

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#26—Theology Proper—Part V¹

The Attributes of God—Part II

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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 11-18 are appropriate for today's study. The next study will be on God's holiness, goodness, truth, love, benevolence, mercy, grace and glory. Sections 18-20 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* will be helpful, along with Reymond, ch. 7.

Over 50 years ago Arthur W. Pink wrote about the distorted picture of God among Christendom:

The god of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds.²

The sad fact that so many who name the name of Christ (note that I did not say "Christians"—there have to be large numbers of people in evangelical churches today that are not true believers) accept the teachings of Open Theism shows that the error Pink describes has become blatant heresy. It is of utmost importance that true Christians today know what the Bible actually teaches about God's nature and attributes and that they be able to defend this propositional truth against the inroads of error.

And to help us see that such knowledge will impact what we do every day, I continue from the previous study with some observations on the practicality of knowing what the Bible says about God.³

1. Our worship is enhanced by our knowledge of God's attributes.

We can only worship what we understand. We are worshipping a God has revealed to us what he is like. Here is Rev. 4:8, where living creatures worship a God that they know to be holy:

Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."

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² Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 28-29.

³ 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.

2. Knowing what God is like improves our prayer life.

Our faith in God's ability to answer is based on what God is like, as we see in Ps. 5:1-5:

Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. ² Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. ³ In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation. ⁴ You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. ⁵ The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.

3. Knowing what God is like improves our witness.

First Corinthians 10:31 shows that God's glory is to dictate what we do before others:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

4. We appreciate the Bible more when we know more about who God is.

Notice in Ps. 119:65-72 the connection between knowing God and desiring to know better what God has said:

⁶⁵ Do good to your servant
according to your word, O LORD.
⁶⁶ Teach me knowledge and good judgment,
for I believe in your commands.
⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word.
⁶⁸ You are good, and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees.
⁶⁹ Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies,
I keep your precepts with all my heart.
⁷⁰ Their hearts are callous and unfeeling,
but I delight in your law.
⁷¹ It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.
⁷² The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

5. Knowing what God is like gives us the right perspective on life—God's perspective.

Here is Phil. 3:8-10:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

In our last study we looked at the following attributes and features of God's nature: spirituality, aseity, immensity, eternality, simplicity, pure actuality, necessity and immutability. We continue today with seven more attributes.

Impassibility

The historic view has been that God is incapable of suffering or being changed or disturbed by what he experiences. This attribute is connected with God's immutability—he is unchanging and unchangeable. But Open Theism says that for our relationship with God to be meaningful, he must interact with us in such a way that he must be changed by the situations that we go through, particularly our suffering. So Rice says⁴,

The idea of a suffering God is the antithesis of traditional divine attributes such as immutability and impassibility. It contradicts the notion that God is immune to transition, to anything resembling the vicissitudes of human experience.

There seem to be two main ways that Open Theists err in coming to this kind of conclusion, and they both have to do with interpretation of the biblical text. The first has to do with understanding biblical anthropopathisms (those portions of Scripture where God is described as having feelings), particularly anger or distress. Anthropopathisms are a subset of anthropomorphisms, which are descriptions of God in terms of what humans are like. When we say that God sees, hears, rejoices or walks, we are using anthropomorphisms. Open Theists see anthropopathisms as indicating that the traditional idea of God's impassibility is wrong, because God really does get changed by things outside of him. This seems to be based on taking anthropopathisms to mean that God has *the same* feelings that we do or the same way of feeling. They fail to see the distinction between creature and creator (as they do with so many other doctrines).

