



Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 2 – The attributes of God

The name *God*, *Almighty* and *LORD*, all names which God has given Himself as a vehicle of self-revelation. Our source of knowledge of God must always be self-revelation; we can know nothing unless He reveals Himself, and we cannot know His name unless He tells us who He is.

But to know God is more than to be able to identify Him and name Him — it is also to know what He is like. The Confession highlights this fact by describing God using terminology which focusses our attention on the theological topic of the *attributes*, or the *essential properties* of God. These are adjectives which are applicable to the divine being — such as omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all-powerful).

Difficulties with the traditional approaches

There are several problems with the traditional approach to God's attributes. One is that many of them are in negative form — God is said to be *immense*, *infinite*, *invisible*, *immutable*, and so on. It cannot, surely, do to describe the most positive Being in negative terms. The negativity of our terminology registers the impotence of our understanding; nonetheless there cannot be satisfaction in describing God merely in terms of what he is without.

There is, however, a deeper and more fundamental problem — the problem of abstraction. The traditional classification of God's attributes leaves God under a philosophical magnifying glass, and leaves the study of theology often barren and unrewarding. So Martens:

"Some older systematic theologians customarily describe God by his attributes. God is said to be omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. While this somewhat philosophical way of putting matters is helpful, it easily tends to be abstract, as though God were a collection of good and great qualities. The Bible itself, while identifying such qualities, presents Yahweh in specific roles".

(*God's Design*, p47)

Martens goes on to identify some of these roles: God as king, shepherd, judge, saviour and warrior.

There is an important point here. God is personal — a He, not a thing. He is not an it. When the Catechism says that God is a Spirit, the emphasis is on the fact that He is personal, not that He is without physical parts. It may be true to say that God's love is infinite, immense and unchangeable; but it is more biblical to represent God as loving, heart to heart, in personal encounter. With Him there is consciousness, rationality and intelligence, and He undertakes to fulfill personal roles in order to fulfill His sovereign purposes.

God is the Father, the shepherd, the ruler, the judge, the husband, the Redeemer, the Kinsman, the Friend, the Comforter, the Surety, the man of war. We dare not obscure the personal nature of God's working behind abstract classifications of His attributes. What He is, is shown to us in the historical outworking of His covenant — we see what He *is* when we see what He *does*. And this opens for sinners like us the glorious possibility of personal encounter, in our own history and time, with the God of the Bible.

There is a further difficulty with the traditional classification of attributes: that is, that they tend to make us think of the being of God as reducible to divisible and distinguishable parts, as if He is

part omniscience, part omnipotence, and so on. God is not the sum of His attributes. God is each one of His attributes. As A.A. Hodge puts it: *"Whatever is in God... is God"* (*Outlines of Theology*, p136), or as Bavinck has it: *"Every attribute is identical with God's being. He is what He has"* (*The Doctrine of God*, p121). God is beyond composition — His essence is one undiluted, simple depth.

To talk of incommunicable and communicable attributes is to obscure this great reality. It is far better and far more biblical to realise that when we talk of attribution in this sense, we are talking of *a particular view of God's acting*. In other words, omniscience is the activity of God viewed from a particular angle — the fact that He is aware of everything that goes on. Infinity is the activity of God viewed from another angle, and so on with all the attributes.

We must recover the ground mapped out by Reformed federal theology in this area. Boice is correct to say of the attributes of God that although they are abstract concepts, they are important *"for these attributes more than any others set God apart from his creation and reveal him as being what he is in himself"* (*Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p102). But does the Bible ever allow us to think of God apart from His creation, detached and separated from it? He is, of course; but that is not how he is presented to us in the covenant of grace, but as a God married eternally to His own bride in covenant love and in covenant commitment. We enter into an unwarranted area of speculation when we consider God apart from that covenant: *"if the Lord has mercifully condescended to reveal Himself to us by means of a covenant, then we cannot know him correctly if we ignore his chosen means of expression"* (*Back to Basics: Rediscovering the Richness of the Reformed Faith*, p68). Murray, in Volume 4 of his *Collected Writings*, defines the covenant idea as *"an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed"* (p.216). God is an absolute being, to be sure; but He is nothing if He is not a *personal* being, and He cannot be known outside of His federal relation to His church.

Of what sort is God?

The Confessional position is that God can be described in certain ways. The Westminster Confession of Faith makes no conscious attempt to classify God's attributes — it simply lists them in the first two paragraphs of chapter 2. Some theologies have made attempts to distinguish God's attributes into, for example *negative* and *positive* attributes (attributes which deny creaturely limitations to God as over against those properties which reflex in man), *indwelling* and *outgoing* attributes (those which belong to God in Himself and those which belong to Him in His relations to men), *general* and *particular* (to the world in general, and to his church in particular), *natural* and *moral* (natural attributes regarding God's being, moral attributes regarding His will).

It is easy to see how a study of this kind can lead to an unwarranted and unbiblical abstraction in discussions concerning the properties which belong to God and the adjectives which can legitimately be applied to Him. It is important to bear in mind that the God of the Bible is a personal Saviour, not a topic for debate.

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