

Attributes of God, Part 2

Written by Calvin Fox

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Part 1 of this Essay about the attributes of God, comes out of a larger study and concern I have about Open Theism, as well as the changes I see in Theology among advocates of the Emergent and Missional church movements, which in turn are rooted in, or greatly influenced by, Post Modernism. I like the challenge and admit I have had to rethink some basic convictions I have held. This is good. The study itself leads to questions about God and Evil, the Trinity and Christology. Today's Essay (post) is a work in progress, as I think out loud about these things. The prior study is the jump off point and I build on it. This, of course is not final or definitive. We are, after all, dealing with mysteries with seeming paradoxes or contradictions and things that don't make sense logically.

God is a spirit (non-corporeal) Being, a self-conscious, self-determining, free and self sufficient, immutable Person. He is essentially unlimited or infinite in relation to time and space. In relation to the created natural world, He is altogether Other, separate, holy or transcendent. We are made in His Image. Exactly how do we image such a Person?

It follows from the above, that we, too, must be essentially spirit Beings, but we are not non-corporeal. We have bodies. We are "of the earth" and mortal. [Long ago, I exchanged the tripartite (spirit, soul and body) view of Man for the view of Man as a unity of soul and body, inseparable now and in eternity. I am revisiting that concept]. We are self-conscious, self-determining and free Persons. We are not immutable or self sufficient. We are in no way self-sufficient. We are limited and subject to contingencies of time and space. And we are subject to change and being changed!

In relation to the created natural world, we are both holy or transcendent and very much, simultaneously, earth bound in the here and now. Unlike God, we have a "sin nature". Like God, we are free to make choices determined by our character or nature, but nonbelievers will always chose according to their sin nature. (Regeneration makes it possible for Believers to chose according to their new nature in Christ.) We actually hate our Maker and resist Him in our lives and refuse to serve Him, even though He is our maker and we share His Image. This sin nature is not a part of our personhood. It is not essential to who we are as the Image of God. It is a "disease" or intruder, not in us by creation and must be removed. We can not deny our spirit nature. Many seek to repress it, but all of us, inconsistently, but continually and unsuccessfully, seek to express or fulfill it in ways other than in God, as He intended.

While God exists "apart from" or 'above' or 'outside' of the natural world, the Transcendent God is also always and everywhere present "in" it. (We can not describe God or His work without using spatial, and other, metaphors, as inadequate as they are.) God's presence in the world is what we call the Spirit of God or the "Holy Spirit". Although the Spirit is God, God is "greater than" the Spirit. The Spirit is the immanence of the transcendent God. He fills everything, everywhere. We all live and move and have our being in Him. In fact, we draw our very breath from Him.

The Spirit works in and through material or physical agents and instruments (so-called "secondary causes") to accomplish God's work. He is not the same as His agents. They are not to be identified with Him, simply used by Him to accomplish God's purposes in the world and history. It can be said that these instruments or agents manifest God or make Him visible or reveal Him. This is especially true of the natural, created World and its elements. Likewise,

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it can be said that, while God is everywhere at all times, these manifestations of Him may be where His presence is especially found or experienced at any particular time or place. This includes visions, theophanies, appearances in clouds and fire, especially in regard to the Tabernacles and Temples, and miracles.

The Spirit of God is particularly found in the hearts and lives of Believers everywhere. He “dwells” in them, although He does not literally need or have a “House”. Before Pentecost, the Spirit “came upon” Believers, worked wonders and departed. After Pentecost, He came to abide in the Church permanently. But, God can not be confined or limited to the Church. Again, He is everywhere at all time, but because members of the Church are people of faith, God is able to particularly “fill” them with His love and peace and work through them in the world.

God is manifested most of all in the Church when she is gathered for worship. He meets with the Faithful (manifests Himself to them) in their corporate praise of Him and through His Word and Sacraments when these are being received by them.

What about Jesus on earth and, now, in “Heaven”?

Scripture teaches that Jesus on earth was fully God and fully Man and that all the attributes of God apply to Jesus. God is a spirit (non-corporeal) Being, a self-conscious, self-determining, free and self sufficient, immutable Person. He is essentially unlimited or infinite in relation to time and space. In relation to the created natural world, He is altogether Other, separate, holy or transcendent.

However, all the attributes of Man (as Man, the Image of God, not Man as sinner) must also apply simultaneously to Jesus. How can that be explained?

Like all people, Jesus was essentially a spirit Being, but not non-corporeal. He had a body. He was a self-conscious, self-determining and free Person, but he was not immutable or self sufficient. He was born and he died. He had to eat and sleep. He had, and depended on, family and friends. He was opposed and murdered by enemies. He was limited by and subject to contingencies of time and space. He did not have omniscience or omnipotence. How could all of this be, while he had all the attributes of God at the same time? The answer to that-He voluntarily limited himself in the use of those attributes that prevented him from acting as a normal man, especially his attributes of omniscience and omnipotence.

