

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

The Attributes of God

God's nature

God's nature is his essence, what he essentially is in himself. God is a spirit, that is a personal and spiritual (immaterial) being. These are two attributes of God. In a similar fashion all God's attributes contribute to his being. His attributes are not separate from his being, but are what God is. God is the totality of his attributes.

One cannot make any real distinction between his being and his attributes.

Each attribute is identical with God's being: he *is* what he *possesses*.

[Bavinck, 2:118]

The attributes of God are the specific elements of his character and being that are identified in scripture. God is all wisdom, all mind, all spirit etc. God's attributes are the same as his essence, every attribute is identical with the divine being, but they are nevertheless distinct, representing different ideas to us. In God, holiness and mercy may be the same in essence but we understand different things by these attributes as revealed by God. The number of attributes revealed in scripture is so great that any discussion of them has to select only a portion.

Scriptural revelation of the attributes

Scripture reveals the attributes of God before, and more clearly, than it mentions God's existence in a Trinity. That God as independent, self-existent and all sufficient is described in his name, YHWH very early.

The Bible gives us a complete list of God's attributes, in various places, which are then classified to some degree by men, though scripture itself makes no attempt at classification. Some examples:

- Ex 15:11 (holiness) 33:19 (goodness, grace, compassion) 34:6,7 (merciful, gracious, longsuffering, goodness, truth, forgiving, justice).
- Deut 6:4 (simplicity, unity or oneness) 10:17 (sovereignty, mighty, justice).
- Num 16:22 (sovereignty & wrath).
- Job 34:12 (righteousness & justice).
- Ps 102:26 (eternity, immutability).
- Isa 44:6 (sovereignty).
- Hab 3:6 (eternity).
- Rev 5:12 (omnipotence, wisdom, glory) 7:12 (glory, wisdom, honour, power).

Theological classification of the attributes

God's attributes are variously classified by theologians. Some examples are:

1. *Absolute*, (belonging to his essence as God) and *relative* (i.e. such as are ascribed to him with relation to his creatures in time).
2. *Communicable* (those which can be imparted in degree to his creatures: goodness, holiness, wisdom, etc.) and *incommunicable* (which cannot be imparted: independence, immutability, immensity, and eternity). [This is the most commonly used classification in Reformed works. However, it must be stated that none of the attributes are incommunicable in the sense that there is no trace in man; while none are communicable in the sense that they are found in man as they are in God.]
3. *Natural* (e.g. eternity, immensity) and *moral* (e.g. holiness, goodness).

4. *Original and derived.*
5. *Active and inactive.*
6. *Intransitive and transitive.*
7. *Attributes of greatness* (e.g. spirituality) and *attributes of goodness* (e.g. holiness).
8. *Personal attributes* (e.g. truth) and *constitutional attributes* (e.g. eternity).
9. *Negative attributes* (that which denies imperfection, defect or limitation e.g. immutability, infinity) and *positive attributes* (that which affirms positive perfection in the divine essence e.g. goodness, eternity).

John Calvin called God's attributes 'virtues' and, wisely, did not get involved in a technical classification or long discussion of them in his *Institutes*. Since scripture does not classify the attributes, it is wise to avoid such scholastic analysis.

Simple definitions of God's attributes

A simple definition of God's essential being is that he is:

1. Omnipotent - God is all-powerful.
2. Omniscient - God is all-knowing.
3. Omnipresent - God is present everywhere.

These summarise many other attributes, affirming God's supremacy, power, wisdom and transcendence.

A simple definition of his moral attributes is that God is 'Holy – Love'. God's holiness requires righteousness, justice, truth, perfection etc., but his love also predicates mercy, grace, forgiveness, long-suffering and so on. It is utterly insufficient to say that God is merely 'love' as this emphasises only a small part of his character at the expense of other more weighty matters, such as holiness. Holiness is God's central moral attribute and all others flow from it; indeed a case can be made that all his attributes flow from this separateness of God.

A simple definition of God's glory

What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, (Jn 4:24) infinite, (Job 11:7-9) eternal, (Ps 90:2) and unchangeable, (Jm 1:17) in his being, (Ex 3:14) wisdom, (Ps 147:5) power, (Rev. 4:8) holiness, (Rev. 15:4) justice, goodness, and truth. (Exod. 34:6,7). [*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 4]

What this is saying is that God is a personal ('his') spiritual being who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his wisdom; infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his power etc. Angels are also spirits; men may evidence some kind of wisdom or truth, but only God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in all his attributes.

