For studies in theology proper, if you have the book, you should read Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. The table entitled "Topics and Readings for Theology Proper" includes Reymond's book along with the two books of charts by Wayne House and associates readings with the study topics. Readings found on lines 6-10 are appropriate for today's study. The next study will be on God's attributes of impassibility, transcendence, infinity, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, with appropriate readings being found in lines 11-18. Having House's *Charts for Open Theism* with you during our study times will be useful for you. Reymond's book is apparently out of print until October.

The most important study we could ever do

Almost 50 years ago A. W. Tozer wrote these words about the great weakness of the Church of Jesus Christ in understanding and appreciating the nature of God²:

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.³

This is even more true today. Tozer continues:

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him—and of her.⁴

In a letter to the humanist Erasmus, Martin Luther said to him, "Your thoughts of God are too human."⁵ The psalmist shows us what our thinking should be (Ps. 50:21): "These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face."

The God of the Bible is at the center of all things that exist. He is therefore the most important topic in the study of theology. Even though we began our study of systematic theology with bibliology, at the heart of that topic is the self-revelation of God. Failure to understand how Scripture presents God will lead to distortion in all our theological thinking.

Eminently practical study

But understanding what God is like also affects our walk with God. Here is J. I. Packer on the practicality of knowing what God is like as he reveals himself in Scripture, answering a hypothetical objector who questions spending time on the study of God:

¹ Copyright 2007 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

² I owe many of these initial observations to Bob Deffinbaugh, "Exploring the Excellencies of God," available at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=248.

³ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 10.

⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵ *The Bondage of the Will*, Sec. XVI.

The questioner clearly assumes that a study of the nature and character of God will be unpractical and irrelevant for life. In fact, however, it is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. . . . Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold[ed] as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.⁶

Bob Deffinbaugh identifies the following practical reasons for understanding what God is like in Scripture:

1. If we want to know about God, the best way is to study what he is like as revealed in Scripture.

Only one generation saw the Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. But the picture of God in the Bible is sufficient for us to know what God wants us to know.

2. The nature and character of God form the basis for all human morality.

All ideas of right and wrong come from the very person of God. He himself is the standard.

3. If we think wrongly about God, we commit idolatry, since we substitute something created for him.

Eve first did this in the Garden, when she underestimated God's willingness to act on his prohibition.

4. Since we are going to be with God forever, we should grow in our knowledge of him now.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

5. Studying God's attributes is at the core of our enjoyment of God now and of our spiritual growth.

God saves sinners and begins a process in which we come to know him better. Knowing his attributes is at the heart of this.

Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Pet. 1:4)

6. Knowing God's attributes is at the heart of faith.

We are to learn to trust God more and more. We are trusting a living being. Knowing what he is like will lead to greater faith.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (Heb. 10:23)

Ordering what we know about God

It should come as no surprise that it is very hard to describe what God is like. We are created beings attempting to talk about the One who made us. Since He gave us our existence, he is in every way greater than we are. We are derived; he is not derived at all. The best we can do is to say as much as the Bible says,

⁶ *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 29-30.

noting points where we correspond to Him in some way, making helpful categorizations and giving illustrations. Often in order to describe Him we must resort to saying what He is not, for instance, in regard to His holiness, since we have never experienced such a quality, and since we can know what the absence or opposite of holiness is—that we *have* experienced!

Over the centuries Bible students and scholars have suggested various ways of dividing the discussion of God’s attributes and the qualities of His essence. When we compare presentations we find that they do not agree in the classification or even in the attributes and qualities covered. I have long appreciated the presentation by H.C. Thiessen, as found in his *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Here is his classification⁷:

God’s Essence:	God’s Attributes:
Spirituality	Non-Moral
Incorporeal	Omnipresence
Invisible	Omniscience
A person	Omnipotence
Self-existence (aseity)	Immutability
Immensity (infinity)	Moral
Eternality	Holiness
	Righteousness
	Goodness
	Love
	Benevolence
	Mercy
	Grace
	Truth

If we look at the attributes found in House’s *Charts for Open Theism*, we find that there are several attributes that Thiessen does not have:

- Simplicity
- Pure actuality
- Necessity
- Aseity (like Thiessen’s self-existence)
- Impassibility
- Transcendence
- Immanence
- Infinity (like Thiessen’s immensity)
- Sovereignty

Missing from both and treated by some other theologians is God’s glory.