In relation to the created natural world, Jesus, as every man, was both holy or transcendent and very much, simultaneously, earth bound in the here and now. However, not having the defect that humans have, a sin nature, Jesus was not a sinner. He did not hate our Maker and resist Him and refuse to serve Him. He did not deny his spirit nature and did commune with God.

Somehow, the infinite, non-corporeal transcendent God who is immanent and fully present everywhere at all times throughout the time-space world, also became God both limited and corporeal (incarnated) in the man, Jesus. The difference between Jesus and all other humans was not qualitative. He was simultaneously both fully God and fully Man. Being fully Man as created, he was not fully Sinner. He was the perfect Man (the New Adam) and absolutely

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unique! How this is possible is unknown. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is a mystery clearly taught in Scripture and acceptable by faith alone and not logic.

God was not confined to the body of Jesus during the incarnation. Jesus prayed to God as His Father "in Heaven". He came "down from Heaven" to do his Father's will, not his own. He would "ascend to Heaven" where His Father was. In contrast, God the Spirit, is fully everywhere at all times, unlimited and undivided. While Jesus was fully God, God was not fully Jesus. God included Jesus, but God was more than, other than, Jesus (language and metaphors are totally inadequate here).

When Jesus ascended into "Heaven" after His resurrection, He remained fully God and fully Man. He re-entered the realm of the Eternal from which He had come. However, all his self-imposed limitations were laid aside. In Heaven, He is a spirit (non-corporeal) Being, a self-conscious, self-determining, free and self sufficient, immutable Person. His physical body remains, but it has been transformed or glorified. He is once again essentially unlimited or infinite in relation to time and space. His omniscience and omnipotence have been fully restored. In relation to the created natural world, He is altogether Other, separate, holy or transcendent. (I am open to the idea of that we are talking here about entering other dimensions.) Concurrently, the Holy Spirit remains in the world as the immanence of God.

As God, the ascended Christ has all the attributes of Man as he was at Creation. He is the New Adam, the perfect Image of God. God is still "greater than" than Christ. But, He does not become absorbed back into God. He remains, at the Father's side, in the role of Head of the Church, the New Humanity. Together, the Risen Christ and His Church shall one day inhabit and enjoy together the New Heavens and the New Earth. (Again, a real heaven and earth, but transformed or redeemed- maybe in another dimension.) Neither the present earth nor Humanity on earth are His Body. He is Sovereign over the earth and Humanity, but He is not the Lord and Savior of them, as He is of the Church.

The Risen Christ remains in communion with all his faithful People, those in Heaven now with Him, as well as those still on earth. The Church, His Body, lives by virtue of its union with its Head. His resurrection life flows into it and nurtures it, especially through His Word and Sacraments. In the latter, Christ is manifest to the Faithful on earth, while His real and true Presence is in Heaven. He reigns over all from Heaven until He comes again.

The Incarnation was not simply to reveal God more clearly than He had already been revealed in Creation and in the works of His Hands or in His acts in the History of Israel. The Incarnation was not to add to the revelation God had already given of Himself in His many Names and Titles declared in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Incarnation was not to reveal the personal characteristics and attributes already learned and experienced by innumerable Old Testament Saints, after all, they walked and talked with Him. They knew Him and had saving faith. Abraham was His Friend. They experienced both His Wrath and His Goodness. They knew of His love and compassion. They received His mercy. They had heard His Word, and His Law, through the Prophets for centuries. They new first hand His miracles and were blessed by His Redemption. They had learned He keep His promises. The Incarnation was not needed to reveal any or all of this.

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The Incarnation was first and foremost about the Salvation of God's Elect. It was to make possible the one, all-sufficient Atonement for the sins of the world. Jesus came to die. He was God Himself making the sacrifice of Himself to satisfy His own transgressed Law. The Incarnation was not about serving the poor, the sick or the marginalized, although Jesus did that while he was here- the same as God had done for centuries before the Incarnation. It was about Ransom. It was about the defeat of the Evil One, Satan. It was to secure the death of Death. The Ascension was to wrap up all this business. Christ reigns now to finally put away Death and Satan for good. They are destroyed, but refuse to admit defeat. They will.

From all the above, the Doctrine of the Trinity was crafted centuries ago. God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit are One, sharing the same nature, character and attributes, but having different roles or functions (Latin: "persona"). That God is Triune, three "Persons" in One is the unique and most basic Doctrine of the Christian Faith. But we rightfully talk most about "God in Christ" because it is in Christ that we today first meet and are personally introduced to God. Through hearing and believing the Gospel about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, we receive the eternal Life of God. We "come alive" to God and to Life "in Christ". We discover "God in Christ" and this becomes our witness to the world.