God is glorious in all his individual attributes, but God's glory is also the sum total of all his attributes. None can be denied. All these attributes are equally true of all the persons in the Trinity.

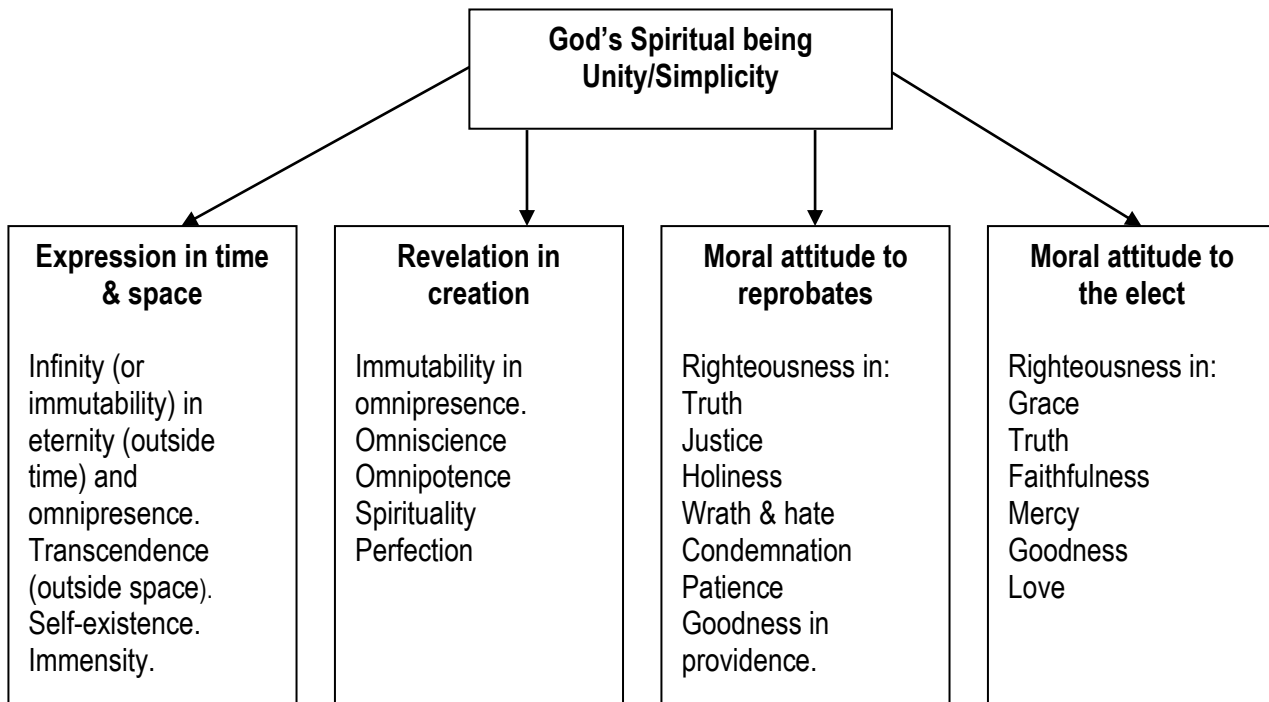
See also *Westminster Confession*, 2:1-2.

We should be ashamed that,

The "god" of this twentieth century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. ... The heathen outside of the pale of Christendom form "gods" out of wood and stone, while the millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a "god" out of their own carnal mind. In reality, they are but atheists, for there is no other possible alternative between an absolutely supreme God, and no God at all. A "god" whose

will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits nought but contempt. [AW Pink, *Attributes of God*, p23-24.]

The Attributes of God - summary



For the sake of clarity I will group attributes together under logical connections, similar to that proposed by Bavinck [2:178 ff.].

God's spiritual nature

Life: (= self-existence, independence or aseity [i.e. supreme substance, self-sufficiency in existence]) God has life in himself and is the source of all life (Ex 3:14; Jer 10:10; Jn 5:26). He is without beginning and self-begotten – YHWH. God is independent in everything: in his existence, his perfections, his decrees, and his works. In his perfections, he is absolutely distinct from his creatures; the first and the last, the sole cause and final goal of all things.

God is the real, the true being, the fulness of being, the sum total of all reality and perfection, the totality of being, from which all other being owes its existence. He is an immeasurable and unbounded ocean of being; the absolute being who alone has being in himself. [Bavinck, 2:123]

This attribute is key above others because it encompasses all God's attributes in an absolute sense. This description confirms God in all his perfections. 'Aseity is the primary attribute of God's being.' [Bavinck, 2:124]

Note that when scripture says that, 'God is a Spirit' in the AV (Jn 4:24), the correct translation is: 'God is Spirit', or 'God (is) the Spirit'. It is a statement about God being the essential Spiritual Being having life in himself. He is not a spirit like other spiritual beings but is the Supreme Spirit, the source of spiritual life.

