

§ 3. Doctrine of God

I. Attributes of God

A. Introduction

1. Knowing about God and Knowing God

Charles Spurgeon, in his morning sermon of January 7, 1855, began with these words:

It has been said that ‘the proper study of mankind is man.’ I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. . . . No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. . . . But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. . . . Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. . . . It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.

It is also to that subject that I invite you this morning as we begin our new locus today: the Doctrine of God. This is the centerpiece of theology; indeed, sometimes it is called “theology proper” – the study of God.

The knowledge of God is really what life is all about. In his marvelous book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer writes the following:

What were we made for? To know God. What aims should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. John 17:3, “This is life eternal that they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? The knowledge of God.

Packer goes on to say,

We have been brought to the point where we both can and must get our life’s priorities straight. From current Christian publications you might think that the most vital issue for any real or would-be Christian in the world today is church union, or social witness, or dialogue with other Christians and other faiths, or refuting this or that -ism, or developing a Christian philosophy and culture, or what have you. But our line of study makes the present-day concentration on these things look like a gigantic conspiracy of misdirection. Of course, it is not that; the issues themselves are real and must be dealt with in their place. But it is tragic that, in paying attention to them, so many in our day seem to have been distracted from

what was, is, and always will be the true priority for every human being—that is, learning to know God in Christ.¹

The knowledge of God ought to be our number one priority in life.

But here an important distinction needs to be made. There is a great difference between *knowing about* God and *knowing* God. Knowing about God is primarily a matter of information, whereas knowing God involves a first-hand personal experience and involvement. To illustrate: suppose that you are a single young man and I had a crystal ball into which I could look and reveal to you what the woman you will someday marry is like. I could tell you what she looks like, her likes and dislikes, her strengths, her weaknesses, her talents, her intellectual abilities, and her spiritual maturity. You would know all about her. But could you truly say that you know her? I don't think so at all. There is no personal relationship between you and her. In fact, you might even say upon hearing my revelation, "Wow, I can't wait to get to know her!" There is a huge difference between knowing about someone and actually knowing that person. Through the crystal ball you might know all about her, but then someday she will walk into your life and you'll get to really know her on a personal level.

It is exactly the same way with God. We can know a lot about God, and yet not really know him well or at all. In this class, I can help you to know about God. I can give you information about God – his nature and existence. But, unfortunately, my ability to help you to know God is limited because it is up to you to do the knowing. Nobody else can do that for you. To think of the illustration of the young man again, maybe I could by my crystal

1 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 314.

ball tell you all about your future wife, but I couldn't give you that intimate personal relationship with her that you would want to have. You have to do the loving, caring, building, communicating yourself. It is exactly the same way with God. I can give you a lot of information about what God is like so that you can know more about him, but only you through your personal engagement can get to know God better for yourself.

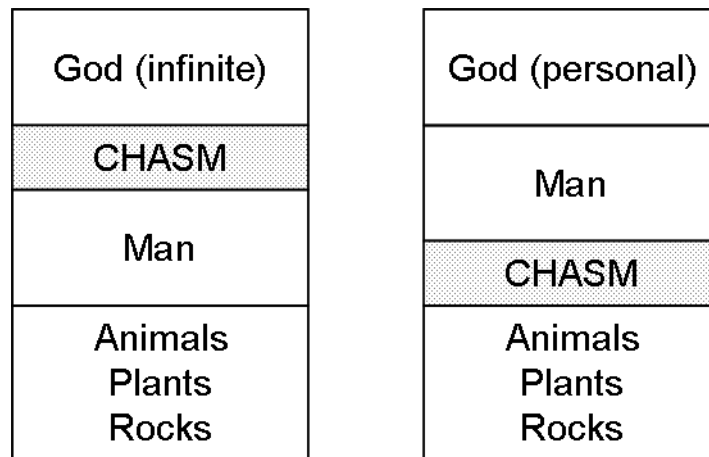
Someone might say, “Then what good is it learning all this doctrine and information about God if it isn't sufficient for really knowing him?” Well, think about it. It can be very helpful to know *about* someone if you are trying to get to know that person *personally*. For example, it would be very helpful – wouldn't it? – to know that someone has, say, a poor self-image that causes him or her to act in certain ways. Or it might be good to know that someone can be trusted with a secret. If we hear that a person is a loyal and dependable friend, then it will be much easier to want to get to know him and to commit ourselves to him. It is the exactly the same way with God. Once we correctly understand what God is like, then it will change our lives.

When we grasp God's love, then we will be drawn to him in turn and want to respond and love him. When we truly comprehend God's holiness, then we will turn away from our sins with loathing and will reverence God with awe. When we understand God's aseity, then we will fall on our faces before him in humility. When we see God's power, then we will go forth for him in confidence and triumph. When we learn of God's omniscience, then we can trust him and his guidance as we go through the trials and valleys of life. We can quit depreciating ourselves and understand and

accept ourselves rightly as those who are beloved by God. So I think you can see that knowledge about God can be very helpful, indeed, in getting to know God.

