

Theology Proper: What the Bible Says about God Himself
Part 1: His Relative Attributes

While the term “theology” broadly refers to the entire study of God and the things pertaining to God, “theology proper” concerns itself with the doctrine of God Himself. And while beliefs about God differ widely, we Christians limit our view of God to the pronouncements of Scripture.

Grudem divides the attributes of God into “incommunicable” and “communicable” attributes.¹ Within the “communicable” attributes, he includes the characteristics of God’s personhood. Strong differentiates between the “absolute or immanent attributes” and the “relative or transitive attributes.”² In the interest of over-simplification, one may categorize them as “attributes that make God bigger than us” vs. “attributes that make God better than us”; or “the attributes of God’s greatness” vs. “the attributes of God’s goodness”; or God’s “relative attributes” vs. his “moral attributes.”

God’s Relative Attributes

Tri-unity
 Personhood
 Self-Existence / Self-Sufficiency
 Infinity / Eternality
 Changelessness
 Omnipresence / Omniscience / Omnipotence
 Perfection
 Incomprehensibility

God’s Moral Attributes

Holiness
 Truth
 Love
 Righteousness
 Faithfulness
 Mercy / Grace

The Tri-Unity of God

There are some things admittedly difficult to understand. This is one of them. It’s not easy, but we must conceive of God as he has revealed himself: Three Persons in One Essence.

1. The Unity of God: God is One Essence

- The Bible states it clearly
 - In the Old Testament Law (Deuteronomy 4:32-39; 6:4-5)
 - In the prophets (Isaiah 44:6-8; 45:5-6)

¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 156 ff.

² Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 249 ff.

- In the Gospels (Mark 12:29-30)
- In the writings of Paul (Romans 2:19)
- In the Letter of James (James 2:19)
- The meaning of the doctrine
 - Yahweh is an indivisible unit (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)
 - Yahweh is the only true God (John 5:44)
- The convincing evidence
 - Unique miracles (Deuteronomy 4:32-39)
 - Unique knowledge of the future (Isaiah 44:6-8)
- The practical implications
 - He alone is worthy of worship (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)
 - There is only one plan for man's salvation (Romans 3:19-20)

2. The Tri-Unity (Trinity) of God

- In the Old Testament
 - Certain passages suggest a plurality of Persons in the Godhead
 - Genesis 1:1
 - Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:5-7
 - Isaiah 6:8
 - Psalm 45:6-7; 110:1
 - Certain passages suggest three Persons

- Isaiah 48:16
- Isaiah 61:1
- In the New Testament
 - Three Persons are recognized as God (John 6:27; Hebrews 1:8; Acts 5:3-4)
 - Each one is distinct from the others (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; Matthew 3:16-17)
 - It is incorrect to speak of the Persons as “three Gods” (John 10:30; 1st Corinthians 2:11; 3:16; Romans 8:9; John 14:16, 18, 23)
 - All three are equal in power and glory (Matthew 28:19; 2nd Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1st Corinthians 12:4-6; Jude 20-21)
 - The only distinction between them is in function (1st John 4:10; John 14:26; 15:26)
- Some opposing theories
 - Arianism: “Jesus was just a created spirit” (modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses)
 - Unitarianism: “Jesus was just a man” (Islam, Judaism, other false religions)
 - Modalism: “All three are different modes of the same Person”
- The heresies answered
 - Such theories render Bible statements absurd (Matthew 3:16-17; John 14:16; 17:1-3)
 - Such theories imply that God has been dishonest
- Practical implications of God’s Trinity
 - Without a triune God, we would be deprived of a perfect, final revelation of him (Hebrews 1:1-2)
 - Without a triune God, there would have been no way to save man from his sins.

If Jesus Christ had been a mere man – even a perfect man – he could have died a substitutionary death for one sinner only. But there was an untold multitude of sinners, and only an infinite, holy Being could die a death sufficient to pay for the sins of every sinner. God, in his great love and grace, was willing to do this; but there was only one thing God could never do: He could not die. So God the Father sent God the Son to earth to be born a human being, born to die – one infinite, holy Being whose death was sufficient to ransom an untold multitude of sinners. He died while the Father watched from heaven. He rose as the Spirit re-energized his physical body. Only a Triune God could have accomplished this great salvation.

The Attributes of God's Personhood

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).

"The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him – and her."³

Throughout the world and throughout history, sinful man has attempted to define "God" as something devoid of personhood: from Dynamism (a belief that all matter or motion can be explained as manifestations of force), to Dualism (the doctrine that there are two independent and eternal principles, good and evil), to Pantheism (the idea that all is God and God is in all).

But in the Bible, God has revealed himself to possess all of the distinguishing marks of personality.