Today we will present God’s essence, following Thiessen, and then the remainder of the first five in House.

God’s essence

Thiessen sees a difference between God’s essence and his attributes. His essence underlies the manifestation of the attributes.

⁷ H.C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 119-133.

Spirituality

God is not physical. He is immaterial and incorporeal: John 4:24 is important here: “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” This could be translated “God is spirit” or “God is a spirit,” with the latter meaning that he is a member of the class of spirit beings. Either way, the ultimate meaning is the same: he is spiritual in nature. See also Lk. 24:39.

Remember that by the incarnation the second person of the Trinity came to have a human body and nature and after the resurrection and ascension has a spiritual body. He has a body, but it is not physical. Because God is not material, he is invisible: “No one has ever seen God” (Jn. 1:18). God is also alive. Spirit beings have life in them. John 5:26 says, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.” God is a Person, a personal being. He has self-consciousness, intelligence and a will. He is a person, but not a human being.

Pinnock raises the question of whether God may have a body:

The only personal agents we know about are embodied agents. It might help us to imagine divine agency if God were somehow, mysteriously, embodied. . . . I would venture to say that corporeality is a subject that ought to be on the modern agenda and which has been neglected hitherto. We need to consider more carefully what form of corporeality would be appropriate to ascribe to God.⁸

Self-existence/Aseity

Aseity comes from Latin *aseite*, which means ‘of or by itself.’ God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent. As we have seen already in a previous study, this is suggested by the most likely meaning of YHWH and by the related term translated ‘I am’ in Ex. 3:14. In Thomas Oden’s words “To affirm that God is independent or necessary means that God depends on no cause external to God. God’s life is contingent upon nothing else.”⁹

Because we are created and live in a cause and effect environment, we have difficulty conceiving of anything that exists without reference to anything else. Yet God is like that because He is totally independent of all animate and inanimate things for His existence and all He does. He reveals Himself in Ex. 3:14 as the God who will not fail to keep His promises because nothing can change Him, since everything depends on Him. He does not need anything from anyone or anything in order to be everything He can and wants to be.

But we should not miss the different position in Open Theism, as shown in Pinnock:

Since it sees God as dependent on the world in certain respects, the open view of God differs from much conventional theology. Yet we believe that this dependence does not detract from God’s greatness, it only enhances it.¹⁰

and

God, through grace, has decided to be independent of the world in some respects and dependent on it in other respects.¹¹

⁸ *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Oneness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 81.

⁹ *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 55.

¹⁰ *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 16.

¹¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 33.

Immensity

God is infinite in relation to space, which is actually dependent on him for its existence. Space and time are creations of God that are separate from him. He is not bound by them. This is taught in 1 Ki. 8:27: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you.” God can be everywhere in His creation—physical and spiritual—and yet not be part of it. The pantheist says God is part of the universe and the universe is part of Him; he cannot thus have a personal God. The God of the Bible is both personal and immense.

Eternality

God's infinite quality with regard to time is described as His eternity. We have great difficulty thinking about living without succession of events. And yet God, as the cause of time—He has created it for His purposes—is not bound by it in the least. All things and events, in any and all of what we know as time periods, are equally present to Him. Scripture describes him in many places as the eternal God (Isa. 57:15; Gen. 21:33).

Together God's immensity and his eternity describe his transcendence. He is beyond the realm of space and time. Open theists seem to be generally orthodox in regard to this attribute, but notice that Richard Rice says, “The open view of God affirms divine transcendence . . . by maintaining that his sensitivity and love are infinitely greater than our own.”¹² Does he mean that his infinite love is the ground for his transcendence? Of course, this assertion by John Sanders denies God's transcendence: “In my view, the Bible depicts God as experiencing duration rather than timelessness or simultaneity. . . . God is everlasting through time rather than timeless or having simultaneity (all of time at once).”¹³ Certainly their view that God does not know what is going to happen in the future means for Open Theists that he is limited by time and therefore not transcendent—no matter what they may claim to believe about ‘transcendence’ as a theological category. After all, God cannot foreknow anything beyond the present on the time scale. He is therefore bound by time. This is a significant departure from orthodox Christianity.

