

# **WHO IS THE LORD?**

**A BRIEF LOOK AT THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD PART 1: THE INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES**

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## SCHEDULE

**Week 1 - Knowing God: How do we talk about God?**

**Week 2 - Attributes of God 1: Characteristics that make God utterly unique**

**Week 3 - Attributes of God 2: Characteristics of God that he shares with us**

**Goal: What we are exploring, is learning to love God as he is, not merely for what he has done. We seek to know and love him through how he has revealed himself to us in his words and works.**

*Its worth saying, I'm presenting a view of God in accord with Classical Theism and leaning on Matthew Barrett's book, "No One Like Him." This is similar to J.I. Packer's "Knowing God"*

# SURVEY OF CHRISTIANS BELIEFS

**2020 Ligonier Survey 3,002 Americans: [thestateoftheology.com](http://thestateoftheology.com)**

God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake. — 50% agree (95% of Evangelicals)

God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. — Among evangelicals 33% strongly agree, 38% strongly disagree

Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God. — 62% of Evangelicals strongly agree, 25% strongly disagree

Jesus was a great teacher, but was not God. — 62% strongly disagree, 26% strongly agree

The Holy Spirit is a force not a personal being — 38% strongly disagree, 38% strongly agree (Evangelicals)

**There is great confusion these days about the classic and historical beliefs about the doctrine of God.**

# GOD'S TRANSCENDENT ATTRIBUTES

## THE INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

### Consider the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) — II:1

1. There is but **one** only, (Deut. 6:4, 1 Cor. 8:4–6) living, and true God, (1 Thess. 1:9, Jer. 10:10) who is **infinite** in being and perfection, (Job 11:7–9, Job 26:14) a most pure spirit, (John 4:24) **invisible**, (1 Tim. 1:17) **without body, parts**, (Deut. 4:15–16, John 4:24, Luke 24:39) or **passions**; (Acts 14:11,15) **immutable**, (James 1:17, Mal. 3:6) **immense**, (1 Kings 8:27, Jer. 23:23–24) **eternal**, (Ps. 90:2, 1 Tim. 1:17) **incomprehensible**, (Ps. 145:3) almighty, (Gen. 17:1, Rev. 4:8) most wise, (Rom. 16:27) most holy, (Isa. 6:3, Rev. 4:8) most free, (Ps. 115:3) most absolute; (Exod. 3:14) working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, (Eph. 1:11) for His own glory; (Prov. 16:4, Rom. 11:36) most loving, (1 John 4:8,16) gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; (Exod. 34:6–7) the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; (Heb. 11:6) and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, (Neh. 9:32–33) hating all sin, (Ps. 5:5–6) and who will by no means clear the guilty. (Nah. 1:2–3, Exod. 34:7)

**Incommunicable Attributes — Simplicity, Aseity, Immutability, Impassibility, Invisible, Infinite, and Eternal**

# CONFUSION ABOUT GOD

## MODERN CHALLENGES TO CLASSIC CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

**Many prominent theologians and scholars today deny classic definitions of God's nature expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. They adhere to a modified classical theism.**

Alvin Plantinga, J.P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, D.A. Carson, John Stott... and more

**Specifically, the one's challenged today that we will discuss are these:**

Simplicity, Impassibility, Eternality, and to some extent his Immutability

**The significance is they were crucial in the early formation of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. CT has been the dominant witness in the church across every branch: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant (esp. Reformed).**

If God does not change or does not have parts, how can we make sense of God being Father, Son, and Spirit?

If God does not have passions (impassibility) then how do we make sense of Christ's suffering? Doesn't that make a huge difference pastorally for the counsel we give in the midst of temptation and suffering?

# **GOD'S TRANSCENDENT ATTRIBUTES**

## **THE INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD**

**An important distinction - God with respect to his nature and with respect to his work (John 1:1-9)**

There is God as he is and God revealed to us in redemptive revelation.

**What do we mean by incommunicable attributes?**

**Aspects of God's being, his nature or essence, that put him in his own category.**

When we say God is eternal and that Jesus is God, we are saying that for Jesus to be God he must also be eternal. Begotten, not made, of the Father from eternity past.

**Are these biblical or human constructed philosophical categories?**

Yes and no. Yes "immutability" or "Trinity" are not "biblical" terms but they are a reasonable inference from scripture. Reason should not go beyond scripture. It must recognize the rightful place of mystery and the limits of human reason. Tradition, Reason, and Experience serve scripture in understanding.

# ATTRIBUTES WITHOUT DISPUTE

## WHAT IS GOD IS INFINITE, SELF-EXISTENT (ASEITY), AND INVISIBLE

### **God is invisible/Spirit (Ex. 20:4; Ps. 139; Jer. 23:23; Jn. 4:24)**

God is not a thing in the universe made of matter or having some form. God is immaterial and is not confined limited to some place in space.