1. He is **living**

- Scripture statements
 - Deuteronomy 5:26
 - Psalm 84:2
 - 1st Timothy 4:10
 - Hebrews 10:31

- Application

³ Tozer, A. W., *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper/Collins, 1961), p. 4

-- Here is an antidote for the false teaching of impersonal gods

-- Here is satisfaction for the cry of the human heart

2. He is **intelligent**

- Scripture

-- 1st Samuel 2:3

-- Proverbs 3:19-20

-- Isaiah 29:16

-- Romans 11:33

- Definitions

-- Knowledge: the perception of facts

-- Understanding: insight into the meaning of facts

-- Wisdom: the ability to relate knowledge to life situations for good

- Application

-- A warning to evildoers (1st Samuel 2:3)

-- Consolation for the godly (Job 23:10; James 1:5)

-- The basis of a biblical world-view: the only wise God is in control

3. He has **purpose**

- Scripture

-- Isaiah 14:26

-- Ephesians 1:11

-- Ephesians 3:11

- Definition: He acts upon that which he intends to do

- Application

- God has a goal for his people (Jeremiah 29:11)
- God is never hindered by inconsistency or indecision

4. He is **active**

- Scripture
 - Deuteronomy 11:7
 - John 5:17
 - Philippians 2:13
- Application: This is the antidote for the heresy of deism: God is not merely alive and aware; he is actively involved in the affairs of his creation

5. He is **free**

- Scripture
 - Job 23:13
 - Daniel 4:35
 - Ephesians 1:11
- Definition: “God’s actions are determined solely by his own nature and pleasure, not by anything outside himself.”⁴
- Application
 - This combats the errors of fatalism and pantheism (Psalm 105:5-9)
 - This provides his people with consolation and hope: God *can* do something! (Psalm 115)

⁴ McClain, Alva (edited by John C. Whitcomb and Ivan H. French) , “Christian Theology: God and Revelation,” p. 28 (class notes, Grace Theological Seminary: Winona Lake, IN, 1971).

6. He is **self-aware (sentient)**

- Scripture
 - Exodus 3:14
 - 1st Corinthians 2:10-11
- Application: God is not an unthinking force, as he is sometimes designated “Nature”

7. He is **emotional**

- Scripture
 - Judges 10:16
 - Psalm 145:8
 - Isaiah 62:5
 - Jeremiah 31:3
 - Romans 1:18
- Application
 - The full range of emotion is essential to personhood
 - God’s emotion is not mixed with imperfection or sin

8. God is **Spirit**

- Scripture
 - Zechariah 4:6
 - John 4:24
- Definition
 - He speaks (Matthew 10:20)
 - He is aware of his surroundings (Mark 2:8)

- He rejoices (Luke 1:47)
- He accepts worship (John 4:24)
- He exercises purpose (Acts 19:21)
- He intercedes (Romans 8:26)
- He possesses a mind (Romans 8:27)
- He loves (Romans 15:30)
- He fellowships (Philippians 2:1)
- Application
 - The source of personality (personhood) is the spirit, not the brain
 - God is the very essence of personhood

Conclusion: The personhood of God is a consoling revelation for the Christian. Contrast the following essay, which reveals the logical and inevitable end result of the rejection of a personal God. Contrast the following with the lofty praise of Psalm 23!

The life of Man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death.... Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious Power.⁵

⁵ Russell, Bertrand, *Mysticism and Logic* (1929) in *Modern Essays*, edited by Russell Nye (Chicago: Foresman & Co., 1953), p. 284.

The Self-Existence and Self-Sufficiency of God1. He is **self-existent**

- Scripture
 - Exodus 3:14
 - John 5:26
 - Acts 17:25
- Definition
 - He does not exist because someone else created him
 - He does not exist because he “created himself”
 - He is independent from any other power
- Application
 - He is the Source of all life (John 1:3), including ours
 - Our eternal life is secure (John 5:24-28), like its Source

2. He is **self-sufficient**

- Scripture
 - Ephesians 1:11; 2:10
 - Psalm 2:1-4; 5:11
 - Colossians 1:16
 - Philippians 2:13
- Application
 - He needs no life, no support, no help, no defenders
 - Everything exists for God’s glory

- It is because of God's grace that he chooses to work through us

The Infinity of God

1. Definitions

- He is not bound by space; he is omnipresent
 - He is beyond space (1st Kings 8:27; Acts 17:2)
 - He is the Creator of space (Genesis 1:1)
- He is not bound by time; he is eternal
 - His existence cannot be measured by time (Psalm 90:2)
 - He is the ruler of time (1st Timothy 1:17)

2. Application

- God is dependable because he is boundless (Deuteronomy 33:27)
- Man's short life is contrasted with God's eternity (Psalm 90:2, 12)
- We needn't hesitate to sacrifice our lives in service to the boundless God (Psalm 102:1-13)

The Changelessness (Immutability) of God

1. Scripture statements

- He is changeless in his existence (Exodus 3:14; John 8:58)
- He is changeless in his honesty (Numbers 23:19; John 14:2)
- He is changeless in his program (Psalm 33:11)
- He is changeless in his attitude toward sin (Ezekiel 24:14)
- He is changeless in his goodness (James 1:17)
- He is changeless in every way! (Malachi 3:6)

2. Definitions

- Three ways that moral beings can change:
 - From evil to good
 - From good to evil
 - From immature to mature
- Why God cannot change in any of those ways:
 - He is perfect in holiness; therefore, he can't become any more holy
 - He is eternal; therefore, he can't deteriorate in any way
 - He is self-sufficient; therefore he is unaffected by outside forces, including the forces of evil

3. A puzzle to solve: What about 1st Samuel 15:10-11 with verse 29? What about Jonah 3:10? What about Joel 2:13? What about Genesis 6:6?

- God never changes in nature or character – including his attitude toward sin.
- For instance, in the case of Saul: It was Saul who changed, so God's action toward Saul changed accordingly.
- An unchanging God must alter his dealings with repentant sinners, in order to remain changeless in his nature. If a sinner repents, God forgives; because he has promised to forgive, and he never changes in relation to his promises (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

4. Application

- The nation which conforms to the unchanging God will receive his blessings (Psalm 33:11-12)
- The changelessness of God guarantees his promises in spite of our backsliding (Malachi 3:6; 2nd Timothy 2:13)
- In a rapidly changing society, one thing remains constant: God's attitude toward sin (James 1:13-17)

The Omnipresence, Omniscience, and Omnipotence of God

1. Omnipresence: God is everywhere

- Scripture
 - 1st Kings 8:27
 - Psalm 139:7-10
 - Isaiah 57:15
 - Jeremiah 23:23-24
 - Acts 17:27-28
- Definitions
 - He is fully present everywhere at once
 - The entire universe is “within” God (Psalm 147:4)

2. Omniscience: God knows everything

- Definitions
 - His knowledge is complete
 - The universe (Job 28:24)
 - The animal world (Matthew 10:29)
 - The spirit world (Job 26:6)
 - Mankind (Acts 1:24)
 - Personal details (Matthew 10:30)
 - Past and future (Isaiah 46:9-11)
 - All possibilities (Matthew 11:21)
 - His knowledge is eternal (Acts 15:18)

- His knowledge sorts out good from evil (Proverbs 15:3)
- Puzzles to solve:
 - What about Genesis 18:20-21 and Deuteronomy 8:2?

In his great grace and condescension, God allows men to demonstrate their true nature to him.
 - If God knows the future, is it certain? What if God can be wrong?
- 3. Omnipotence: God can do anything
 - Explanation
 - God can do anything consistent with his nature
 - Jeremiah 10:12-13
 - Job 26:14
 - Daniel 4:17, 35
 - Ephesians 1:18-22
 - God can do nothing that involves wrong
 - Hebrews 1:13
 - Hebrews 6:18
 - James 1:13
- 4. Application
 - These truths ought to strike fear into the heart of the wicked (James 2:19; Matthew 8:29; Psalm 99:1; Psalm 94:3-9)
 - These truths ought to generate hope and praise within the heart of anyone who needs God's forgiveness and care (Romans 5:8; Revelation 11:17; Jeremiah 32:25-27; Isaiah 40:28-31; Matthew 6:8; Psalm 56:8)

The Perfection of God

1. Scripture

- Deuteronomy 32:3-4
- Job 37:16
- Psalm 18:30
- Psalm 19:7
- Romans 12:2
- James 1:17

2. Definitions

- The Old Testament word “tamin” – nothing is lacking; God is complete in every way
- The New Testament word “teleios” – God has everything that he ought to have

3. Puzzles to solve

- What about “perfect” people?
 - Noah (Genesis 6:9)
 - Job (1:1)
 - The King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:12)
- What does Matthew 5:48 mean?

4. Application

- God’s perfect lies at the root of everything he supplies to us: physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual)
- God’s perfection affects all of his other attributes

God's Incomprehensibility

1. Scripture

- Job 5:9
- Job 11:7
- Psalm 145:3
- Isaiah 40:28
- Romans 11:33

2. Definitions

- A summary statement: God cannot be known *completely* by any finite mind.
- Qualifying statements:
 - God is not absolutely unknowable (John 17:3; 1st John 4:7)
 - Jesus is the only human being who can know God completely (Matthew 11:27)

3. A puzzle to solve: What about Proverbs 25:3? Is man incomprehensible, too?

- The context limits the meaning of “unsearchable” – that is, “hard to understand”
- Man is created in the image of God; so there will always be aspects of humankind (and individual humans) that are difficult to understand

4. Application

- Intellectually, we are assured that in eternity there will always be new things for us to learn about God (Proverbs 25:2)
- Spiritually, the vastness of God's being is a truth that propels us to our highest worship (Romans 11:33-36)

Recommended Reading

MacArthur, John Jr. *The Ultimate Priority*. Chicago: Moody, 1983.

Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973.

Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York: HarperCollins, 1961.

Assignments for Next Segment (“Theology Proper, Part 2”)

1. Read Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, chs. 12-14.
2. Answer one or more of the “Questions for Personal Application” at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class. Or compose a question of your own (which relates to the subject matter in those chapters), research the topic, and be prepared to share your answer with the class.