**Theological Equipping Class** August 4, 2024
***Attributes of God: Introduction***
***and Communicable Attributes***

## Defining God's Attributes: Explanation and Assumptions

What is the chief end of human life? John Calvin answered succinctly: "To know God" (Phillip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:470).

A. W. Tozer insightfully ran with the idea:

> What comes into our minds when we *think about God* is the most important thing about us.
>
> The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its *idea of God*. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low *thoughts of God*.
>
> For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart *conceives God to be like*.
>
> We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our *mental image of God*. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her *idea of God* (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1, emphasis added).

Thinking about God poses an obvious danger: getting him wrong. Indeed, it could be argued that many people—including professing Christians—hold idiosyncratic views of God primarily fueled by feelings. God made them in his image and they were quick to return the favor! Martin Luther spotted this tendency in Erasmus in their debate over divine sovereignty and human freedom. Luther cut to the heart of the matter: "Your thoughts concerning God are too human" (*Bondage of the Will* [translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston], 87).

Knowledge of God is not a matter of basic instinct or gut intuition. As the great theologians in the band Boston once sang, it's "more than a feeling." Fortunately, God has not left us to our own devices when it comes to knowing him. He "declares to man what is his thought" (Amos 4:13). How? "At many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's self-disclosure is seen across the history of Israel and reaches its zenith in the person and work of Christ. The interpretive framework for it all is God-breathed Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), which is the product of the Holy Spirit operating through human authors (cf. John 6:13; 1 Corinthians 2:10-12; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 John 2:20). Scripture is thus the ultimate norm for all theology and the final authority for all we believe about God.

It follows, then, that knowing God through his attributes requires rigorous study of Scripture. But it is no mere academic exercise. As the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, knowledge of God's attributes is the highest privilege in which we can boast and a source of divine delight:

> Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, *that he understands and knows me*, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast *love, justice*, and *righteousness* in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23-24, emphasis added).

It doesn't ultimately matter if we're brainy, buff, or billionaires. If we don't know the Lord and understand his attributes, we have nothing to brag about. So how do we go about understanding his attributes? Let's start by defining our terms.

### *Explanation*

The late Drew University professor and Methodist theologian Thomas Oden explains the attributes of God like this:

> Attributes of God are qualities that belong to God's essential nature and that are found wherever God becomes self-revealed. They are those reliable character patterns that belong to God as God (Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, 35).

Oden's explanation contains five key ideas for us to keep in mind as we explore God's attributes.

First, God's attributes are "qualities." That is, they explain what he is and show what he is like. They are thus distinguishable from his actions, which arise out of his attributes.

Second, these qualities belong to God's "essential nature." In other words, God's attributes are intrinsic to his *being*. One implication of this is that God's many attributes simultaneously reveal his singular character. Though there are times when one or more attributes may seem more dominant at any given moment in redemptive history, all of God's attributes are perfectly balanced all the time. If one attribute were weakened or strengthened in the slightest, he would cease to be God (see John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 234).

Third, God's being is "self-revealed." God is knowable only through his attributes, and his attributes are knowable only through his actions. These actions are made known in redemptive history and recorded in Scripture.

Fourth, God's revelation of himself reveals "reliable character patterns." God's activity across redemptive history has revealed consistent, discernible qualities that have made him reliably and sufficiently knowable. Indeed, the pattern of redemptive history reveals that God possesses all his attributes *perfectly* and *permanently* (James 1:17). This means that, contrary to what many today think, God does not change his moral standards to accommodate a changing world.

Finally, these character patterns "belong to God as God." God's attributes are not independent aspects of his being. God *is* his attributes (see Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 173). His attributes are thus not "add-ons," accessories, or extensions to his essence. If they were, they would logically precede him (see Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 186). And they would be standards outside of him. But "he must be his own Godhead, his own life, and whatever else is thus predicated of him" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 3, Article 3).

These things will become more evident as we proceed. Our next step is identifying some basic assumptions.

### *Assumptions*

Our study of God's attributes proceeds on the following assumptions:

First, we can't comprehend God's attributes *totally*, but we can comprehend them *truly*. This means, as Anglican theologian Gerald Bray notes, that "the theology of God's attributes is therefore both a confident expression of faith and a humble admission of ignorance in line with the nature and content of God's self-disclosure to us" (Gerald Bray, *The Attributes of God*, 19).

