

## **Pilgrim Theology**

**Michael Horton**

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Living God**

Every covenant has a lord, on whose name the lesser ruler calls in the case of extreme danger. And in the battle royal of the Old Testament between the great kings (suzerains), Pharaoh and Yahweh, the revelation of God's name is seen to be politically significant. Yahweh claims his lordship over his people—and over Pharaoh—by sending plagues upon Egypt. With each plague he sends, Yahweh mocks a particular deity in the Egyptian pantheon, and each plague further hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let God's people go. All of this sets the stage for God's sovereign liberation, so that it is clear to all how the people are saved. The liberation of God's people will not be in any way credited to the leniency or acquiescence of the rival lord.

In fact, the specific purpose Moses is told to give to Pharaoh, the reason why Pharaoh should let the people go, is “that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness” to celebrate Yahweh's victory (Ex 5:1). From this we begin to recognize a fact that becomes increasingly obvious in the unfolding drama of redemption—namely, that God reveals his attributes in the context of historical works. With the calling of Moses and the liberation of his people from Egypt, God gives his name as the guarantee for his people throughout all ages (Ex 3). God reveals his name, not for us to use like a magical charm for whatever purposes we desire, nor as a code that cracks open the secret chamber of God's majestic essence. God reveals his name to us as to be used as a political invocation in our distress and in our worship and celebration. As Yahweh speaks and acts, and interprets his actions, the drama gives rise to doctrines which evoke doxology and discipleship.

#### **I. Incommunicable Attributes**

Although God's “eternal power and divine nature.... have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Ro 1:20), it is in Scripture that we learn that God is “immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Ti 1:17), that he is spirit (Jn 4:24), “the only

Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Ti 6:15–16). Scripture reveals to us that God is independent of the world, even though the world is dependent on his word for its creation, preservation, redemption, and consummation. Scripture reveals that God has even determined where each person would live, and for how long (Ac 17:24–26). The attributes of God that are unique to him are considered **incommunicable**—they cannot be understood to be true, even analogically, of creatures. Most, but not all, of the terms for these incommunicable attributes have a negative prefix meaning “not”: a- (alpha) in Greek and in Latin, in-/im- (e.g., *infinite*, *immortal*, *invisible*, etc.).

Worldview Paradigms	
ATTRIBUTE	DESCRIPTION
<b>Simplicity</b>	As infinite spirit, God is not made up of different parts; his attributes are identical with his being.
<b>Aseity</b>	Self-existence
<b>Immutability</b>	Unchangeableness
<b>Impassibility</b>	Incapacity for being overwhelmed by suffering
<b>Eternity</b>	God’s transcendence of time

### A. Simplicity (Unity)

“Simple” means undivided and indivisible; not complex or made up of different things. For example, a jacket made entirely out of wool is simple in its fabric, while one composed of different fibers is complex. To say that God is simple is to say, first of all, that he is pure spirit. We are made up of different parts. Not only are we composed of spiritual and physical aspects; even our soul and body are complex. The soul has capacities for thinking, desiring, and willing, and the body is composed of a host of different parts. However, God is not composed of different faculties or parts.

Key Distinction:
<i>incommunicable/communicable (attributes of God)</i>
God’s attributes of infinity (e.g., eternity, aseity, and immutability) are not shared with creatures, even analogically. Hence, they are incommunicable. God’s communicable attributes (e.g., goodness, love, knowledge, wisdom, and righteousness) are shared analogically with human beings as his image-bearers.

One of the important implications of divine **simplicity** is that God's attributes are not literally different aspects of God's essence but various descriptions of God's unified being. This does not mean that all of God's attributes are really the same. Love is not the same as justice; holiness is not merely a synonym for omniscience. These are distinct attributes. Nevertheless, they are differences with respect to what God is like, not divisions in his being. Especially in the Christian East, a helpful distinction was drawn between God's *essence* and God's *energies*. Like the sun and its rays, the essence of God is simple and transcendent while God's energies are his works—and the attributes that his working displays. As Basil expressed it, "The energies are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from his energies, but do not undertake to approach near to his essence. His energies come down to us, but his essence remains beyond our reach."