God's attributes

Simplicity

The great *Shema* of Dt. 6:4 expresses a crucial attribute of God: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” This verse can be interpreted in two basic ways—to refer to uniqueness or to unity. Either one would be true, but I believe that the second is preferable, based on the syntax and semantics of the words. God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts; he is unitary. God's attributes are not like slices of an orange that are arranged around a center. One very common error outside the Judeo-Christian tradition is polytheism, holding to the existence of many Gods. This biblical teaching concerning His unity counters this fallacy as well as the error of seeing the Persons of the Trinity as separate gods. Here is Berkhof's description of the doctrine:

When we speak of the simplicity of God, we use the term to describe the state or quality of being simple, the condition of being free from division into parts, and therefore from compositeness. It means that God is not composite and not susceptible of division in any sense of the word.¹⁴

¹² “Biblical Support for a New Perspective” in Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 42.

¹³ *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 319.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 62.

But Pinnock clearly does not agree with this:

Let us not treat the attributes of God independently of the Bible, but view the biblical metaphors as reality-depicting descriptions of the living God, whose very being is self-giving love. When we do so, God's unity will not be viewed as a mathematical oneness but as a unity that includes diversity. . . .¹⁵

It is clear that proponents of Open Theism do not hold to the historic view of the simplicity of God.

Perhaps the error of thinking that God is composite comes in part from the view that God's attribute of love takes precedence over the others, automatically creating an imbalance and thus suggesting that God has divisions within him.

Pure actuality

There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way. John S. Feinberg says, "Actuality or *act* is the opposite of potentiality. Through various causes, a being that is, say, potentially a tree, becomes one actually. . . . God is "pure act," the "pure act of being."¹⁶

Open Theism differs significantly from this: "Pure actuality means . . . God cannot have real relationships with a changeable world because that would involve give and take."¹⁷

Necessity

Recall from our earlier study that if something is necessary it is not caused. And if something is not necessary, it is contingent. It exists by definition. God is uncaused and exists because he must exist. As such he is the ultimate ground of all things that exist. Feinberg says, "Necessary beings depend on nothing for their existence; they neither come into nor go out of existence."¹⁸

Notice what Open theists say about God's necessity: "[God] is not wholly immutable and necessary, for he is also changing and contingent."¹⁹

This appears to confuse God's actions with his unchangeable attributes. Because they want a God who changes by learning and growing, they say that he is contingent in his existence: things outside him lead to change in who he is. This is unbiblical, of course.

Immutability

Malachi 3:6 says "I the Lord do not change" and James 1:17 speaks of the "Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." God is unchanging and unchangeable.

Here Open Theism clearly contradicts Scripture. Pinnock says,

God is not a cosmic stuffed shirt, who is always thinking of himself. Rather he is open to the world and responsive to developments in history. He remembers the past, savors the present and anticipates the future. He is open to new experiences, has a capacity for novelty and is open to reality, which

¹⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 27.

¹⁶ *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001).

¹⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 117.

¹⁸ Feinberg, 211.

¹⁹ Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 159.

itself is open to change. . . . God is unchangeable with respect to his character, but always changing in relation to us.²⁰

It is important for us to see that the Bible says that God does not change in his essence *or* in his relationships. Both of the passages just quoted teach us this. In Mal. 3:6 the point is that because God himself does not change, he will not abandon his promises to Israel. Israel was disobedient, yet God would not alter what he promised. Notice the whole quote: “I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.” Humanly speaking, we should expect God to tire of Israel’s disobedience and destroy everyone. But his immutable promises are grounded in his immutable nature. He doesn’t change in his relationships and actions because he doesn’t change in his person.