Unity: God is one and indivisible (Deut 6:4; 1 Cor 8:6). [Note: all scripture is monotheistic; there is no evolutionary development.]

- *Simplicity*: God is a unique spirit; an indivisible being free from composition (Jn 1:18, 4:24; 1 Tim 1:17, 6:15-16). Whatever is in God, is God; God is not only wise and truthful, but is the truth and the wisdom. Every attribute of God is identical with his essence. Simplicity is required by the perfection of God's attributes. It is the opposite of

‘composite’ and is not opposed to Trinity. God is not composed of three persons but the one God exists in three persons. [Note: Polytheism and philosophy separate God’s attributes into independent forces (e.g. mind, reason, wisdom, goodness, power, beauty etc.) This personifies God’s attributes into ideals or divine beings (note the aeons/emanations of Gnosticism). Some ‘Christian’ cults also do this, such as the separation of faith from God by Word Faith preachers and many other Charismatics.]

Immutability: God never changes since he is perfect (Ps 102:27; Mal 3:6; Jm 1:17). True being cannot change for any change would diminish his being; if something changes, it ceases to be what it was. When applied to time God’s immutability (or infinity) is called eternity; when applied to space it is called omnipresence. God is also immutable in his knowing, willing and decreeing as in his being; creation and incarnation brought no change to God. There was no new plan, but always one single will. There is no ‘becoming’ in God; neither is God the efficient cause of his own existence; he *is*. There is no change in time for God, hence his eternity; there is no change in location for God, hence his omnipresence and there is no change or variation in his essence, he is pure being. [Note that Arminianism is based on God changing; his will is dependent upon the actions of men.]

Infinity: God is without end or limitation (1 Kg 8:27; Ps 145:3; Acts 17:24). He is infinite in a qualitative sense in all his attributes.

- *Eternity:* God has no beginning and no end. There is no succession of moments in God, no development. ‘God’s eternity is fulness of being, present and immanent in every moment of time; he pervades every moment of time with his eternity.’ [Bavinck, sic. 2:148] God is unbegotten, incorruptible and immutable. God is not bound by time but lives outside it (Gen 21:33; Ps 90:2). Time is the mode of existence for created beings.
- *Omnipresence:* God is present everywhere (Ps 139:7-12; Jer 23:24). Heaven and Earth cannot contain him, but neither can it exclude him. Omnipresence includes God’s being as well as his power; he is not present somewhere, he fills space and is uniquely a place of his own.
- *Immensity* (another way of describing omnipresence). God’s substance is limitless; he transcends spatial limitations. God is not circumscribed by space. God is present in every part of space in fulness. The scholastics explained it thus,
 - The whole substance, in its whole essence, is simultaneously present in every point of infinite space, yet without multiplication of itself. [Dabney, c3:4]
 - The entire indivisible essence of God is at every moment of time contemporaneously present to every point of infinite space. [AA Hodge, 8:21]

Invisibility: God cannot be seen by human eyes since he has no material form (Ex 33:20, 23).

Transcendence: God is distinct from and above creation, but sovereign over it and actively working in it. God is ‘wholly other’ [Barth], not a part of the universe. This distinguishes the Bible’s God from pantheism (identifying God with the material universe), monism (all nature is one) and panentheism (the universe is part of God but God is more than the universe).

Immanence: God is present everywhere and particularly in his people. God indwells his creation and upholds it. This is the counterpart of transcendence. How does this differ from omnipresence? The divine essence is immense in its own being, absolutely. It is omnipresent relatively to all his creatures [AA Hodge].

Personality: God is a person. He has the attributes of personality: self-awareness, will,

intellect, self-determination, emotions (Ex 3:14; Gen 3).

Freedom: God is independent from his creatures and dependent upon nothing (Ps 115:3).

Intellectual attributes

Omniscience: God perfectly knows all things (Ps 139:1-4, 147:4-5; Matt 11:21).