In a chapter entitled “Veiled Glory: God's Self-Revelation in Human Likeness—A Biblical Theology of God's Anthropomorphic Self-Disclosure,” A. B. Caneday shows that Open Theists fail to see that biblical anthropomorphisms do not describe God as he actually is but are instead accommodations to our finiteness. They think that anthropopathisms “reveal God just as he is in himself.”⁵ Here is an incisive observation on this by Paul Helm, where he relates impassibility to immutability⁶:

So divine immutability does not signal total inaction or immobility, like the face of the Moon, a state incapable of personal relationship. Rather, it speaks of firmness, faithfulness, covenantal constancy, grounded in who God essentially is. Likewise divine impassibility is not impassivity, but constant goodness, variously expressed (according to God's will and to the specifics of human history) as (for example) love, or wrath, or mercy. Such expressions are rooted in the immutability of the divine nature, the fact that God is unchangeable in goodness and perfection, and cannot be deterred or deflected by outside forces. Of course God's immutable relation to his creation is not perceived as such by it, but what is perceived is a function of the situation or condition of the creaturely recipient. Just as (we say) the Sun is now setting, now rising, so God is now wise, now just, now loving etc. depending on the human circumstances in which he is “encountered” and on God's purposes in these circumstances.

By contrast human emotion is affected by ignorance and moral weakness, by surprise, fear, partiality and physical distance. (This reminds us that a range of emotions is necessarily connected with human

⁴ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 46.

⁵ John Piper, Justin Taylor and Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity: Beyond the Bounds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books: 2003), 152.

⁶ Paul Helm, “Divine Impassibility: Why Is It Suffering?”, available at Reformation 21, the Online Magazine of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, at

http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/Divine_Impassibility/94/

physical embodiment.) For instance, while all of us know that at this very moment there are hundreds of children dying in Darfur this fact fails to move us, whereas if children were dying in a similar fashion on our doorstep we would be moved to grief and compassion and action. These outbreaks of emotion would not be unrelated to our own self-interests, of course, and to what follows from the fact of our physical embodiment.

So emotion in humans is not an unmixed good. Emotion is better than no emotion, but its expression is often the result of selfishness and ignorance. With God it is otherwise. He has an emotional life—he cares and loves and judges and has compassion on his sinful world. But his life—unlike our own emotional lives—is not spasmodic and moody. God does not have a temper. He cannot be cowardly or vain. Rather his “emotional life” is an expression of his perfect goodness and knowledge. The life of God is not first passive and then reactive, as ours is, but it is wholly active.

The second error of interpretation with regard to God’s impassibility lies in the approach to biblical statements concerning Jesus’ anger and suffering, which are used to support the idea that God himself suffers. So Pinnock says, “The sufferings of God and the cross of Christ speak to the issue of impassibility.”⁷

Here we must be careful to describe the expressions of feeling predicated of Jesus as the feelings of the God-Man—the incarnate second person of the Godhead. Helm is helpful here:

But what of the Incarnation? For many, anxieties about divine impassibility are at their highest in the case of Jesus. They say: Jesus is God, and Jesus suffered, therefore God suffered. The conclusion seems inescapable. But is it? Is it then equally valid that: Jesus sat on the side of the well, Jesus is God, therefore God sat on the side of the well. Are we not at such points as these faced with the mystery of the incarnation, of the union of the human nature with the person of the Son of God? But must we not say, to avoid absurdity, something like: Jesus Christ, being God incarnate, the Mediator, sat on the side of the well, and suffered for our salvation?

How are we to understand the emotional life of our Lord? Are episodes in the life of our Lord—his reaction to the Temple money-changers, or to the death of Lazarus, for example—cases of God’s emotion made flesh? In a way they are, but not in any way which involves the transmutation of the divine emotion into something else. It is God expressing his impassioned love (along with much else he expresses) through the vehicle of assumed human nature. So the emotional life of our Lord is what you get when the second person of the impassible God is embodied in human nature. It is an inevitable expression of the divine character in a way conditioned by the necessities of being united to what is human and so localised in time and space.

I would add that when Jesus was angry, he never sinned as we do. When he felt alone on the Cross, he did not indulge in self-pity as we would. His emotions were real, and they were part of his being human, but they were never touched by sin. Nor were they demonstrations of a limitation in the Godhead, as the Open Theists would propose.