This means that we cannot rank God's attributes. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us, "For all the divine attributes, whether named or conceived, are of like rank one with another." There is a caution here against the tendency of hyper-Calvinism to rank God's sovereignty and justice over his love and of Arminianism to reverse the order. This comes perilously close to idolatry by worshiping an attribute of God rather than God himself. While we often experience inner turmoil or tension between various faculties, desires, and attributes of our character, God does not. God never wrestles with whether to be loving or just, righteous or good, omnipotent or kind. God's sovereignty and justice are never greater than his love, nor his love greater than his sovereignty and justice.

If ever there could be a division in God's being, with different priorities to negotiate, surely it would have appeared in Christ's death: God's justice, holiness, and righteousness on one side and his love, mercy, and compassion on the other. Nevertheless, it is precisely here—in the specific way in which God saved us—that God did not sacrifice love to justice or justice to love. Rather, because Christ—no less than God himself—fulfilled the law and bore our curse, justice and love embrace. God is "just *and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Ro 3:26). All of God's actions are determined by the unity of his simple being.

#### B. Aseity (Independence)

Latin for "from-himself-ness," **aseity** refers to God's self-existence or independence from creation. There is God and there are creatures. There

is no emanation of God's being, radiating from "the One" to ever-diminishing grades of being. The angels may be a lot older than we are, but they were created and continue to exist as created beings. Creation exists as a result of God's word freely spoken, not as a necessary and eternal extension of God's being.

Often the term *absolute* is used to illumine aseity. Literally, the word means "without relation." I am using the term *absolute* here in the traditional Christian, rather than ancient Stoic or modern panentheistic, sense. Particularly in recent years, many Christian thinkers have questioned whether the God of biblical revelation can be considered absolute in this strict sense. After all, the God of Israel is engaged deeply in history. How can he be considered "without relation" to creation? In its technical use, *absolute* simply refers to God's not being dependent on the world, his not having any *necessary* relation to the world. God would be who he is without the world. On the other hand, the world is related to God in a dependent sense. Without God, the world would not exist. What we mean by saying that God alone is absolute, then, is that God doesn't need the world, but the world needs God.

The world adds nothing to God, Paul argued in his speech to the philosophers in Athens, "since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Ac 17:25). So of course it is true that God can enter freely into the creation he has made, even as an actor within history, since nature and history are always dependent on his will and word. However, he does not have to. The world is not necessary for God's being or happiness. He could live without us—does live without us in that ultimate sense, but chooses not to live without us. It is not because God is related to (dependent on) the world that the world is related to him, but because he has related the world to himself, especially in a covenantal relationship, by the act of his own free speech. This means that love is the ground of God's creation of a world that is different from himself yet valuable as the work of his hands. As Karl Barth observed, precisely because God is free *from* creation, he is free *for* creation.

This is precisely the relationship that we see in Scripture. As creatures, we are dependent on other people—indeed, on other creatures and natural conditions—for our well-being. What would be a deficiency in God (dependence) is in us a measure of our uniqueness—our difference—from God. For us, it is good to be finite, interdependent creatures who need each other. Nevertheless, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he

pleases” (Ps 115:3). God is so independent of creation that, at the end of the day, even the comparisons that God himself reveals fall short of the majesty of his being (Isa 40:8, 15, 17–18, 25). No creature can determine God’s happiness or the fulfillment of his purposes (Da 4:34–37). “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Ac 17:24–25). “ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Ro 11:35–36).

We *live*, but only God *is* life and possesses life “in himself.” In fact, this is the point that Jesus made in John 5:26, claiming this divine attribute for himself as well as the Father. God gives life to creatures, because he does not receive it; it is his alone to give. Even as God’s image-bearers, we do not possess this kind of self-existence. So even existence is qualitatively different for God than it is for us.

Whatever relationship God chooses to have to that which is other than God is free rather than necessary. Scripture emphasizes that God has condescended freely to enter into an intimate relationship with human beings by means of a covenant. Inherent in the very idea of a covenantal relationship is a mutual exchange of oaths and bonds. This covenantal relationship, in which the transcendent God condescends to bind himself freely to creatures, exhibits the utter freedom of God’s love and the significance of those he created in his own image for that relationship.