

Fathom Academy: Christian Theology

WEEK 2: ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

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Week 2: Theology Proper:

The Incommunicable and Communicable Attributes of God

Part I: Incommunicable Attributes of God

- **Definitions and Scope**
 - **Terminology**
 - **Attributes are *essential*/characteristics of God's being**
 - **Not *actions* that God performs or *roles* that God fulfills**
 - **Applicability**
 - **Each attribute applies fully to each person of the Godhead**
 - **The Living God**
 - **Theology begins at the Burning Bush [Exodus 3:1–16]**
 - **“Do not come near” (v. 5) = God is *Holy***
 - **“... if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (v. 13) = God is *personal***
 - ***Personality Traits* rather than *Properties***
 - **“I am who I am” = God is *incomparable***
 - **“‘I am who I am’ prevents comparative analysis. God is qualitatively different from all other beings.” (Michael Allen)**
- ### 1. God is Spirit
- **“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**
(John 4:24)
 - **“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever. Amen.” (I Timothy 1:17)**
 - **God is *infinite***
 - **Anthropomorphisms and Theophanies**
 - **Anthropomorphisms = Analogical images used to describe God by way of reference to a human or other's creatures characteristics or behaviors**
 - **Theophanies = Temporary, empirically perceivable manifestations of God**

2. God is *Self-sufficient* [*Aseity*]

- ***Aseity***=God has life *in himself*, and is not contingent on anything or anyone else for his existence. God is *satisfied* with himself.
- “I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. . . . If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.” (Psalm 50:9–10, 12)
- ”And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” (John 17:5)
- Implications
 - God enters into relationship in *absolute freedom* motivated by *love*
 - God is *dependable* because he himself is never *dependent*

3. God is Eternal

- “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
- “I am who I am.” (Exodus 3:14)
- “I am the Alpha and the Omega, ‘says the LORD God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” (Revelation 1:8)
- God chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” (Ephesians 1:4)
- Implications
 - God is not “timeless,” but he is not bound by time
 - God’s saving purposes reach back behind what we are able to imagine

4. God is *Immutable* [*Immutability*]

- To say that God is *immutable* is to say that God’s character *does not undergo change*
- “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.” (Numbers 23:19)
- “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” (Malachi 3:6)
- Clarification of the doctrine’s purpose
 - The *character* and *purposes* of God do not change (J.I. Packer)
 - Divine “constancy” (Donald Bloesch)
 - The God of Christian Scripture is not Zeus

5. God is *Impassible* [*Impassibility*]

- *Impassibility*= the doctrine that God is not *affected* by anything outside himself
- Without biblical warrant?
- Misconceptions?
 - Im-passible = without *passions* (in the classical sense)
- Implications
 - God is not “consumed” by *passions*
 - “The *choseness* of God’s grief and pain” (J.I. Packer)

6. God is *Omnipresent* [*Omnipresence*]

- *Omnipresence*= God is not limited or constrained with respect to spatial locations
- “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:7–8)
- “[God] is not actually far from each one of us. . .” (Acts 17:27b)
- Implications
 - God is always near to hand (even when it doesn’t feel like it)
 - Immanence and Transcendence—not Pantheism (God is not identical with creation)

7. God is *Omniscient* [*Omniscience*]

- *Omniscience*= God’s absolute knowledge over all things, past and present, possible and actual
- “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done. . .” (Isaiah 46:9–10)
- God has perfect knowledge of all things (I John 3:20)
- Implications
 - Prophecy (Isaiah 37:26)
 - Intimacy with God
 - Perfect Wisdom

8. God is *Omnipotent* [*Omnipotence*]

- ***Omnipotence***= God's power is without limit, contingency, or condition. God is able to execute any purpose which is consistent with his character.
[Etymology: "able to do everything"]
- **Genesis 1: God *speaks* creation into existence**
- **"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." (Psalm 115:3)**
- **Divine Titles**
 - ***El-shaddai* = "God Almighty"**
 - ***Pantokrator* = "Ruler of everything"**

Part II: Communicable Attributes of God

- **The God whose Name is Mercy**
 - **Back to the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:1–16)**
 - **The God who Hears**
 - **"I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings..."**
(v. 7)
 - **The God who Comes**
 - **"... and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (v. 8)**
 - **The God whose Name is Mercy**
 - **"Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."**
- **Definitions and Terms**
 - **A word of caution:**
 - **"For no similarity can be said to hold between Creator and creature which does not imply a greater dissimilarity between the two."
(Fourth Lateran Council, 1215)**
 - **Theopomorphism**

1. God is *Personal*

- God is a personal being with *agency*
 - Self-conscious and self-determining
 - Thinking, feeling, willing, and speaking
 - Enters into relationship with personal beings created in his image
- God has a *name*
 - **YAHWEH**/ Lord
 - God's ultimate self-revelation is in the form of a *person*: Jesus of Nazareth

2. God is *Faithful*

- Integrity | Veracity | Faithfulness
 - “God is not a man that he should lie . . . Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”
(Numbers 23:19)
 - The God “who promised before the ages began” never lies
(Titus 1:2)
 - “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)
 - “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:24)
- Implications:
 - Christians are people who (should) *tell the truth*
 - Negative: Do not lie
 - Positive: Tell the truth
 - Christians are people who (should) lead “trustworthy lives” (Rowan Williams)

3. God is *Love*

- It is God's eternal nature to share himself
 - God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).
 - “... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

- **John 3:16 (you probably know this one)**
- **“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”**

(1 John 4:7–8)

4. God is *Holy*

- **Holiness | Righteousness**
- **Holiness**
 - **Negative: “Our God is a consuming fire”:** Absolute separation from all that is evil, impure, unclean
 - **Positive: “There is no rock like our God”:** Absolute moral goodness and excellence
- **Righteousness**
 - **Justice & Punishment**
- **Implications**
 - **“For I am the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45)**
 - **Active Righteousness vs. Passive Righteousness (Luther)**
 - **Separation from Sin that ends in Death (James 1:15)**
 - **Pursuit of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (Philippians 4:8)**

5. God is *Good*

- **“... what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to the purity of God. Hence that dread and wonder with which Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God. Thus it comes about that we see men who in God’s absence normally remained firm and constant, but who, when he manifests his glory, are so shaken and struck dumb as to be laid low by the dread of death—are in fact overwhelmed by it and almost annihilated. As a consequence, we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”**

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.i.2–3

“What art Thou then, my God?

**Most highest, most good,
most potent, most omnipotent;
most merciful and most just;
most hidden and most present;
most beautiful and most strong,
standing firm and elusive,
unchangeable and all-changing;
never new, never old;**

**ever working, ever at rest;
gathering in and [yet] lacking nothing;
supporting, filling, and sheltering;
creating, nourishing, and maturing;
seeking and [yet] having all things.**

**And what have I now said, my God, my life, my holy joy?
or what says any man when he speaks of Thee?
And woe to him who keeps silent about *you*,
since many babble on and say nothing.”**

~ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.4.4