Transcendence and Immanence

Transcendence has historically been the view that God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him. Immanence has been described as God’s presence in the world. He is not divorced or aloof from his creation, as the deist claims. Together these attributes mean that God can be active in his created universe but not be part of it.

⁷ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 64.

There can be no question that Open Theism tilts these balanced doctrines toward immanence. Pinnock says, “By divine immanence I mean that God is everywhere present in all that exists. The world and God are not radically separated realities—God is present within every created being.”⁸ He goes further in his *Most Moved Mover*, saying “Perhaps God uses the created order as a kind of body and exercises top-down causation upon it.”⁹

If we take these statements at face value, they are assertions of panentheism, the view that God is greater than the universe, yet the universe is contained within God. This is different from pantheism, which asserts that God is the universe and the universe is God—they are co-extensive. In panentheism God changes and grows as the universe changes and grows.

Panentheism is a key feature of Process Theology, as represented by such writers as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Process Theology is based on Process Philosophy, which says that the only absolute that exists in the world is change. Therefore, God, too, is constantly changing. The Bible opposes this view (for example, in Ps. 33:11 and James 1:17).

Infinity

Historically, God’s infinity is usually defined negatively: there are no limits to his person and his perfections. The Open Theist’s panentheism shows itself again here, as in Pinnock’s words: “It seems to me that the Bible does not think of God as formless. Rather, it thinks of him as possessing a form that these divine appearances reflect. At the very least, God chooses to share in the human condition, participate in human history; an intensely and remarkably involved participant.”¹⁰ Notice how Boyd gets around the limitation he places on God with regard to the future: “He is infinitely attentive to each and every [possibility].”¹¹ Boyd’s writings in general show that he is heavily influenced by Process Theology. If the only reality is change, then God changes and has potential, so he cannot be infinite at any point.

Omnipotence

A characteristic of God that is seen especially in His activities is that of His omnipotence, His ability to do whatever He wants to. This is subject, of course, to His other attributes. He could not will to sin in any way, or to be other than what He is. Jer. 32:17 emphasizes the power side of this attribute; other passages remind us that it can never get Him into trouble. He cannot be inconsistent with Himself.

Thiessen says that God cannot do anything that is not in harmony with His perfections, such as deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13)¹². The Open Theist has clearly violated this traditionally accepted view, for he redefines God’s omnipotence, saying that he has voluntarily limited his power, so that he will not override human freedom. Yet God shows his power in another way. Here is Pinnock: “We must not define omnipotence as the power to determine everything but rather as the power that enables God to deal with any situation that arises.”¹³ It seems to me that this amounts to asserting that God has denied himself in that he has willed not to be omnipotent in actuality. Furthermore, this kind of statement is actually circular in its argumentation. It simply says that God is as powerful as he is powerful. Where the Bible *does* teach self-limitation on the part of God is in the experience of the God-man, as exemplified by Phil. 2, where the second Person of the

⁸ Pinnock, *Openness*, 111.

⁹ *Most Moved Mover*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹ Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 128-129.

¹² H.C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 126.

¹³ *Openness*, 114.

Godhead voluntarily restricts himself for the sake of providing salvation. But, as we saw above with regard to God's suffering, this is the experience of deity joined to humanity.

Omniscience

God knows everything there is to know. Both His omnipresence and His omniscience are taught in Jer. 23:23-25:

“Am I only a God nearby,” declares the LORD, “and not a God far away?”²⁴ Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the LORD.

Recall that Open Theists have among them two grounds for saying God doesn't know the future: 1) God has chosen to restrict himself so that he can allow human beings to make free choices or 2) since future events don't exist yet, no one, not even God, can know them. We see the second approach, along with the influence of Process philosophy and Process Theology in Boyd's words¹⁴:

[The open view] affirms that the future decisions of self-determining agents are only possibilities until agents freely actualize them. In this view, therefore, the future is partly comprised of possibilities. And since God knows all things perfectly—just as they are, and not otherwise—God knows the future as partly comprised of possibilities.