- *Knowledge:* God's essential infinite and perfect knowledge. God intuitively knows all things directly. It is independent and not mere deduction; it does not depend upon the actions of creatures. It is total, not successive, one single, indivisible act of intuitive knowing. It is perfect and essential, not relative (i.e. not based on observation of a thing's properties). God has a perfect understanding of all things, past, present and future, by one single act of intuitive, comprehensive vision.
- *Foreknowledge:* This is based upon God's infinite knowledge of his own pre-determined will and eternal purpose and the nature of all things. (1 Sam 23:11, 12; Isa 46:9,10.i; Acts 2:23; 15:18)

Note: How is God's certain knowledge of all things reconciled with man's free will? Some argue that man has no free will, but this is unscriptural and would mean that wicked men cannot be guilty for the choice to sin. Both God's certain knowledge of the future and man's free agency are affirmed by scripture, even if we cannot understand it.

Note: *Scientia media* ('middle knowledge', i.e. between: 1. God's absolute, unbounded knowledge of all possibility and, 2. God's consequent knowledge resting on the divine will, i.e. his choices; knowledge of actual things decreed by him). It was proposed by the Jesuit Luis Molina (1535-1601). This teaches that God has intuitive knowledge of man's free agency; i.e. God instinctively knows what man will choose to do rather than sovereignly predetermining it. It makes God's foreordination of men to heaven or hell depend upon his foreknowledge of their future faith and obedience, denying that his foreknowledge depends upon his sovereign foreordination. This makes God's knowledge consequent on man instead of absolute and antecedent foreknowledge. Arminians use this argument to avoid predestination and election. The truth is that God foreordains as well as foreknows (Isa 10:5-15; Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28.ii).

Moral attributes

Goodness: God is good; God cannot do anything evil (Ex 33:19; Ps 145:9).

- *Love:* God is benevolent (loving disposition). God is complacent (approval of good, e.g. God's delight in Jesus) 1 Jn 4:8-10.
- *Grace:* God is gracious and supplies the needs of his people freely through undeserved favour (Ex 34:6; Eph 1:5-8; Titus 2:11).
- *Mercy:* God is compassionate and shows pity towards those he chooses (Ex 3:7,17; Ps 103:13; Matt 9:36).
- *Long-suffering:* God is patient. He restrains judgment according to his good pleasure. (Ps 86:15; Rm 2:4, 9:22).
- *Holiness:* God is righteous, perfect and separate from all evil (1 Pt 1:16).
- *Truth:* God is consistent in himself. There is no contradiction in him (Jn 14:6; 17:3). God is trustworthy and speaks the truth (1 Sam 15:29; Jn 17:17,19; Heb 6:18; Titus 1:2).
- *Faithfulness:* God keeps his promises (Num 23:19; Ps 89:2; 1 Thess 5:24).
- *Righteousness:* God's holiness applied to relationships, God's will is right (Ps 19:7-9; Jer 9:24).
- *Justice:* Righteousness applied to judging behaviour. God is just and does not show partiality (Acts 10:34-35; Rm 2:11).

Attributes of sovereignty

Sovereignty: God is supreme; he has authority over all beings (Eph 1).

Omnipotence: God is all-powerful (Matt 19:26; Rev 19:6).

Biblical teaching on this subject

- Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! (Rev 19:6)
- I *am* the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight, says the LORD. (Jer 9:24)
- I *am* the LORD, I do not change. (Mal 3:6)
- For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself. (Jn 5:26)

Questions

1. Why is it important to have some understanding of God's attributes?
2. Can you think of some examples where misunderstanding an attribute leads to heresy?
3. Can God's attributes be separated from him?
4. Is faith a 'force', as claimed by Charismatics?
5. Is God just love?
6. Does God hate? What attribute(s) is this a reflection of?
7. What does the Bible centre upon as God's chief attribute (it is not love)? A clue: what attribute is mentioned in triplets (i.e. '*, *, * Lord God Almighty')?

Consider

God is our portion, possession or inheritance (Num 18:20; Deut 10:9; Ps 16:5, 73:26, 119:57, 142:5; Lam 3:24). The inheritance of God's people is not a material thing (like a certain land), nor a privilege, nor even a blessing; it is God himself. This is why salvation is not only of the Lord but is in the Lord. Salvation primarily concerns union with Christ; he is our portion, and he is God. In the Christian life all blessings are not isolated gifts but are in Christ (Eph 1:3). Knowledge is having the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) enabling us to judge correctly (1 Cor 2:15); peace is being in Christ (1 Pt 5:14). In fact every good thing we have is ours because it is found in Christ and we abide in him by spiritual union (Philem 1:6)

If God is our portion, then all the attributes associated with the being of God is ultimately ours by relationship. We do not share these intrinsically, we never become God, but we are partakers of God in Christ (2 Pt 1:4). We need nothing and no one else.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward.' (Gen 15:1)

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