Second, we can't avoid extra-biblical language (as some heterodox groups demand) in describing God. We just need to ensure that our language truly expresses biblical concepts. As the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

> The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men (1.6, emphasis added).

Technically speaking, if sound theology required the use of biblical terminology alone, we'd all need to learn Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This is, of course, impractical. It's also impossible to square with the miraculous distribution of a dozen-plus languages—*for the purpose of proclaiming theological truths*—at Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11).

Third, we must affirm all the attributes of God in each person of the Trinity. Indeed, it is the ascription of divine attributes to each person of the Godhead—in conjunction with Scripture's strict monotheism—that sets us on a Trinitarian trajectory.

Fourth, as we recognize divine qualities in the Father, Son, and Spirit, respectively, we must be careful to distinguish *attributes* from *properties*. In theology, *property* "is a technical term that has been used to speak of the characteristics of the interior relations of the persons of the Godhead" (Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, 36). For example, sonship is a property that applies to the Son, not to the Father or the Spirit. Thus, Jesus has all the attributes of God, but not all the properties of the Father or the Spirit.

Discussion of attributes gets a bit more complex in view of the Incarnation. The orthodox claim, according to Bowman and Komoszewski,

> is not that all of Jesus Christ's attributes are those of God, but that Jesus Christ has all the attributes of God. The difference in wording is subtle, but the difference in meaning is highly significant. Jesus Christ, especially when he was living as a mortal on the earth, obviously had attributes that are not those of God. He was mortal (and in fact died), he got tired and fell asleep, he got hungry and thirsty, he was able to be tempted, and so forth. These are all attributes of human beings. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ was not originally like us in any of these ways, but 'he had to be *made* like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God' (Heb. 2:17 NIV, emphasis added). The result is that Jesus Christ has, as it were, two sets of attributes—those of human beings and those of God (Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 75).

In short, we must be careful not to mix Jesus' human attributes with the divine attributes ascribed to all three persons of the Trinity. To do so would dilute God's attributes, diminish Christ's humanity, or both.

Fifth, we assume the fact that God perfectly and simultaneously possesses several attributes that are distinguishable but inseparable. He is not, for example, partly merciful and partly just. Nor is he sometimes fully merciful and sometimes fully just. He is always perfectly both. When we look at any of God's attributes individually, we are not viewing parts of God. Rather, we are viewing his entire essence from different angles. It is thus a methodological misstep to elevate any attribute above the others, as if God were composed of competing parts. An example of this misstep is the book *Love Wins* by Rob Bell. Bell singles out the divine attribute of love so that it subdues other attributes like God's holiness, righteousness, and justice. For Bell, love is the filter through which all other attributes are forced, and this leads to his ultimate embrace of unbiblical universalism.

Finally, we should remember that God has ultimately revealed his attributes to fortify faith (Romans 4:21), trigger transformation (Ephesians 5:1), and awaken worship (Micah 7:18). For many, God's attributes are abstractions best left to ivory tower academics. But, as we will see, they bear witness to realities that are profoundly relevant to our relationship with God and the satisfaction of our souls in him.

## Categorizing God's Attributes: Expectations and Approaches

If the history of this discussion has shown us anything, it's that we need to temper our expectations going in. No two theologians (at least in print) have produced the exact same schemata for God's attributes. So we need to approach the subject with humility. But as we'll see, the thinking of most theologians is closely aligned. So we can proceed with hope.

***Expectations***

Our study of God's attributes proceeds with the following expectations:

First, total precision is impossible in the categorization of God's attributes, so we shouldn't be overly critical of classifications and terminologies so long as they're biblically warranted and systematically helpful. As Gerald Bray has noted:

> If we want to rearrange the categories here and there, find other words to express what is meant, or conflate two or more words into a single umbrella idea, there is no real problem, since all we are doing is looking at the *form* in which the classical teaching was expressed. Tidying things up in this way is an age-old practice…. It is only when our thoughts turn to matters of *substance* that real problems arise (Gerald L. Bray, *Doctrine of God*, 102).

