

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper, Session 10, Wrapping up the Trinity, Attributes of God, Introduction and Incommunicable Attributes

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on Theology Proper or God. This is session 10, Wrapping up the Trinity, Attributes of God, Introduction, and Incommunicable Attributes.

We continue our study of Theology Proper with a wrapping up of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Father, Son, and Spirit exist in unity and equality. This is the seventh of our seven principles that constitute the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God, Father is God, Son is God, Holy Spirit is God, the persons are inseparable but distinguishable, they mutually indwell one another, and lastly, scripture itself takes us by the hand and leads us toward Trinitarian conclusions when it says the Father, Son, and Spirit exist in unity and equality.

Passages that join the three Trinitarian persons in unity and equality confirm our conclusions. Texts joining the three persons in unity and equality are plentiful but we will sample from the Gospels just three authors of New Testament epistles and Revelation. In his Great Commission, Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name singular of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 28:19.

The word name is singular yet the names of the three persons follow suggesting their three in oneness. Moreover baptism is done only in God's name implying the deity of all three persons. The three exist as one God but they are distinct and not to be confused.

Paul portrays the three persons as a source of divine blessings in his benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" 2 Corinthians 13:12. Only God bestows grace, love, and fellowship, and that is exactly what the three persons do. That should have been 2nd Corinthians 13:14, not 12.

Salvation is the work of God alone. Paul presents the Father's kindness, love, and mercy as the source of salvation, the Spirit's regeneration and renewal as its application, and Christ as the channel of the Spirit, Titus 3, 4 through 6. I do need to read it. But when the goodness and kindness of God our Father, of God our Saviour, appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but

according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4 through 6. The persons are distinct and not mistaken for one another, and each plays a role in salvation. John teaches how to distinguish the Holy Spirit from false spirits. 1 John 4, 2. Every spirit who confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

1 John 4:2. Each is from God. Each conveys His truth. The Father sends teachers who testify to the incarnation of His Son and are prompted by the Holy Spirit.

But every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. Verse 3. Spirits and the teachers they inspire that deny the incarnation are from the Antichrist, not God the Father. After warning of false teachers, Jude counsels his readers in Jude 20 and 21.

But you, dear friends, as you build yourselves up in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourself in the love of God, waiting expectantly for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, for eternal life. Jude 20 and 21. They must edify the Church on the foundation of the most holy faith, the Gospel.

They are to pray, relying on the Spirit. Returning to the themes of the Father loving and the Son keeping them, from verse 1, Jude tells his readers to abide in the Father's love by obeying Him. They are also to look for mercy and eternal life from Jesus, from Christ, at His return.

Scripture, again, distinguishes the three persons, telling of the Father's love, prayer in the Spirit, and anticipation of Christ's return. John prays, in Revelation 1:4, that God would grant grace and peace, "to the seven churches in Asia," to which he writes, Revelation 1:4. But instead of writing God, he writes "the One who is, who was, and who is to come."

The seven Spirits before His throne, and Jesus Christ, referring to the Father, Spirit, and Son, respectively, verses 4 and 5. John distinguishes the three persons and portrays them as giving divine blessings, thereby implying their divine status. In conclusion to the doctrine of the Trinity, there is one God who eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persons are inseparable, but must be distinguished.

Mysteriously, they are in one another. They live in one another, as three persons within the one divine essence.

The fact that texts joining the three persons in unity and equality come from the Gospels, three different epistle authors, and Revelation reminds us of the breadth of

the New Testament's witness to the Trinity. At times, Scripture combines expressions of God's greatness with other attributes. The following passages do this, for His sovereignty, faithfulness, and power, respectively.

Psalm 135: 5 and 6. For I know that the Lord is great. Our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever He pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas, and all the depths.

Nehemiah 1:5. Lord, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God, who keeps His covenant with those who love Him and keep His commands. Nehemiah 1-5.

Jeremiah 10: 6 and 7. Lord, there is no one like You. You are great. Your name is great in power.

Who should not fear You, King of the nations? It is what You deserve. For among all the wise people of the nations, and among all their kingdoms, there is no one like You. Jeremiah 10:6 and 7. The Psalms praise God for the greatness of His name, His person, 8:1, 148:13.

