

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#27—Theology Proper—Part VI¹
The Attributes of God—Part III

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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 line 5 are appropriate for today's study. The next study will be on the holy Trinity. Readings found on line 4 are appropriate for that study.

In today's study we continue with the attributes of God, comparing classical biblical formulations with the erroneous views of Open Theism in order to understand the truth better.

Holiness

The classical definition of God's holiness is that God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin. However, since he is the standard for what is pure, we cannot describe purity apart from saying it is simply what he is. We have a very good idea of what it is not, however, since we know what sin is. God's holiness extends to all that he is and does. Here are two passages that are central to understanding his holiness:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
 who does not lift up his soul to an idol
 or swear by what is false. (Ps. 24:3-5)

"There is no one holy like the Lord;
 there is no one besides you;
 there is no Rock like our God. (1 Sam. 2:2)

It may be that God wants his creatures to see him above all as a holy god. This does not mean that his holiness dominates his other attributes.

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (Isa. 6:3-5)

R. C. Sproul speaks to this biblical emphasis on God's holiness:

The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of His glory.²

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² R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985), 40.

Leviticus 11:44-45 supports this:

I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. ⁴⁵ I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.

In Open Theism God's holiness is only an aspect of God's love. Here is John Sanders³:

According to openness theology, the *triune* God of love has, in *almighty* power, created all that is and is *sovereign* over all. In *freedom* God decided to create beings capable of experiencing his love. In creating us the divine intention was that we would come to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own and freely come to collaborate with God towards the achievement of his goals. We believe love is the primary characteristic of God because the triune Godhead has eternally loved even prior to any creation. Divine holiness and justice are aspects of the divine love towards creatures, expressions of God's loving concern for us. Love takes many forms—it can even be experienced as wrath when the lover sees the beloved destroying herself and others.

This undercuts the Bible's emphasis on God's holiness as pervading all that he is and does. I believe it fits with Open Theism's trend to make God like human beings. According to Open Theism we need God's love so badly that as his love becomes larger his holiness becomes less important.

Some theologians treat God's righteousness as an attribute. This is incorrect. Righteousness in the Bible speaks of being in accord with a standard. The NT words for this describe making a pronouncement that a person matches God's standard. The standard is holiness. The words 'righteous,' 'righteousness,' 'just' and 'justify' are all translations of the same group of words (the root is δικ- [*dik*-]). God demands holiness because he is holy. Justification means that God makes the pronouncement that the sinner meets the standard of his holiness because he sees the sinner as having the merits of Christ, who was always holy. Romans 3:21-26 is the best passage for understanding this concept of viewing someone as meeting a standard. It actually shows the meaning by describing how God meets his own standard.

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

The phrases 'his justice' and 'so as to be just' refer to the vindication of God that shows he met his own standard, i.e. holiness. He did not violate his holiness by forgiving sins before the Cross. Of course, this passage also shows how righteousness is imputed to sinners (vv. 21-24).

Goodness

Some writers see God's goodness as a quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace. I think that this is a good way of looking at it. Beyond this it is really impossible to give a definition of God's goodness, since he himself is the standard for goodness. Any definition would be derived and partial. We understand it when we see it coming to us through his love or grace: it is something that is valuable and

³ <http://www.opentheism.info/>

helpful to us. God never does anything that is not valuable for his creatures. God's wrath, love, mercy, grace and holiness are good. His always gives his children what is good:

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

He does not hold back anything that is good. Everything he does is good. But good things are not necessarily pleasant. The trials that he brings are good, even though they hurt at the time. Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7) was good because it led Paul to depend on God's strength. Joseph's brothers intended to hurt him, but God intended it for good (Gen. 50:20). Those who teach the health and wealth gospel—that we can know that God loves us when we have healing and material goods—do not understand the goodness of God. Ps. 119:67 and 75 are enough to show the falsity of this idea:

⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

⁷⁵ I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

Open Theism proponents believe that they are defending the goodness of God when they take away his knowledge of and planning of the future and make all “bad” or “unpleasant” experiences in human history the result of solely human actions. Roger E. Olson of George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, says⁴,

The point of Arminian and open-theist belief in free will is not to embrace consumer-driven multiplication of choices. It is to protect the goodness of God in the face of the horrors of history which are human and not divine. Open theists and Arminians generally ask those Christians who reject libertarian freedom how and in what sense God is not the author of sin and evil.

This is a significant distortion and misunderstanding of the goodness of God. The very first human sin involved a questioning of God's goodness. Eve accepted Satan's bait that essentially said that he was not good if he withheld anything from her. This is like a child's view of what his parents should do for him. He wants something and if he doesn't get it he thinks his parents are unfair—never mind the fact that it might not be good for him. So Eve thought she would be right in going ahead on her own to eat the forbidden fruit. Here is Bob Deffinbaugh's description of this part of the theology of the fall. Notice how relevant this is to the error of Open Theism:

*Satan first changed Eve's perspective of God, and then he was able to persuade her to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit. The goodness of God is a perspective from which we can and should view all of God's commands, including His prohibitions. It is apparent from what happened as a result of the eating of the forbidden fruit that God forbade that fruit for man's good. The prohibition was an expression of God's goodness. She did not understand why God forbade it, but knowing that God was good should have been enough. What a good God forbids must be evil, and what a good God commands must be good. We must know the truth found in the Word of God to avoid Satan when he tempts us to change our perspective of God. He often does this by causing us to doubt God and His Word.*⁵

Truth

God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality. He is “the only true God.” (Jn. 17:3). He can always be counted on to do what he has promised because he cannot and will not contradict what he

⁴ Writing in *Christian Century*, Nov. 29, 2005.

