

# ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## A. METHODOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

It is important to talk about how we approach the study of God, what type of methodology we should employ. Some things we can agree upon at the outset as Evangelicals. We are going to agree that we can accept God's revelation of himself in doing this; the Bible will be normative, the only final authoritative source. Having said that we are going to learn of God from the Bible, is there way to approach what Scripture teaches about God that will either help or hinder a full and accurate understanding of who he is? Most theologians have felt there are some things we can do with this.

### 1. CLASSIFICATION OF ATTRIBUTES

Most theologians have felt there are some things we can do with this. One thing that has been proposed is that the attributes of God can be classified in certain kinds of categories.

#### TRANSCENDENT AND IMMINENT ATTRIBUTES

There are attributes of God's transcendence and attributes of God's imminence. What does Transcendence mean? It is God's distance, his otherness, his being apart from us, other than us. It is who God is in his majesty and greatness that exists apart from relationship to us. Imminence would refer to what? His nearness. It is God's attributes that express his being near at hand, intimate, close, compassionate, kind, caring, providing, protecting. This is a helpful distinction in the attributes of God. For example I think it is utilized in Scripture to great advantage.

In Isaiah 57:15 you have this amazing statement.

Is 57:15 For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place,

Look at what is being said, "high, exalted One, One who lives forever, whose name is Holy. I dwell on a high and holy place." "Holy" means different, one of a kind, unique, separate from. Transcendence is being emphasized.

Is 57:15 "And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit, in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."

Here God's imminence is shown; he is close at hand, near, comforting, strengthening, helping.

This is a very helpful distinction in terms of what each emphasizes, and it is also helpful in understanding that God in his imminence is the God who is transcendent and marvel. It ought to make us marvel that there is an Isaiah 15:57b. Once you have said, "I am the high and exalted One, my name is holy;" once you have said that God is so great, majestic, glorious, independent, rich, and full, then marvel that you go on to read, "and I am with the contrite, the lowly, to revive the spirit of the contrite." It is incredible.

Another example of the categorization of these attributes is in Isaiah 66:1,2.

Is 66:1 Thus says the Lord, "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. Where then is a house you could build for me? And where is a place that I may rest?"

Those are good rhetorical questions. What is the answer to them? Where is the house you could build for God? Nowhere. Don't think, Israel, that I dwell in the Tabernacle or I dwell in the Temple as if that contains me.

Is 66:2a "For my hand made all these things,

Anything you use, my hand made them, God says. I am bigger than anything out there you could use to make a place for me.

Is 66:2a "For my hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord.

Remember how this began; heaven is my throne, the earth is my footstool. This is transcendence. The whole picture is to emphasize how big, immense, awesome, great, and majestic God is.

Is 66:2b "But to this one I will look,

We ought to say, why? This is incredible that he would look. We live in an age of entitlement thinking. We are all entitled. What is the one thing that you and I have absolute rights of entitlement for? What is one thing, as we stand before God, and we have absolute rights of entitlement; what is it? Damnation, judgment, Hell; that is it. We don't have a right to a breath of life. In our culture we think we are entitled. God loves you and our response is, "Of course he does; I am me, I am self actualized and I have esteem and live as the center of the universe, that is the way I was raised. After all he made me because he was lonely and I am helping him out. It is a good thing I am here to help this poor lonely God out because he is all by himself and wanted a friend and here I am." Then we translate that into Christian service. Isn't it such a great thing for God that I am a preacher, that I am a counselor, that I am a missionary; where would God be without my contribution? We are so skewed in our thinking. We make God the beggar, when we are. We make ourselves the all sufficient giver when he is. We think we are entitled. Look how great we are; look how wonderful we are; look how fully actualized we are; at least in process, I am working on it. Look how much esteem I am beginning to build up of myself and working on these things. I am very important and God knows that, so of course he loves me.

Instead we ought to hear God loves us and then marvel. Grace ought to be amazing, but it isn't. It is expected in our culture, but not from the Bible. When we come to Is 66:2b "But to this one I will look." Why would he?

Is 66:2b "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word.

This is one very helpful categorization of God's attributes that I think is borne out in biblical teaching. God is both other than us; he is great, awesome, distant, remote, in himself, perfect, and sufficient; and he is intimately involved in every life, every moment of human existence, every aspect of his creation, intimately involved, caring, providing, protecting, and holding every atom together. I think that is what Colossians 1:17 means. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17).

### ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

There is a sense in which God has attributes that are absolute and in himself, and there are other attributes that are involved in relationship. That is what it means by relative, not relative in the sense of they can come or go or they mean different things at different times. It is not that sense of relative but more in the sense of in relationship.

### IN SE AND IN RE

There is a Latin phrase "in se" and "in re" that you will come across in theological writings that are meant to communicate a similar kind of idea. God is in himself, "in se"; he is in himself triune, sufficient, omnipotent. He is "in re", in relation to us caring, loving, and judging or whatever the case may be.