In other words, there are several ways of organizing God's attributes that are fully orthodox. None, however, are fully adequate. This is because all of God's self-revelation is *analogical*. Michael Horton explains:

> When we assert certain predicates of God, based on God's own self-revelation, we use them in one of three senses: univocally, analogically or equivocally. If we say that the predicate "gracious" means exactly the same thing, whether in God or in a creature, we are using "gracious" *univocally*. At the other end of the spectrum, if we say that by using that predicate we are ascribing something to God whose appropriateness is unknown to us, we are using it *equivocally*. If, however, God is said to be "gracious" in a way that is both similar and dissimilar to creatures, we say it is *analogical*. For instance, when we acknowledge that God is a "person," do we really mean to say that he is a person in *exactly* the same sense as we are? When we follow Scripture in using male pronouns to refer to God, do we really believe that he is male? Unless we are willing to ascribe to God (in a univocal sense) all attributes of human personhood, predications must be analogical. Human language cannot transcend its finitude, so when God reveals himself in human language, he draws on human analogies to lead us by the hand to himself. It is correct description, but not univocal description (Michael Horton, "Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method," *Beyond the Bounds*, 209-10).

In short, God condescends to our level when he describes himself. He establishes common ground by moving from the known to the unknown, the like to the unlike, and the created to the creator. John Calvin colorfully describes this condescension as God's "baby-talk" or "lisping." It should come as no surprise, then, that, as they have groped for grammar to adequately describe God, theologians have adopted different approaches to categorizing his attributes.

Second, attempts to classify God's attributes are complicated by the fact that Scripture does not present a systematic theology with categories of divine attributes. For example, we don't find glossary-like entries on omnipresence or omnipotence in the pages of holy writ. Rather, we encounter stories and promises that remind us of God's continual presence amid life's trials and reassure us that he has the power to bring us through them. We must take these stories and promises as they are given to us, infer their intended meanings, determine how those meanings fit patterns in the progress of redemptive history, derive concepts from those patterns, convert those concepts into propositions, and develop categories to convey those propositions accurately and clearly. In a sense, doing theology is gathering and arranging loose ends into tight categories. The process is complex and the outcomes are not always cut and dried.

This should humble us. But it mustn't dishearten us. It simply reminds us that our finite minds are incapable of fully grasping our infinite God. What's more, there is significant overlap between most approaches to divine attributes, with the majority following a two-category scheme that contrasts ways God is "above us" (transcendent) with ways he is "with us" (immanent). In other words, most approaches are more alike than different. Below is a sampling of contemporary classification schemes and representative adherents. [For a brief survey of approaches pre-dating 1950, see Gerald Bray, *The Attributes of God*, 111-39.]

***Approaches***

### *Non-Moral and Moral*
(John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 233-374)

Feinberg's massive (879 pages!) magnum opus is an evangelical, broadly Calvinistic, and largely philosophical theology of God. The volume is particularly helpful in its critiques of process theism and open theism.

Feinberg admirably labors to balance God's transcendence and immanence, while taking pains to stress God's relatability to a suffering world. This is seen in his oft-repeated phrase "the King who cares."

Feinberg's burden to show God's relatability leads him to tweak some classical understandings of God's **non-moral** attributes, such as absolute aseity (independence), absolute immutability (unchangeableness), and atemporal eternity (timelessness). Undergirding it all is a rejection of divine simplicity (specifically the idea that God *is* his attributes).

One example must suffice. Feinberg is concerned that asserting God is timeless makes God seem distant and aloof, unaffected by our suffering in the "now." A timeless God, he argues, knows about our suffering but he doesn't know it as it occurs. Feinberg fears that people today will reject God because of this perception. He thus suggests that a truly relational God must in some sense be temporal. That is, God not only acts within time, but also somehow enters and experiences time.

But if God did indeed enter time, would that change his nature? Theologians are divided on this issue. Some say yes and defend the classical view that God is timeless (see, e.g., Paul Helm, *Eternal God*), while others say no and argue that God ceased to be exclusively timeless at the moment of creation (see, e.g., William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity*). Interestingly, Feinberg seems open to the idea that God was affected by time even before creation, which makes one wonder how time could have been measured apart from space.

In the end, perhaps the most we can say is that God's relationship to time—whatever it is—is not like ours. After all, "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). The "secret things" of Deuteronomy 29:29 come to mind here.

Feinberg's discussion of **moral** attributes is a fairly standard evangelical treatment. He classifies all the attributes as follows:

The **non-moral** attributes refer to what God is in contradistinction to us. These include divine perfections such as aseity, infinity, omnipresence, eternity, immutability, omnipotence, sovereignty, omniscience, wisdom, and unity.

The **moral** attributes refer to who God is in relation to us, displayed in his actions within the universe. These include his holiness, righteousness, love, grace, mercy, longsuffering, goodness, lovingkindness, and truth.