Jonathan Edwards anticipated today’s great error concerning God when he penned his *Freedom of the Will*, published in 1754 (do the math—that’s 253 years ago!). Countering Daniel Whitby, an Arminian minister in the Church of England, who had said, “It is better to deny prescience [foreknowledge] than liberty,” Edwards wrote (among other things):

It will also follow from this notion, that as God is liable to be continually repenting of what he has done; so he must be exposed to be constantly *changing* his mind and intentions, as to his future conduct; altering his measures, relinquishing his old designs, and forming new schemes and projects. For his purposes, even as to the main parts of his scheme, such as belong to the state of his moral kingdom, must be always liable to be broken, through want of foresight; and he must be continually putting his system to rights, as it gets out of order, through the contingency of the actions of moral Agents: he must be a Being, who, instead of being absolutely immutable, must necessarily be the subject of infinitely the most numerous acts of repentance, and changes of intention, of any being whatsoever; for this plain reason, that his vastly extensive charge comprehends an infinitely greater number of those things which are to him contingent and uncertain. In such a situation, he must have little else to do, but to mend broken links as well as he can, and be rectifying his disjointed frame and disordered movements, in the best manner the case will allow, The Supreme Lord of all things must needs be under great and miserable disadvantages, in governing the world which he has made, and of which he has the care, through his being utterly unable to find out things of chief importance, which hereafter shall befall his system; for which, if he did but know, he might make seasonable provision. In many cases, there may be very great necessity that he should make provision, in the manner of his ordering and disposing things, for some great events which are to happen, of vast and extensive influence, and endless consequence to the universe; which he may see afterwards, when it is too late, and may wish in vain that he had known before, that he might have ordered his affairs accordingly. And it is in the power of man, on these principles, by his devices, purposes, and actions, thus to disappoint God, break his measures, make him continually change his mind, subject him to vexation, and bring him into confusion.²¹

Notice that Edwards faced the same basic issue that the Church is facing today with regard to Open Theism: either deny God’s foreknowledge or deny human freedom. Open Theists, of course, opt to keep freedom and jettison foreknowledge.

I encourage you to read the review of Edwards’ book at <http://www.monergismbooks.com/Freedom-of-the-Will-p-16186.html>, including the comments of R. C. Sproul and John Gerstner, respectively:

²⁰ Ibid, 41.

²¹ *Freedom of the Will* 2.11.4.111.

Pelagianism has a death grip on the modern church. Perhaps the most important refutation of this distinctive is Edwards' Freedom of the Will. I believe this is the most important theological book ever published in America.

and

In this book, Edwards annihilated false views of the will that prevailed in his century and in ours, in order that men may know how to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. This profoundest of all Edwards' works is essentially and intentionally and [sic] evangelistic tract.

Here is a simple table that contrasts historical views of God on the topics we have treated alongside the views of Open Theism, where every one of the eight features of God involves a departure from orthodoxy.

Feature of God	Brief description of orthodox position	Open Theism
Spirituality	Not physical	Could be physical
Aseity	Self-existent	Dependent
Immensity	Infinite re space	Could have a body and so be limited
Eternality	Infinite re time	God is everlasting through time rather than above time. He is bound by time.
Simplicity	Not capable of division	A unity that includes diversity
Pure actuality	Not potential	Potential in some ways
Necessity	Uncaused	Some causable aspects
Immutability	Unchanging	Changing

It is not extreme to say that the words of Open Theism seek to make God more like us. Luther was right, and we can apply his words to this movement today: "Your thoughts of God are too human." And the psalmist has the perfect answer for the error (Ps. 50:21): "These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face." It must be true that any such devaluing of God leads to the same response from him today.

Study questions

1. Please internalize definitions 15-22 in the list below.
2. Try to give from memory the errors of Open Theism for the eight features in this lesson.
3. What is the difference between:
 - a. Immensity and Eternality
 - b. Actuality and Necessity
 - c. Necessity and Immutability
4. Which of the features do we partake of or have in some way, if any?
5. In what ways does Open Theism make God like us with regard to these eight features?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.