⁵ “The Goodness of God,” available at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=250.

has said. The Open Theist attempts to defend God by saying that descriptions of his changing his mind (e.g. Jonah 3:10: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened”) are not a violation of God’s truthfulness, because he couldn’t have known what was going to happen. Thus Open Theists sacrifice God’s omniscience to supposedly uphold his quality of truth. The explanation is that God knew all along that the Ninevites would repent.

Love

God’s love is his continual communication of himself to his creatures. It is not an emotional state or reaction such as we have, but is steady and intentional. It exists apart from God’s creation in the love of the persons of the Trinity for each other. Some have correctly pointed out that human beings are not necessary for the exercise of God’s love. He is “the God of love” (2 Cor. 13:11).

God’s love never exists or operates in contradiction to his other attributes. For example, his wrath is loving, because it preserves his holiness and his glory, which he communicates to his creatures. One of the most egregious errors of Open Theism is raising God’s love to a place above his other attributes. Recall the words of John Sanders in our treatment of God’s holiness, above. It would not be loving, in their view, for God to bring trials on any one. Therefore all difficulties in life are due to human choices. Ultimately this position misunderstands God’s goodness, thinking that God only brings about things that are pleasant. While they seem to uphold God’s wrath, their basic position also denies God’s wrath against sin.

Benevolence

God’s benevolence is his goodness, care and affection for his creatures, which are his workmanship. Psalm 145:9, 15 and 16 show this:

- ⁹ The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.
- ¹⁰ All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you.
- ¹¹ They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might,
- ¹² so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
- ¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.
- The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.
- ¹⁴ The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.
- ¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.
- ¹⁶ You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

Notice that by limiting his power, the Open Theist has a god who cannot carry out a desire to always be benevolent toward his creation. So v. 13 in the preceding quote cannot be valid.

Mercy

God’s mercy is his goodness toward those who are weak. He is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4). I question whether the Open Theist has a God who can show mercy, since his actions can be thwarted by the unforeseen actions of human beings. His intentions to show mercy can result in situations that he regrets.

Grace

God’s grace is his goodness toward those that do not deserve it—toward sinners. Grace benefits the sinful, while mercy benefits the weak and helpless. Both conditions are true of the unsaved person. God’s benevolence touches all human beings. Mercy and grace only touch some. God’s grace touches all human

beings, for example in his withholding immediate judgment on sin (see the Romans passage quoted above) and in his provision of Scripture that can in some ways benefit the lives of the non-elect. Grace is particularly operable in the elect—in his choosing them, providing forgiveness through the Cross, regenerating, calling, justifying, sanctifying and glorifying them.

God's grace meets the need of those that are spiritually dead in their sins, unable to turn to him (Eph. 2:1). Grace is the basis for the gift of salvation (Eph. 2:8) and excludes human works. I do not see how the Open Theist can have grace in his system, since grace involves God's intervention into the alienated state of sinners and their god does not intervene to save someone. Furthermore, there is ultimately no need for grace in their system, since human beings are able to come to God on their own: "spiritually dead" doesn't really mean "spiritually dead."

Glory

Robert Reymond points out that the OT term describing God's glory refers to importance and weightiness: "God's glory is simply the inescapable 'weight' of the sheer intrinsic Godness of God, inherent in the attributes essential to him as the Deity."⁶ Reymond emphasizes how crucial it is to maintain the glory of God in our understanding of him⁷:

It is important to underscore the truth that when we speak of God's "infinite, eternal, unchangeable" being, etc., we are speaking of those attributes that comprise what the Scriptures intend when they speak of God's *glory*. That is to say, *God's glory is the sum total of all of his attributes as well as any one of his attributes*. For the creature to deny to him any one of his attributes is to attack the very glory of God and to deny him that without which he would no longer be God.

Let's define God's glory, then, as the greatness of God's perfections. A. W. Tozer has convicting words about our view of God's glory⁸:

But the God we must see is not the utilitarian God who is having such a run of popularity today, whose chief claim to men's attention is His ability to bring them success in their various undertakings and who for that reason is being cajoled and flattered by everyone who wants a favor. The God we must learn to know is the Majesty in the heavens, God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the only wise God and Saviour. He it is that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in, who bringeth out His starry host by number and calleth them all by name through the greatness of His power, who seeth the works of man as vanity, who putteth no confidence in princes and asks no counsel of kings.

Sadly, we must say that this utilitarian god is the God of the Open Theist (as well as the health and wealth proponent), who only gives us things that feel good. He is certainly not the glorious God of Scripture.

⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 166.

⁷ Ibid, 166.

⁸ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961), 121-22.

Study questions

1. Please try to internalize definitions 30-37, as found below.
2. Review definitions 15-29, as found below.
3. How can something be a good gift from God and yet hurt at the same time? What does this say about joy in the Christian life? What is “joy” for the Christian? What are the implications of this for thankfulness? What is “good” in the life of the Christian? How can a loving God bring about pain?
4. In what ways is God’s wrath compatible with his love?

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 no 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

- 30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
- 31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
- 32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
- 33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
- 34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
- 35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
- 36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
- 37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.