### GREATNESS AND GOODNESS

Millard Erickson tries to capture this with the terms greatness and goodness. You know what he trying to get at, but every good attribute of God is great. Isn't grace great? Isn't love great? Isn't mercy great? Every great attribute is good. There is no attribute of God that isn't morally pure, good. It suffers in that sense that it tends to separate things that have to be held together on both sides. In terms of trying to make a point, it can do that. Attributes of God's majesty, holiness, and power would constitute God's greatness. Attributes of God's mercy, forgiveness, and presence would constitute goodness.

### NATURAL AND MORAL

Natural would have to do with capabilities like power, wisdom, and knowledge. Attributes that characterize what God can do. Whereas moral attributes have to do with the center moral nature of his being. Goodness, love, justice, righteousness, and holiness would be moral attributes. This is similar to greatness and good. Every moral attribute is natural. Every natural attribute has moral connotations attached to it. It makes a point, but it can be almost as misleading as helpful.

### INCOMMUNICABLE AND COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES

In terms of analysis of the attributes, this is probably the most helpful. There are certain attributes that are not communicated to us. You have to understand what communicated means. It does not mean that they are not revealed, otherwise how would we know about them? This doesn't mean that they are not said to us or made known to us and communicated in that sense. Rather, it is that we do not share in any part of that attribute. There is no creaturely finite expression of that attribute. It is distinctively divine. ***For example, self-existence is an incommunicable attribute. God alone possess self-existence.*** We do not share in finite measure in self-existence. Our existence is contingent and dependent and derivative; God alone has existence within himself.

Whereas communicable are attributes of God which he communicates. He shares in substance, shares in kind, those attributes with at least a portion of his creatures. There is a finite representation of those attributes. God is love; that is a communicable attribute, and we are called to love. God is wise; that is a communicable attribute, and we are called to be wise. God is merciful, and we are called to merciful. There are these communicable attributes which express truths about God, but in finite measure they may also be true, to some degree, of his creation as well.

## 2. NEED FOR METHODOLOGICAL BALANCE IN THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

It is easy to so emphasize one side of any of those categories we have, of the attributes of God, that the other corresponding side is given less attention than it ought to be. It is easy to see this worked out practically. Someone could emphasize so much the holiness of God, the justice of God, the righteousness of God, and the judgment of

God that compassion, mercy, kindness, and forgiveness is hardly accounted for. What a fearful thing to live with a theological view in which God is wrathful, and that is prominent, but merciful you don't hear much about. On the other hand, that is not the problem with our culture today. That might have been the problem seventy years ago, and there have been portions of the church where the excess has been on that side. Today it certainly is not that way. We have an imbalanced view of God because if there is one thing that God is out there on the streets, it is love; God is love. What love means is defined by the culture, not by the Bible. Love is accepting and tolerant and never judgmental; God would never judge anyone. We can emphasize one side of God.

One lesson we can see in this is you can distort even the one thing you say about God and make it wrong and you have missed the other side. In the history of the church this has been a huge problem. In the history of the church the prominent side has been the transcendence of God. In the early church there was such a concern to uphold God's greatness, supremacy, his Godness, and his separation from anything finite and creaturely. For example, it was said of God that he cannot change in any respect what so ever. That is what immutability was for the early church and basically was through much of the church. Is that true? Why did they want to hold immutability, that he cannot change in any respect whatsoever? Because change either involved a change for the better or change for the worse. If God changes for the better then that means that he wasn't really perfect before. If he changes for the worse, he is not perfect anymore. So in either case you don't have God, so he can't change. It never occurred that it was possible to change in a way that doesn't involve better or worse. There is another kind of change that can be true.

Another example is emotion. What do emotions do to us? They lead us to rash action; road rage is a good example of emotion at work. So, God must not have emotions.

What about time? God cannot be involved in time, they said. This was critical. The early church adopted a view of the eternity of God in which God is timeless because temporality is the necessary medium for change. It is senseless to talk about change without change occurring in a context of time. Think of painting a bedroom; you change it. It used to be yellow, and now it is blue. You painted the bedroom; you changed it. That means at one time it was yellow, and at another time it is blue. You have to have time to make sense of change. So eliminate time and you eliminate change.

There was clearly an emphasis on transcendence that resulted in imminence being very difficult to account for. Once you have said that God is timelessly eternal, absolutely immutable, passionless, and impassable, and then you say he relates to us; what does this mean? It became very difficult to account for that. This is an important issue in Evangelicalism today; these issues that we are talking about right here. We need to elevate both sides, but in the right way.

One Pair Related: Self-Sufficiency and Love

One discussion question before we approach the topic.

Psalm 8: 3,4 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?