2. The Infinite-Personal God

Who is this God, then, that reveals himself to us in the Bible? He is the infinite-personal God. God is, on the one hand, an infinite being. On the other hand, God is also a personal being. The God of the Bible is the infinite-personal being. This is in contrast to the gods of many other religions in the world. For example, the gods of Greco-Roman mythology were certainly personal beings, but they were not infinite. The god of Eastern pantheisms like Hinduism and Taoism is infinite, but this god is not personal. What the Bible says is that God is both infinite and personal.



Infinite-Personal God

Insofar as God is infinite, there is a great chasm that separates him from everything else in the universe, including man, animals, and inanimate objects. God stands alone as the infinite being. On the other hand, insofar as God is personal, man (as made in the image

of God) finds himself on God's side of the chasm that separates them from all of the rest of the cosmos, which are not persons.

So you have this very interesting concept of God in Judaism and Christianity as a God who is infinite (and therefore unlike all the rest of creation) and yet who is also personal (and therefore can be known in a personal way).

In our first section of this locus we want to look at those attributes of God which are his in virtue of being an infinite being, and then we will later look at those attributes of God which are his in virtue of his being a personal being.

B. God as Infinite

1. Introduction

The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes God in the following terms: "a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." We want to look at those attributes, or properties, of God which are his in virtue of his being an infinite being. In one sense this distinction is artificial because God has all of his attributes to an infinite degree, but nevertheless he has certain attributes which are not his in virtue of his being personal. We will look at these separately.

A lot of times you will hear people in our culture say, *You can't really know anything about God. If God does exist, you can't say anything about what he is like.* For these sorts of people, God is just a sort of nebulous force or something of that sort, not something that can really be described. But in reality such an entity

would be a non-being. Anything that exists in reality has attributes or properties that make it what it is and so describe it. So a God that literally had no attributes or properties would be non-existent. Anything that exists has certain properties or attributes.

The 19th century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach expressed this point well when he wrote:

A being without qualities is one which cannot become an object to the mind; and such a being is virtually non-existent. Where man deprives God of all qualities, God is no longer anything more to him than a negative being. To the truly religious man, God is not a being without qualities, because to him he is a positive, real being. The theory that God cannot be defined, and consequently cannot be known by man, is therefore the offspring of recent times, a product of modern unbelief. . . . On the ground that God is unknowable, man excuses himself . . . for his forgetfulness of God, his absorption in the world: he denies God practically by his conduct, – the world has possession of all his thoughts and inclinations, – but he does not deny him [God] theoretically, he does not attack his existence; he lets that rest. But this existence does not affect or incommode him; it is a merely negative existence, an existence without existence, a self-contradictory existence, – a state of being, which, as to its effects, is not distinguishable from non-being. . . . The alleged religious horror of limiting God by positive predicates is only the irreligious wish to know nothing more of God, to banish God from the mind.²

2 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841

So God, as an infinite-personal being, must have certain qualities that make him the kind of being that he is. The question then is: what qualities are these? What are these properties that God has? Two controls help to guide our inquiry into the divine nature. First is *Scripture*, and then second is *perfect being theology*.

Scripture will be our guide to seeing what God has revealed to us about himself. Fortunately, God has not left it up to us to work out what he is like by our own ingenuity. Rather he has revealed himself to us in his Word. So it is to the Bible that we will want to turn in order to discover what God is like. But the Bible is not a book in systematic theology, much less a philosophy book. Rather it is the story of God's acts in human history, revealing to us what God is like, what this person with whom we have to do is like. The Bible is underdeterminative with respect to many of God's attributes— that is to say, the biblical data do not always make it clear how we are to understand God's attributes. To give just one example of this, the Bible affirms clearly that God is eternal, but it doesn't make clear whether this means that God is infinite throughout all time or whether God transcends time all together. The biblical data are underdeterminative with respect to how we understand divine eternity.

But for thinkers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the concept of God enunciated by St. Anselm as the greatest conceivable being (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) (or the most perfect being) (*ens perfectissimum*) has guided our theological reflection upon the raw data of Scripture, so that God's biblical attributes are to be conceived in the greatest possible way – in a way that would serve to exalt God's greatness. So when the Bible says, for example, that

God is all-powerful or that God is all-knowing, we should take these attributes to the greatest possible degree that we can – to say God is omnipotent and omniscient and to construe these attributes in ways that would exalt God’s greatness.

Since the concept of God is underdetermined by biblical data and since what constitutes a great-making property is to a degree debatable, theologians and philosophers who work within the Judeo-Christian tradition have considerable latitude in formulating a philosophically coherent and biblical faithful doctrine of God.

For example, with respect to divine eternity it is not clear whether it is greater to be timeless or to be infinite throughout all time. This is a matter of debate among philosophers and theologians. So this would be one example of where Christian theologians and philosophers have differed in their doctrine of God. They all affirm the core doctrine that God is eternal but some will maintain that God is atemporal (that is, he exists beyond time), others will say, no, God is omnitemporal and exists throughout infinite time. Both of these would be acceptable as Christian doctrines of divine eternity.

Our exploration of the divine attributes will be guided by these two constraints – Scripture and perfect being theology. What we want to do is to look first at the scriptural data relative to any particular attribute, and then we will attempt to provide a systematic formulation.

The first attribute that we want to look at is God’s necessary existence. We will open that discussion next time.