

Attributes of God, Part 1

Written by Calvin Fox
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Who is the God the Psalmist talks about? Whom does he seek, for whom does He thirst? You may assume you know or that every Christian will answer the question in the same way. Of course, we all know who God is! This is actually difficult to answer.

God created our world and us. He is complete without us. He is totally other than us. So how can we describe Him? This is normally done by describing, or trying to describe, attributes about Him (and sometimes it is done by describing things which people believe God is not). The most common attribute, the one that is probably the most popular today is simply Love. If God is anything, many say, God is love. The very essence of God is Love. Love is what God is [literally] all about. This statement is emphatically not Biblical! (I am not forgetting 1 John 4:8. I am defining "Biblical" as faithful to what the entire Bible says about God altogether, therefore, this particular statement is not "Biblical".)

God reveals Himself in Scripture. The single, basic, essential nature of God revealed there is not Love! When Theologians describe God they actually talk about "attributes". These are aspects of who he is, His essential character or essence as God. Not every Theologian makes the exact same list of Attributes. They agree in general, and all agree on placing God's attributes into two categories: those which He shares in some degree with us human beings and those which He does not or can not share with us. Theologians do not agree as to which category a particular Attribute belongs. I am listing them here in an order that makes sense to me.

The first group of attributes are known as "Communicable", because they are characteristics of God which He transmits or communicates to us. We are, after all, created by Him in His Image. The other group of attributes are not communicated to us. They are "Incommunicable", because, after all, we are limited created beings. (Some maintain that the difference between categories is a matter of degree.)

God does not exist apart or behind His attributes. Nor do His attributes exist apart from Him. They were not added to God and they are not parts of God. They can not be separated out (except when we are trying to define and discuss each one). As we shall see, one aspect of God is His oneness or unity. He is One. In practice, God is always all that He is everywhere, at all times and in all places. This is why we can not say God is Love. Love is only one of many attributes of God. God is God and, among many other things, it is the nature or character of God to love. God loves, but it is not correct to say that the nature or essence of God is Love or is primarily Love. When we do that, we are ignoring, or even denying, all that God is. That, in effect is denying God. He is all or He is nothing. He can not be a "part" of Himself. One attribute of Him can not be all of Him. His character or nature or essence is one. He is not the sum of His attributes; He is essentially, equally, all His attributes together.

Incommunicable Attributes (brief definitions)

1. Self-existence, Independence- God does not need us or anything else in creation for Him to be God. God needs only Himself to be God. Being God is a given. Nothing existed before Him. He is uncaused. God is totally Other, totally Unique- there is none like Him. This is the first meaning of Holy.

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2. Spirituality- God exists as a being not made of any matter. He is a spirit, a non-corporeal Being. He has Life. He is the source of Life. He can not be perceived by any of our physical senses. Human beings are not spirits, but, in creating us, God endowed all humans with spirituality. (We are a unity of body and soul. Our soul has the need and ability to commune and communicate with God. That need and ability is our spirituality. We do not have a non-corporeal spirit living within our bodies, to be released at death.)

2. Invisibility- This is related to God's spirituality. God can not be seen by human eyes, although He makes something of Himself visible on occasion through visible things (known as theophanies, such as the burning bush or some angelic appearances).

3. Personality- God is a personal being. A "person" is defined as a being capable of self-consciousness and self-determination. The latter includes free-will.

God has revealed himself in nature and in the Bible as a Being who speaks and acts within time. He is causally related to specific events in the world. He is revealed to be a Person distinguished by Rationality, Creativity, Morality and Communality (a Trinity).

3. Unchangeableness- God is unchanging in His being, nature or character, as well as in His purposes.

The technical word for unchangeable is "immutable". God is immutable, but God is not "impassible", i.e.- God is not without emotions or feelings. He is capable of both compassion and anger. (But, God is not a hot-head, flying off the handle, given to passion in the sense of being capable of irrational "crimes of passion", such as humans are. The latter is impossible given that God's nature and character and purposes are immutable!)

3. Infinite- Everything about God is absolutely perfect. When Scripture tells us to think about all that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy, we are to think of God. He is the standard or measure of all such things. This applies equally to all His attributes. They are all infinite, without quantification or qualification.

4. Eternity- Infinity in relation to time is eternity. God has no beginning or end. He does not progress or develop. In Himself, He transcends time and He possesses His life complete and all at once. He created time and existed before there was Time. Therefore, we say God is timeless in Himself. But, God acts within time. He is not limited by it. He somehow is above Time and yet is involved in events as they occur in time, using them for His purposes. He knows tensed time. (See Omniscience)

4. Omnipresence- God is unlimited with respect to space, as well as Time, having created both. He has no spatial dimensions (He has no size. We can not properly say God is immense or big.) All that is God is present at every point everywhere at all times.

5. Unity- God is not and can not be divided into parts. That is the original meaning of "Simple" and the Unity of God is sometimes known as His simplicity. As said, earlier, God is not a collection of individual attributes. Every attribute applies to His entire being. God is a

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completely integrated Person infinitely perfect in all His attributes.

Communicable Attributes (brief descriptions)

1. Omniscience- God fully knows Himself and all things actual and possible, past, present and future and this knowledge He has now, all at once. (See the attribute of Eternity.) His knowledge is complete and perfect, unchanging. He never learns or forgets anything.

Our ability to know is predicated on God's prior knowledge. We can know because He does. That proves there is a reality which is knowable. Our education is in learning for ourselves what He knows about that reality.

2. Wisdom- God's wisdom, based on His knowledge and purposes, is His ability to chose the best goals and the best way to attain them. We are to seek His Wisdom for ourselves

3. Truthfulness- All that God is defines reality and what is true. All of God's knowledge is true, without error. His words (revelation) expressing His knowledge is therefore also true. God can not lie or contradict Himself. The standard or measure of truth is conformity with the character, knowledge and words of God. God gives us the desire and the ability to receive, love and live by Truth. His Truth is the sure foundation for our world view and our lives.

4. Goodness- Likewise, what God is defines what good is. "Good" is everything that is in harmony with the character and works of God. (cf. Perfection) Particularly, God's goodness refers to His Love and that includes the Grace, Mercy and Patience or Long-suffering He has for us.

5. Holiness- The second meaning of Holy is ethical. God has unique standards of ethical behavior and morals for Himself and for human beings. We are to be holy as He is holy. We are to love His Law, His Norms for how we are to live. We are to hate transgressions of His Law and separate ourselves from behavior that does not conform to His Norms.

6. Righteousness- God is a God of Justice. He governs the world by His Law and holds it accountable to live accordingly. His Justice rewards those who do and it condemns those who do not.

7. Sovereignty- God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. He has his secret will and His revealed will for all things and all peoples. Though it is resisted, that resistance will fail and God's will shall be obeyed.

This is because God is also sovereign in power. He is omnipotent, King of Kings, Lord of Lords. But His power is not exercised ruthlessly or arbitrarily. God's power is in the service of God's character and of all the attributes we have listed here. **Summary**

God is a non-corporeal spirit Being, a Person who is self-sufficient, complete, unchangeable, infinite, eternal, omnipresent, and simple. He is omniscient, wise, truthful and good. His goodness is Love and that includes grace, mercy and patience toward us. God is also holy and

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righteous, decreeing and upholding the highest standards of morality and justice. And God is sovereign in His will and purposes, as well as in His power.

All of this together describes the essential nature of God and begins to answer our question of who God is! This is the God with whom we have to do, the God we worship and serve. To Him be the Glory now and always.