They also praise Him for the greatness of His works. Psalm 145:3-6. The Lord is great and highly praised.

His greatness is unsearchable. One generation will declare Your works to the next and will proclaim Your mighty acts. I will speak of Your splendor and glorious majesty and Your wondrous works.

They will proclaim the power of Your awe-inspiring acts, and I will declare Your greatness. Psalm 145:3-6. God's greatness leads us to worship Him and Him only.

Psalm 86:8-10. 96:3-5. Luke 1:46-48.

It leads us to fear Him. Psalm 96:3-5. Jeremiah 10:6-7.

To submit to His sovereign hand. Psalm 135:5-6. And trust in His covenant faithfulness.

Nehemiah 1:5. God's greatness also inspires us to bear witness to Him, to others. Psalm 145:3-6.

There are three major divisions in the doctrine of God. We have now completed the first one, which is God, the Holy Trinity. We deliberately put that first and not the attributes of God because the attributes of God pertain to the person of God, who is a triune, the triune God.

Our God's attributes, introduction. Having explored the doctrine of the Trinity, we move to God's attributes, which are, quoting Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, before an explosion of systematic theology books, for quite a while Erickson's book was the book. Millard Erickson *Christian Theology*, page 291.

Here's how he defines God's attributes. Quote, those qualities of God that constitute what He is, the very characteristics of His nature. Close quote.

They are intrinsic, eternal, permanent, objective, and inseparable. And they express what God is like. Before we begin, we will caution you and provide clarification.

First, because God is infinite, we will never plumb the depths of His character. Even as resurrected saints on the new earth, we will never cease learning of Him. Second, because God is eternal, we should view all His attributes as eternal.

God has been, is, and always will be each and all of these attributes. Since His attributes are eternal, and thus permanent, God has been, is, and will be infinite, loving, holy, good, and so forth. Third, because God is one, we should be wary of overly differentiating His attributes.

Though the Bible describes God with various adjectives and images, it also explains, excuse me, that He is one. He is unified, not divisible into separate parts. So, His attributes may be distinguishable, but they're also inseparable.

Below, we list more than 20 attributes of God. But He's not 120th holy, 120th loving, faithful, and so on. God is altogether holy, loving, faithful, and so forth.

Fourth, because God is a person, we should not focus on an attribute itself but on our one God, who is truthfully characterized by the attribute. In other words, we're not studying love per se, but God, who is loving. We're not primarily studying sovereignty but God, who is sovereign.

And according to Scripture, the God who is love is also sovereign simultaneously. His love is a sovereign love, and the sovereignty is the loving sovereignty. Likewise, God is all-powerful and holy.

So, if being all-powerful means He can do anything that power can do, His holiness reminds us that all His powerful actions are also holy, et cetera. I also commend you John Frame's book, *The Doctrine of God*, and John Feinberg's, for a more philosophically-informed treatment, *No One Like Him, The Doctrine of God*. Feinberg did a PhD at the University of Chicago, so his stuff is informed philosophically, and he helps me think theologically.

Fifth, because God reveals Himself, we can know Him truly. We can know Him truly and truthfully. God graciously communicates who He is to us, and we can know Him and His attributes truly, even if never exhaustively.

Charles Hodge used to say it in an older way, we apprehend God, we do not comprehend God, whereby comprehend speaks of comprehensive knowledge of God. Our God really is one, personal, loving, gracious, truthful, and so on. Of course, these are human descriptions, human categories, and human images.

How else could God communicate with humans but in human forms? God uses our cultures, thought forms, words, and images as analogies to reveal Himself and truths about Himself to us. We can have confidence in their validity to communicate truthfully what He is like because He is God, and He made us in His image, and He chose to communicate Himself to us in words. Notice that He chose to communicate Himself to us in words.

The notion of propositional revelation is not at odds with the personal revelation of God. Sixth, because God is one, all attributes characterize all attempts. Because God is one, all attempts to categorize His attributes are flawed from the start.

We admit that. So why do we discuss these attributes as incommunicable, unique, and communicable, shared? For a few reasons. One long list of 20 or more profound attributes without some organization is too much for us to synthesize.