Pinnock shows where this logically leads¹⁵:

Though God knows all there is to know about the world, there are aspects about the future that even God does not know. Though unchangeable with respect to his character and the steadfastness of his purposes, God changes in the light of what happens by interacting with the world.

According to Open Theism, the closest God can come to knowing the future is to guess at it. I must say that I am glad that that is not the kind of God that the Bible asks me to put my trust in for tomorrow.

Omnipresence

Ps. 139:7-12 teaches that God is personally present everywhere in regard to His creation and all living beings. He can function this way because of His immensity. This teaching is a great encouragement to believers, and should serve as a deterrent to sin, since there is no act anywhere in the universe that escapes His notice. This attribute is often called God's omnipresence.

Once again, Open Theists erase the distinction between Creator and creature. Here is Pinnock:

In tradition, God is thought to function primarily as a disembodied spirit but this is scarcely a biblical idea. For example, Israel is called to hear God's word and gaze on his glory and beauty. Human beings are said to be embodied creatures created in the image of God. Is there perhaps something in God that corresponds with embodiment? Having a body is certainly not a negative thing because it makes it possible for us to be agents. Perhaps God's agency would be easier to envisage if he were in some way corporeal.

¹⁴ Ibid, 90-91.

¹⁵ *Most Moved Mover*, 32.

I cannot fathom why Pinnock speculates like this when passages such as Jn. 4 tell us so clearly that God is a spirit being.

Here is the table we presented in the previous study, with the attributes from this study filled in:

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
Impassibility	Not disturbed or capable of suffering	Grieved, frustrated, amazed—just as we are
Transcendence	God is distinct from the world	God is distinct from the world
Immanence	God is present in his creation	God is present in everything and everyone
Infinity	No limits to person and perfection	Limited re time and knowledge
Omnipotence	God can do whatever he wills	God has limited his power
Omniscience	God knows all things actual and possible ahead of time	God does not know the future with certainty
Omnipresence	God is present everywhere in his creation	God may have a body

We should take a moment to think about what our lives would be like if we adopted the views of Open Theism with regard to these attributes of God that we have studied today. First, as we go through suffering we would have no assurance that God knows how to overcome what is afflicting us, since he could very well be frustrated by it. Second, while we would know that God is greater than the world that we are in, at the same time we would know that he is bound by it as we are. How can he help me overcome what is around me and my own weaknesses? Third, I would be walking with a God who has limited himself with regard to time and knowledge. As I struggle with the passage of time, wondering what will happen tomorrow, I can have no comfort from God, since he wonders, too. Finally, instead of having a God who is above the world and my circumstances, I would try to walk with a God who is trapped by time and space as I am. What good does that do me?

No thank you. That's not a God who inspires my trust and confidence. And I think that the great heroes of the faith would agree with me.

Study questions

1. Review the key features of Open Theism. Try to learn all of them, if you can. Here they are extracted from Study #24:
 - 1) Human beings have free will to determine their future.
 - 2) God does not know the future completely.
 - 3) God takes risks.
 - 4) God learns about the future as it occurs.
 - 5) Any difficulties in your life are the result of the free actions of human beings, not God's.
 - 6) God makes mistakes and regrets some of his decisions.
 - 7) God may change his mind based on what he finds out that human beings do. He can be surprised, disappointed or angered by what people do.
 - 8) God's supreme attribute is love.
 - 9) Prayer is meaningless if the outcome is determined ahead of time.
 - 10) Traditional theism is based more on philosophy than the Bible.

2. Please review the questions from the previous study (#25):
 - 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 (#25).
 - 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?

3. Continue your written list of theological problems that Open Theism leads to beyond what this study mentions. Be prepared to share this on Wednesdays.

4. Please internalize definitions 23-28 as found in the running compilation

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.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are not limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation