

Introduction to the Attributes of God

By Gary Takahashi

Before we begin our study of such an awesome topic as the attributes of God, it is necessary that we make some preliminary remarks. First of all, though we may study all our lives, we can never know all that there is to know concerning God. That is, we can know God since He has revealed Himself to us, but we can only know God inasmuch as He has revealed Himself to us. Therefore, a true knowledge of God is possible, but an exhaustive knowledge of God isn't. Our knowledge of God is limited to what is found in the Scripture alone and He hasn't included everything there is to know about Himself – only what we need to know. These facts alone should cause us to humble ourselves before Him. Second, we must not allow knowledge about God to be confused with knowing God. That is, we do not pursue intellectual knowledge about God as an end in itself, but rather to be applied. Otherwise, as J. I. Packer has noted,

If we pursue theological knowledge for its own sake, it is bound to go bad on us. It will make us proud and conceited. The very greatness of the subject matter will intoxicate us, and we shall come to think of ourselves as a cut above other Christians because of our interest in it and grasp of it...To be preoccupied with getting theological knowledge as an end in itself, to approach Bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is the direct route to a state of self-satisfied, self-deception (Knowing God, Packer, pp. 21-22).

Jonathan Edwards also spoke to this issue more than 200 years ago when he made this comment about one who truly desires to know God rather than just know about God:

The true saint, when under great spiritual affections, from the fullness of his heart, is ready to be speaking much of God and his glorious perfections and works...but hypocrites, in their high affections, talk more of the discovery, than they do of the thing discovered.¹

Although many modern Christians today think that the study of theology or doctrine is reserved for the scholar or theologians, the fact is every believer is a theologian. The only question is what kind of theologian are you, a good one or bad one? Some of you may not think that the study of theology is all that practical but think about this: what can be more practical than getting to know more about the God that saved you from hell and gave you eternal life? The Puritans used to say that theology or the study of doctrine is highly practical and therefore they refused to teach it apart from showing its practical application. For example, how can you fully understand the command to “Be holy for I am holy,”² unless you already have a biblical understanding of God's holiness? Often when Puritans commented on Scripture they broke it down into theology, doctrine, and practice. Remember we said that it's important not to confuse knowledge about God with knowing God, right? Yet at the same time don't forget that it's impossible to truly know God without

¹ Ian H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), p. 258, fn. 2.

² Leviticus 11:44-45.

having true and accurate knowledge about Him. Otherwise, you're not truly worshipping the God of the Bible but a figment of your imagination or an idol. That's why Paul wrote this in Colossians 1:9-10, "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." We should have the same desire to study about our God as we do our favorite actor, singer or athlete.

Definition

Now that we have made the necessary remarks in preliminary to our study, we'll begin by discussing two things: (1) a definition of what an attribute is; (2) a proper categorization of those attributes. First of all, when discussing the attributes of God, we need to be careful that we distinguish His attributes from His works. His works reveal what He has done, while His attributes describe who He is. Many theologians have confused God's attributes with His works. For example, Louis Berkhoff in his systematic theology defined an attribute as "the perfections which are predicated of the Divine Being in Scripture, or are visibly exercised by Him in His works of creation, providence, and redemption" (*Systematic Theology*, Berkhoff, p. 52; emphasis mine). But as Millard Erickson has pointed out, "When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature. We are not referring here to the acts which he performs, such as creating, guiding, and preserving, nor to the corresponding roles he plays - Creator, Guide, Preserver" (*Christian Theology*, Erickson, p. 265; emphasis mine). Therefore, I think it is best to understand an attribute of God as "the perfections of God which are revealed in Scripture, that describe the nature and being of God" (Takahashi), and to keep in mind that "the attributes are inseparable from the being or essence of God" (Erickson, p. 265; emphasis mine), since the absence of these characteristics would result in God's ceasing to be God (*Systematic Theology*, Hodge, I: 369).³ All this to say that the attributes of God refer to those essential characteristics that make God who He is and consequently reveal who He is.⁴

Lastly, when viewing the many faceted attributes of God, it is important that we not "exalt one attribute over another; when that is done it presents a caricature of God. It is all the attributes of God taken together that provide an understanding of the nature and Person of God."⁵ Every attribute of God is essential to who He is and therefore one is not less or more important than any of the others. This keeps us from an unbalanced view of God such as those who view God as nothing more than "love," with the implication that it is inconsequential how we live or what we believe since a loving God would never really send someone to hell for an eternity, right? All the while they neglect the fact that God is also a holy, righteous and wrathful God and will punish all those who reject the gospel. At the same time if we stress the wrath of God to the exclusion of the grace or mercy of God, we paint a picture of God that is equally unbalanced – a God that vengefully sends people to hell without a second thought.

There is no standard way of classifying the attributes of God, as you can clearly see by reading any standard systematic theology. For example, Henry Thiessen and Vernon

³ G. R. Lewis, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 451.

⁴ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 188.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Doerksen classify the attributes as Moral and Non-moral; Millard Erickson classifies them according to Greatness and Goodness; but most popularly, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhoff, William Shedd, and Herman Bavinck classify the attributes of God as Communicable and Incommunicable. This will be the way in which I will classify them.

An Incommunicable attribute of God is one that is true of God, found only in God, in which there can be nothing comparable found in man. In other words, these are perfections of God which man cannot know experientially, only conceptually. These attributes emphasize “God as the absolute Being,” which means that God is the first cause of all things (the uncaused cause), who is self-existing (Aseity), self-sufficient, and thus entirely independent of any other being, necessary for His existence (John 5:26). The following is a list of such attributes, with a short description:

1. Spirituality – God is spirit and therefore He has no physical form or material to speak of (invisible). As a result, no man can or ever will see God (I Tim. 6:16; Jn. 1:18). This is why Exodus 20:4 prohibits any attempt to confine Him to a likeness or man-made image. Furthermore it must be pointed out that as spirit, God is personal – not some impersonal force as will be revealed when we review some of His communicable attributes. cf. John 4:24; Luke 24:39.
2. Simplicity - The unity of God, the fact that God is One, and the only One. The Israelites were to recite the Great Shema everyday, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4), affirming the existence of the one true God YHWH as opposed to all the false gods and idols of the nations. This does not deny the doctrine of the Trinity, for although there is only one God, that one God manifests Himself in three “Persons.” These 3 “Persons” are fully God, distinct from each other and yet one. There is only one God but that one God has revealed Himself to be the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Berkhoff, pp. 61-62). cf. I Kings 8:60; Is. 44:6; I Cor. 8:6.
3. Eternity – God’s timelessness, the fact that He never had a beginning, and will never have an end, He is the only uncaused cause. He is an eternal being, not limited by time or space, self-existent (aseity) (John 5:26), totally independent of anyone or anything outside of Himself. In Exodus 3:14, God identified Himself as “I am who I am,” which stresses His continual existence in Himself (Hodge, p. 385-390; Berkhoff, p. 60; Enns, p. 193). Omnipresence [God is present everywhere] would be a subcategory since He transcends all spatial limitations and there is nowhere you can go from His presence. Omniscience [God knows all things] is also a subcategory because knowledge is based upon one’s being (i.e. our knowledge is limited because our being is limited). There is nothing in the universe that is outside of the knowledge of God. He knows the whole of human history past, present and future simultaneously [all is a present now] and though He exists outside of time can interject Himself in time and space. He also knows every man’s inward thought and outward act and there is nothing that happens in the entire universe that is hidden from Him. The reason that God alone is

the perfect judge is because He knows all the facts and He knows them perfectly. cf. **Ps. 90:2**, 102:12; Is. 44:6, 57:15; Rev. 1:8, 21:6; Prov. 15:3; **Ps. 139:7-12**; 2 Pet. 3:8; Jer. 10:10.

4. Infinity (Omnipotence) - The fact that God, unlike man, is free from any and all limitations in His Being (Hodge, pp. 380-385, 407; Berkhoff, p. 59; Erickson, pp. 272-278). In other words, God is inexhaustible, all-powerful and therefore does whatever He pleases. But in saying that God does whatever He pleases, this doesn't imply that God acts randomly or recklessly. God only acts in accordance with His nature and therefore will never do anything that is inconsistent with Himself. Therefore God cannot lie, sin or contradict His word. So God's will acts in accordance with His nature and never in contradiction to it. cf. Ps. 147:5, 145:3, 115:3, 33:6, 89:6; Job: 9:19, 11:7-11; Gen. 18:10-14; Jer. 32:17; Hab. 3:4; Matt. 19:26; John 10:17-18; Rom. 4:17; Eph. 1:4-5, 19-20; Heb. 1:3; Is. 40:15-17, 44:24; Rev. 19:6.
5. Immutability - The unchangeableness of God in His Being, due to His perfection; since change is always for the better or for worse, improvement or regression is impossible with God. There obviously can be no improvement in an already perfect God (Hodge, pp. 390-392; Berkhoff, pp. 58-59; Erickson, pp. 278-281). cf. Ps. 33:11, 102:26-28; **Mal 3:6**; Rom. 1:23; Heb. 1:11-12, 6:18, 13:8; James 1:17; Num. 23:10; Titus 1:2.

The communicable attributes on the other hand, are those which can in a lesser degree, be found in human beings. Whereas no trace of aseity, immutability, infinity, eternity or simplicity can be found in man, communicable attributes such as wisdom, benevolence, holiness, justice, compassion and truth, can. The following is a list of communicable attributes:

1. Holiness – The basic meaning of the word is “set apart,” and so Scripture emphasizes that God is infinitely distinct from and above any of His creation. This is the transcendent aspect of who God is. But holiness also refers to the absolute absence of any evil whatsoever; infinite purity. Because of this, He cannot tolerate evil or any relationship to it. Sin therefore is an eternal offense to God's holiness which results in His wrath. God's wrath stems from His hatred of evil and His consequent love of righteousness. As one writer has pointed out, “Apart from understanding God's wrath against evil, it is impossible to understand the extent of divine love in the incarnation, the extent of Christ's suffering on the cross, the propitiatory nature of his sacrifice, the prophetic Scriptures speaking of the great day of God's wrath, the great tribulation, or the book of revelation” (EDOT, p. 457) (Hodge, pp. 413-415; Berkhoff, pp. 73-74; Erickson, pp. 284-286; Enns, pp. 192-93). cf. I Sam. 2:2; Ex. 15:11; Is. 6:1-4, 43:3, 57:15; Ps. 99:3; Hab. 1:13; Lev. 11:44-45; Hos. 11:9; Rev. 15:4.

2. Truth - The whole of who God is consists in truth. Therefore, everything that He reveals about Himself, including His Being, His will and His works, is true. This notion of truthfulness is to be understood in its most comprehensive sense. That is, He is the source of all truth in every sphere of knowledge. This stresses the absolute reliability of God. Faithfulness is a subheading of this attribute since we know that everything He says in His word can be trusted. Furthermore it means that God is the only true God and that every other god is false (Berkhoff, pp. 69-70; Erickson, pp. 289-291; Hodge, pp. 436-440; Enns, p. 192). cf. (Metaphysical) I Jn. 5:20; John 14:6, 17:3; Jer. 10:10; I Thess. 1:9; (Ethical) Rom. 3:4; Deut. 32:4; Ps. 25:10; Is. 65:16; (stated negatively) Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18; Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29.
3. Justice - The righteousness of God; however God acts or judges, He does so perfectly and justly, without partiality because it is according to truth. God never makes a rash or hasty judgment and therefore we never have cause to criticize His actions [as we do earthly judges] (Erickson, pp. 288-289; Hodge, pp. 416-426; Berkhoff, pp. 74-76). cf. Ps. 7:11, 58:11, 73:17-20, 96:13, 97:2; Is. 33:22; Deut. 7:10, 32:4; Rom. 1:32, 2:5-9, 12:19; Gen. 18:25.
4. Benevolence - The uninitiated, everlasting love of God demonstrated toward us, though we were undeserving of it. God's love is grounded in His truth and holiness, is rational as opposed to emotional, and is unconditional since He loves whether or not that love is reciprocated or not. Goodness, grace, mercy, and longsuffering would be appropriate subheadings here (Pink, pp. 77-81; Hodge, pp. 427-429; Berkhoff, p. 71; Erickson, pp. 292-294; Enns, p. 192). cf. I John 4:8-10, 16; Rom. 5:8; Deut. 7:7-8; Jn. 3:16; Eph. 3:19; Jer. 31:3.
5. Wisdom - God's application of His knowledge in such a way that glorifies Himself most. God's wisdom in contradistinction to man's is infinite, comprehensive and unfailing (Berkhoff, p. 69; Hodge, pp. 401-402). Ps. 104:4; Rom. 11:33-36; I Cor. 1:21, 2:7; I Tim. 1:17.

I have broken down the Incommunicable and Communicable attributes into general headings, in which component parts of each attribute exists. Therefore, this is by no means an exhaustive list of God's attributes, but it does provide a start in systematically listing them.

The Immanence & Transcendence of God

Immanence and Transcendence are two contrasting attributes, yet they are able to co-exist in God side by side. Before we can see how this is demonstrated, we need to look at each attribute individually. First, the Immanence of God can also be stated as "the

knowability of God” (Berkhoff, pp. 29-30), and “the nearness of God,” as it emphasizes the fact that it is possible to come into relationship with God (Jn. 17:3; Acts 17:27-28; James 4:8; I Jn. 5:20; Jn. 14:7), as well as the fact that God is present within the operation of the world (Heb. 1:2-3; Col. 1:17; Jer. 23:24; Ps. 104:29-30). This doctrine is in contrast to the Deists, who taught that God created the world and man, and then simply removed Himself from any involvement of either. They postulated a “watch-maker” type God, who wound up the clock, and then let it run. They believed that God is totally separate from this world, and never intervenes in it. But this is clearly not the God of the Scriptures. Christ not only created the world, it is through Him that the world “holds together” (Col. 1:17).

Now this doctrine of Immanence is balanced by the Transcendence of God. The Transcendence of God is the notion that God is separate from man and above man, because He is absolutely holy and infinite, whereas man is sinful and finite. Thus, many theologians term God as being “wholly other” than man. That is, God is so far removed from us in the sense of His greatness, holiness, righteousness, and being He must condescend Himself just to communicate to us. This is clearly demonstrated throughout the Scripture (Is. 55:9-10; Deut. 29:29; Ps. 103:12-14, 19, 113:5-6, 123:1; Jn. 8:23). However, the doctrine of Transcendence is not a contradiction of Immanence, but rather a compliment. We need to realize that though God has revealed Himself in a way that can be known, we still must have a reverent awe for Him, understanding that He is so far greater than we are, and ever will be. His ways are so far above our ways, that we cannot even begin to fathom the difference. He has revealed Himself to us truly, but not exhaustively. Now, if you stress the Immanence of God at the expense of the Transcendence of God, and vice versa, you will come out with an unbalanced view of God. For example, the Deists made this mistake because they emphasized the Transcendence of God, minus the Immanence of God, and thus came out with an impersonal God. On the other hand, those who have emphasized the Immanence of God at the expense of the Transcendence of God have ultimately led to pantheism. Once you start to correlate the idea that God is everywhere present in the universe, then nature and God soon become synonymous - God is nature, and nature is God. I think those in the Charismatic Movement have likewise made the same mistake. They have so overemphasized the immanence of God that it has led to strange behavior and excesses that are mistaken for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit doesn't lead believers to bark like dogs or laugh uncontrollably and yet for some reason many in the Charismatic Movement are sure that He is the source of all that. The adjective *Holy* is the key to the Holy Spirit's ministry; His immanent ministry in the believer's life is to produce holiness in the life of the believer, not strange behavior.

But, when you stay within the confines of Scripture, you will maintain the proper balance – “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Is. 57:15).