Even more, though calling God's attributes incommunicable and communicable is not perfect, and the categories overlap, the categorization itself reminds us of how we relate to God. Many times, the Bible stresses that we are not like God. The incommunicable attributes highlight this distinction.

He's the self-existent Creator. We are creatures totally dependent on Him for existence. He is infinite.

We are finite. He is omnipresent. We are spatially located. He is all-powerful. We have limited strength. He's eternal. We are time-bound. He is unchanging. We are always in process.

At other times, the Bible stresses that we are to reflect God in our character, and the communicable attributes highlight this. We are created in the image of God, saved by Christ, the true image of God, and being conformed to His image. This means that God is actually transforming us into people who reflect Him.

But how? We certainly cannot reflect His incommunicable attributes, as we will never be self-existent or infinite. By His grace and through union with Christ, however, we can and do reflect His communicable attributes to the extent that

redeemed creatures can do so. God is completely sovereign, and we are given dominion over His creation as stewards of God.

God is infinitely wise, and we grow in wisdom. God is truthful, and we are increasingly so. God is faithful, and so should we be.

God is loving, and we love too. And so on. Categorizing the attributes of God in this way underlines this important truth.

The virtues of the Christian life, the fruit of the Spirit, the Beatitudes, etc., and the marks of the Church are essentially the communicable attributes of God. Our God's unique attributes, incommunicable ones, these refer to those qualities or characteristics of God that are unique to God. They are incommunicable.

He does not share these with His people. Our God is living, traditionally called aseity. By living, we mean God relies on nothing for His existence.

By the way, our God is living is a more biblical way of saying it than aseity. I don't despise the word. It means uncaused, and we'll deal with it.

By living we mean God relies on nothing else for His existence. This is also called God's aseity. God is the source of His own being, as Jesus implies when He says, the Father has life in Himself, John 5:26.

The Creator and Lord of all life gives life to all and needs nothing. He who gives everyone life and breath, Acts 17:24, 25, does not need to be given life. Images of God that pertain to this attribute include the fountain of living water, Jeremiah 2:13.

No one made God, no one gave Him life, for He is the living God who has always existed. Isaiah portrays the Babylonian idols as cowering and unable to save those who trust in them, Isaiah 46:1 and 2. The prophet questions the logic of someone who fashions his God with his hands from wood. The prophet mocks is what he does.

He kindles a fire, Isaiah 44:15 to 17. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. He even makes it into a god and worships it.

He makes an idol from it and bows down to it. He burns half of it in a fire, and he roasts meat on that half. He eats the roast and is satisfied.

He warns himself and says, ah, I am warm. I see the blaze. He makes a god or his idol with the rest of it.

He bows down to it, worships it, and prays to it: "Save me, for you are my God."

Save me for you are my God, Isaiah 44:15 to 17. The Bible does have humor. It's sort of a sarcastic humor here.

In contrast to lifeless idols, the living God, quote, gives life to all. First Timothy 6, 13. Although God does not need us, he is personal and even commits himself to his people via covenant and claims their allegiance.

It is our great privilege to realize our utter dependence on the living God who has pledged I will be their God and they will be my people. Jeremiah 31:33. Our God is one unity.

There's only one living and true God and he is a unity. He is not composed of parts and should not be mentally divided into separate parts. I will just reread some of the three verses that we used when we affirmed as our first point under the doctrine of the Trinity that God is one.

First is Deuteronomy 6, which became ensconced in Israel's famous Shema. It's the first word in the passage. Shema Yisrael, it starts out.

Hear, O, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love him with everything that you have and teach these truths to your children. The Lord our God is one.

First Peter, first Timothy, sorry, two and joins the people to pray for their leaders. Speaks of God our savior. We need to be careful of the word savior in the pastorals.

First and Second Timothy and Titus sometimes refers to the father, sometimes to the son. Whenever it refers to the son, it uses his name. Generic savior in the pastoral means God the Father.

There's been confusion on that, but there really shouldn't be because Paul himself is quite clear on it. And takes us by the hand. I'm going by the seat of my pants here.

It's Titus. Titus 1, he says, the gospel, the preaching, which I have been entrusted by the command of God our savior in verse 3. In verse 4, when he says, he writes to Titus, he says, grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus, our savior. Same word, but when he refers to the son, he uses his name.