### **God is infinite (2 Cor. 2:6; Job 11:7-9; Ps. 145:3; Is. 40:12-17; 48:12; Dan. 4:34; Mt. 5:48; 2 Pet. 3:8; Eph. 3:20)**

This is a denial that God is limited in his being or perfections transcending creaturely categories. It does not mean he extends boundlessly or indeterminately. It means whatever he is, he is so perfectly and eminently. This is important for his being, his eternity, and his omnipresence.

### **God is self-existent (Aseity) (Ex. 3:14; Job 22:2-3; Jn. 5:26; Acts 17:24-26; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6)**

God's existence by virtue of who he is and does not depend on anything else for his existence. Everything else exists by the grace of God.

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# ATTRIBUTES WITHOUT DISPUTE

## THE SO WHAT...

### **God is infinite**

We should be in awe of him and aware of our creatureliness. He will never be lacking in enough grace for you. Christ's sacrifice was infinite and perfect.

### **God is self-existent (Aseity)**

God's did not create us out of need or to show his power, but for our joy and out of his love.

### **God is invisible/Spirit**

We should create idols or images of God, either real or mental. He is also present for us anywhere and everywhere.



# GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

**"[HE] DOES NOT CHANGE LIKE SHIFTING SHADOWS" — JAMES 1:17**

**Immutability means God's nature does not change. He is perfect and he does not change for the better or change for the worse.**

Scripture seems very clear: Jer. 10:10; Nu. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 90:2; 102:26-27; Is. 48:12; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 6:16; Heb. 13:8

God will not break his covenant promise to Abraham. He wills to bring about redemption. God is trustworthy and faithful. He can be relied upon *utterly*. He is a rock.

These qualities of God are primarily negative, *saying what God is not*. They are not positive descriptions of a static God. These are in contrast to us as his creatures who undergo change in manner God never does.

He is always merciful and gracious and loving to us. He is always standing over evil and sin in judgment.

# GOD'S IMMUTABILITY?

**OR IS IMMUTABILITY CLEAR? GEN. 6:6-7; EX. 32:14; 1 SAM. 15:11; 2 SAM. 24:16; JER. 18; HOS. 11; JON. 3:10; JOEL 2:13-14**

**What about God changing his mind? Repenting or relenting in response to human sin, to repentance, or to prayer?**

If God is changing his mind, does that then mean he now knows something he did not before?

If God is not, does that mean scripture is giving us a misleading picture of God responding to us?

If God is not perfect, subject to some weakness, how can he have atoned for human sin?

**Exegetically, the narratives here are showing a problem with human's in contrast to the divine will.**

It is revealing his displeasure with people choosing sin (or lack of compassion in Jonah's case). It is revealing the consistency of God's judgment in their sin and his mercy in their repentance.

We are observing God's work at particular moments in time in the drama of redemption. God's will and plan is consistent. He forgives the repentant, he condemns the guilty. He is the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

*"Rather than witnessing a change in God—and an emotional one at that—we are instead witnessing the effects of God's will on his creatures." — Matthew Barrett\**

# GOD'S IMPASSIBILITY

## FOLLOWING FROM IMMUTABILITY THAT GOD IS WITHOUT "PASSIONS."

**Impassibility technically means God does not have "passions," that he does not suffer.**

Clearly the Bible depicts God with various emotions and Jesus in particular demonstrates this who himself suffers as the Son of God on the cross (Mt. 26:36-46).

*We are talking about what God is not. We are not talking about what God is. The claim is that God is not affected by things external to himself. That while Jesus experienced these things, it did not change his personality or purpose. But we must also remember that Jesus had two natures, human and divine in a mysterious union.\**

### **J.I. Packer puts it this way:**

"It means simply that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us. His are foreknown, willed, and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside... a totally impassive God would be a horror, and not the God of Calvary at all. He might belong to Islam; he has no place in Christianity. If, therefore, we can learn to think of the closeness of God's grief and pain as the essence of his impassibility, so-called, we will do well."

# GOD'S IMPASSIBILITY

## GOD ACTS FOR US BECAUSE OF WHO HE IS, NOT BECAUSE HE WAS EMOTIONALLY ENTANGLED

### What difference does it make?

It means God acts out of love and grace because that's who he is. He doesn't do it so that you will accept him or because you are really really sad. He is always these things. He is not emotionally unpredictable or co-dependent.

It means that God in Christ suffered for us "in the flesh." Because the Son of God did so, God always intended for us to share in his divine life by the Son of God taking on human suffering.

In times of crisis, such as forest fires, we do not need a God who sets himself on fire to identify with our pain. We need a God who cannot be consumed, who does not lose control, who we can run to with our pain, who can put the fire out.

### Criticisms

It seems to fly in the face of a straightforward reading of the Bible. But the alternatives have been quite problematic. It in turn has called for a fresh reading of the early church on the Incarnation where impassibility was critical.

Can make God sound cold, distant, and static. Some argue it leads to determinism.

# GOD'S SIMPLICITY

"HEAR O ISRAEL, THE LORD YOUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE." — DUET. 6:4  
"I AM THAT I AM." EX. 3:14; EX. 34:6-7; 1 JN. 1:5

**Simplicity is the detail that God has parts or is a composite of different things.**

That is, one attribute is not more important or more fundamental to God than any other attribute. God does not have love, God *is* love.