Christ Jesus, Jesus Christ, is one of those variations. In any case, first Timothy 2 is good. We pray for our leaders and are pleasing in the sight of God, our savior, who desires all people to be saved in the contract context.

It means even leaders, even ungodly leaders who oppose the faith and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, God and men, God and human beings, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave

himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. There is one God.

First Timothy 2:5. And one mediator, one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus. So Deuteronomy 6:4. First Timothy 2:5. Lastly, James 2. In a sarcastic comment, James criticizes the waywardness of professed Jews, perhaps professed Jewish Christians, who confess, they stay confessed to Shema, they say God is one, and yet they don't seem to believe and live for God the way they should. You believe that God is one, James 2:19.

You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder and tremble. Martin Luther said, at least the demons tremble.

James, audience, at least some of them didn't seem to tremble. They did not seem to combine faith with validating deeds that showed the genuineness of their profession of faith. Our God is one.

Monotheism is the baseline for the doctrine of God in both testaments. Our God is spirit. God is a person who is a holy spiritual being and does not have a body as we do.

This attribute is called the spirituality of God. Jesus tells a Samaritan woman, quote, God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. John 4:24.

Though God in the old covenant manifests his name on Mount Zion in Israel and not Mount Gerizim in Samaria, God is a spiritual being whose new covenant worship is not tied to one geographical place. Rather, his worship is in spirit, that is spiritual, and in truth, that is based on his revelation of himself in Jesus. How do we understand God's revealing his presence physically? To Moses in the burning bush, Exodus 3:2 through 6. To Isaiah in a temple vision, Isaiah 6:1 and 4. In fire and wind at Pentecost, Acts 2:1 to 3. How do we understand God's revealing himself physically? As these examples attest, these are occasions when God, an invisible spirit, makes himself known physically to strengthen his people.

They do not indicate that God is a physical being any more than when scripture speaks of him as if he had a face, number 625, Psalm 34:16, as if he had eyes and ears, Psalm 34:15, a hand, Exodus 6:1 and so on. They do not indicate that God is a physical being any more than when scripture speaks of him as if he had a face, eyes and ears, a hand, and so on. We call these anthropomorphisms, for they speak of God as if he were a human.

And their presence in the Bible shows God's humbling himself to make himself known to us in terms we can understand. Because God is a spirit, he's invisible, 1

Timothy 1:17, and idolatry is folly, Deuteronomy 4. 1 Timothy 1:17 is a doxology. Doxology, 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul just bursts out.

There we go. To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen. God is not only the king of the ages, he's immortal, he's not a man, he is invisible.

That is a corollary of his being spirit, of his being a spirit being, a spiritual being. The Old Testament reflects this when Moses reminds the people of God they didn't see anything, any image when God spoke to them. Deuteronomy 4:15, in a passage prohibiting idolatry, Moses writes, therefore, watch yourselves very carefully, since you saw no form on the day that God spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire.

Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the skies, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. Beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of them, and be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. Do not worship them.

God is a spirit. He is not to be identified with any part of his creation in the sense of offering worship to it. He alone is God, and he is one, and he is a spirit.

Furthermore, God alone is infinite. By infinite, we mean that God is unlimited in his person and perfections. Images of God that pertain to his infinity include the high and exalted one, Isaiah 57, 15.

Scriptures teaches that God is unlimited, specifically mentioning his power and understanding. I'm not sure if we can actually show infinity but we can we can show exuberant expressions that speak of God's utter greatness, his utter transcending human limitations. Technically, philosophically infinite? I don't think so.

But is God infinite? Yes, and this is how Hebrews would express it. Psalm 147: 5. Psalm 147: 5. Our Lord is great, vast in power. His understanding is infinite.

Isaiah 40 and verse 28. The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the whole earth. He never becomes faint or weary.

There is no limit to his understanding. Isaiah 40:28. Paul says, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the immeasurable

greatness of God's power toward us who believe according to the mighty working of his strength.

Ephesians 1:18 and 19. God's infinity is not his only attribute but is in harmony with the rest of his attributes. So when we say that God is infinite, we do not mean that he can sin, be powerless, or be unfaithful.