**God is infinitely, eternally, and perfectly, loving, holy, unchanging, just, invisible, etc.**

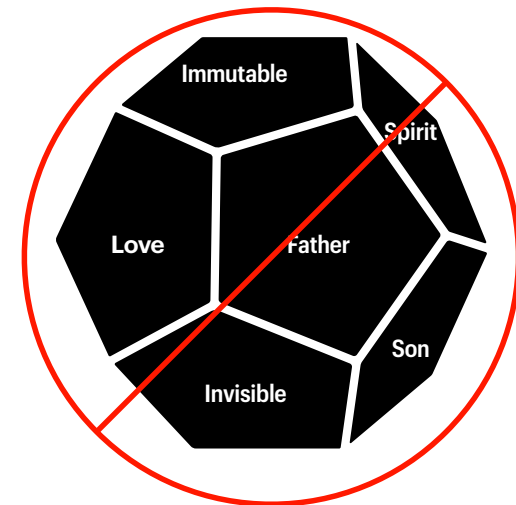
It keeps us from collapsing some attributes into other ones. Affirms that God is uncaused and is not confused within himself, feeling conflicted between his love and wrath.

**GOD IS NOT A MIXTURE OF DIFFERENT PARTS. HE IS INDIVISIBLE.**

**GOD IS FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT**

**GOD IS NOT 33% FATHER, 33% SON, AND 33% SPIRIT.**

**GOD IS NOT 90% LOVE, 1% WRATH, 5% GOODNESS, .5% JEALOUS, 2% JUST, ETC.**



# GOD'S SIMPLICITY

## GOD IS WITHOUT PARTS

### What Difference Does it Make?

This is important for the Trinity, that God is a unity. Father, Son, and Spirit exist in eternal relation as the one divine being.

He is not like a symphony, he is the Composer who has no composer, and we are his symphony. It tells us that God was not wrathful in the OT and then loving in Christ, but that he has always been loving and gracious to us as declared and demonstrated in Christ.

It means God cannot be corrupted, he cannot be deconstructed into different pieces. He is one, indivisible, pure perfection, and greater than anything else in all creation we can conceive of. He is like a ray of light hitting stained glass — a single ray that shines in various ways as it interacts with its creation. Augustine called this God's "manifold simplicity."\*

### This is heavily disputed today along the following lines (Alvin Plantinga)

Its conceptually difficult and seems to collapse God's attributes into each other so his love is his wrath is his holiness is his faithfulness. To say God is goodness, is to make God an abstraction and not a person.

### Response

No studied Christian prior to the 19th century denied it. The criticisms seems guilty of univocal language. Does not seem to properly account for the distinction between God's nature and work, or the fundamental distinction between the Creator and the creation.

\* BARRETT, MATTHEW. *NONE GREATER* (PP. 81-82). BAKER PUBLISHING GROUP. KINDLE EDITION.

# GOD IS ETERNAL

“I AM THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA,” SAYS THE LORD GOD, “WHO IS, AND WHO WAS, AND WHO IS TO COME, THE ALMIGHTY.” — REV. 1:8

## God is not limited by time

This is quite complex and difficult to think about. Scripture speaks of God as everlasting, as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end (Is. 40:28; Ps. 90:2-4; 2 Pet. 3:8; Job 36:26; Jn. 8:58).

God’s eternality points to God beyond time. He had no beginning or end. God is uncreated and since he cannot change he does not experience change through time like we do. He does not experience a succession of moments for he cannot be measured.

Augustine’s response to the question: “What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?... Preparing hell for pryers into mysteries.”

## Actually that's not what Augustine meant...

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *CONFESSIONS*, 11:12.

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*In Confessions he explains how some have responded with such a joke, but in his opinion the joke is “to evade the force of the question.” “It is one thing to laugh, another to see the point at issue, and this reply I reject.” How, then, did Augustine respond? “I would have preferred him to answer, ‘I am ignorant of what I do not know’ rather than reply so as to ridicule someone who has asked a deep question and to win approval for an answer which is a mistake.”*

*Barrett, Matthew. None Greater (p. 140). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*



# GOD IS ETERNAL?

## GOD IS TIMELESS OR IS GOD SEMPITERNAL

### What Difference Does it Make?

Many have leaned on the truth that to know God is to have eternal life and finding no objections to eternal life. At the same time many object to eternal condemnation. But we can't have it both ways and it serves as check to take the stakes seriously.

It should be clear God's eternal nature supports the eternal aspect to all his other perfections. In him, we find the eternal joy and peace we long for that we will find nowhere else. We will never be bored in heaven.

### Objections, God's existence is perpetual and temporal (sempiternal)

God's act of creation implies change within God. Scripture (esp. Hebrew) does not have a word for eternal so concept imported from Greek philosophy. (re: Order of decrees not temporal but logical, e.g. light switch)

Again, does this make God static, all time the same, thus pre-determined and our prayers make no difference? Does it make his response to us nonsensical? (re: God is present in every moment. Time is a gift.)

Horton, "To understand eternity, is to be divine."