For he is holy, all-powerful, and faithful. That is, we must try to hold together all the attributes of God simultaneously because that is how he is. Hermann Bavink, 1854 to 1921, was a Dutch theologian and a leading thinker in the Reformed tradition.

He defied the common logic of his peers, not only peers but elders. Everybody was in the Dutch, we would say, evangelical. The Dutch conservative church went to the conservative schools. He said, no, I want to go to the big mainline school, the big liberal school, and learn from the most famous teachers of our time in Holland, in Amsterdam.

Be careful, that's unwise, and so forth. With great respect for his elders, he went his own way and studied at the university and got a very broad education. They were afraid he would lose his biblical moorings, he did not.

And then when he wrote, defending the evangelical and Reformed faith, he did it with a breadth and an understanding of the liberal theology that was incredible. He's best known, he wrote many things, including an ethical textbook. He's best known for his Reformed Dogmatics, an authoritative four-volume systematic theology.

I remember having a professor, Robert Vannoy who had studied at the Free University of Amsterdam in Holland, and we had Charles Hodges systematic theology and Birkhoff systematic theology. Birkhoff was a Dutch-American, and Vannoy would say, those are good, and I'm glad for them, but Bavink is better. Bavink is remarkable.

He interacts with liberalism on a high level, he's thoroughly conservative, he is very, very gifted, and thankfully now those books have been translated. We have a one-volume Bavink, and we have four volumes. They're not easy reading, but they're godly reading, they're biblical reading, they're dated, but they are very good.

Here Bavink shows, in the quotation I'm going to read, that God is both far above, transcendent, and near, imminent, to his creation. Quote, the same God who, in his revelation, limits himself, as it were, to certain specific places, times, and persons, is at the same time infinitely exalted above the whole realm of nature and every creature. Even in the parts of scripture that stress this temporal and local manifestation, the sense of his sublimity, exaltedness, and omnipotence is not lacking.

The Lord who walks in the garden is the creator of heaven and earth. The God who appears to Jacob is in control of the future. Although the God of Israel dwells in the midst of his people, in the house that Solomon built for him, he cannot even be contained by the heavens.

1 Kings 8:27. In a word, throughout the Old Testament, these two elements occur hand in hand. God is with those who are of a concrete and humble spirit, and nevertheless, he is the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity.

Isaiah 57:15. What an amazing, amazing passage. I can't help but read it.

He just summarized it for us, but wow. Isaiah is like the Romans of the Old Testament. It's the Himalayas.

I don't mean to start that. Deuteronomy is as spiritual a book as there is in the Bible. I'm studying and teaching the Psalms right now.

Wow. If you want to see what a spiritual pygmy you are. Anyway, all of God's word is inspired and profitable.

Isaiah 57 verse 15. For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Bavink was a great man, and the Lord used him greatly. And now English readers can benefit. I think maybe in the last 10 years is when those volumes were translated.

Although my age is probably more like 20, that's what happens. God's infinity also characterizes other attributes.

He is infinitely holy, infinitely powerful, and so on. Multiple depictions of God in Ephesians 2-4. There was some translations of Bavink's works were going on.

So indeed, it's closer to 20. Multiple depictions of God in Ephesians relate the infinity or greatness of God's perfections. Paul speaks of the riches of his grace, 1:7, the immeasurable greatness of his power to us, the mighty working of his strength, 1:19 of Ephesians, and says he is far above every other authority, 1:21.

God is rich in mercy, characterized by great love, 2:4, and will display the immeasurable riches of his grace to us, 2:7. Paul proclaims the incalculable riches of Christ, 3:8. The church displays, quote, God's multifaceted wisdom, verse 10.

Our strength is according to the riches of his glory, verse 16. Paul is exuberant. He grasps for words to express the greatness and the infinity of God.

Paul's prayer is that we would be, we would comprehend what is, quote, the length and width and height and depth of God's love, a love that surpasses knowledge, 18 and 19. Well, how can we comprehend it then? We comprehend it in part, of course. Indeed, this infinite and glorious God is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think, 3:20.

We will continue next time with the incommunicable attributes of God, laying a foundation for the communicable attributes, which are equally wonderful.

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