Feinberg's intellectual prowess has led to comparisons with Carl F. H. Henry and Karl Barth, making Feinberg one of evangelicalism's most important theological voices. *No One Like Him* commendably steers clear of "either-or" thinking about God, but it's a long ride and not without its bumps for those steeped in classical Christian theism.

### *Nature (Primary and Relational) and Character* **(Interpersonal and Moral)**
(Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, 50-130)

Oden was a former theological liberal who turned to classical Christianity after devoting himself to a study of the early church. Oden, an Arminian theologian (though he objected to the label) who labored for a conservative resurgence in the United Method Church, was considered one of the most important evangelical voices of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Leaning on early church fathers, scholastics, and Reformers, Oden distinguishes God's attributes on four levels: **primary**, **relational**, **interpersonal**, and **moral**. These are more broadly categorized under the **nature** of God and **character** of God.

With respect to God's **nature**, Oden sees God's attributes as **primary** and **relational**.

**Primary** attributes refer to those essential qualities that God possesses without reference to creatures. They include aseity, independence, necessity, oneness, simplicity, infinity, immensity, eternality, and aliveness.

**Relational** attributes exhibit the majesty of God in relation to his creatures, emphasizing his ways of being present, knowing the world, and influencing the world. They include omnipresence, omniscience, prescience, foreknowledge, wisdom, and omnipotence.

Though **primary** attributes are displayed without reference to creatures and **relational** attributes are seen in God's relationship to his creation, both categories reflect what are often called "absolute" or "incommunicable" attributes of God. None of them can be bestowed upon any created being.

With respect to God's **character**, Oden sees attributes as interpersonal and moral.

**Interpersonal** attributes refer to those manifest qualities of God that he shares in limited fashion with human beings in the context of divine-human relationship. Indeed, as Oden contends (in company with classical Christian exegetes), these divine attributes are broadly analogous to human experience. That is, they shed light on the reasons humans are the way they are. These archetypal attributes stress God as personal, spiritual, free, and volitional.

**Moral** attributes are divine qualities revealed in the context of redemptive history and seen primarily in God's relationship to free and volitional creatures who are held morally accountable for their responses to him. Chief among these characteristics are holiness, perfection, justice, righteousness, constancy, veracity, goodness, and love. Oden argues that holiness and love capture these qualities in summary form and urges their counterbalance (see the fifth statement under "Assumptions" above): "It is only by keeping these two primary moral qualities of the divine being closely related that we can rightly behold the character of God" (*The Living God*, 98). In short, God's love is not unholy (John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.8-16) and his holiness is not unloving.

*The Living God* is a strong defense of classical Christian theism that will be of particular interest to those wanting a theology informed by early church fathers, scholastics, and Reformers.

### ***Essential and Relational***

(Gerald Bray, *The Attributes of God*, 22-102)

Gerald Bray is a top-tier historical theologian who has written an accessible introduction to the attributes of God. With respect to what he calls the **essential** divine attributes, he largely follows the lead of the late-7th and early-8th century Eastern Orthodox theologian John of Damascus (who was the first to classify God's attributes).

Bray's treatment of the so-called **relational** attributes is unique among modern classifications in that he sees some of the commonly identified qualities as not properly belonging to the category of attributes. For example, he contends that holiness is an attribute that we, as fallen creatures, *perceive* God to possess. However, "if we think of God as he is in himself, the word 'holiness' has no obvious application. It cannot mean anything in metaphysical terms, since there is no way the Creator would ever mistake a creature for himself or worship it. Nor does it make much sense in moral terms, since God cannot sin…. God could not be holy in our sense of the word if he tried" (*The Attributes of God*, 95).

Likewise, Bray denies that personality is an attribute of God: "We must not say that personality—or more correctly nowadays, 'personhood'—is an attribute of the divine nature, on par with invisibility or immutability. If it were,

there would be no room for a Trinity in God, nor would the incarnation of the divine Son (but not of the Father or of the Holy Spirit) be possible" (*The Attributes of God*, 82).

Of special note is Bray's rejection of wrath as an attribute of God: "Simplicity also makes it impossible to say that God is wrathful by nature. Wrath is the way disobedient people experience God's justice, but it is not a divine attribute. If it were, God would be angry with everybody all the time" (*The Attributes of God*, 28).

Bray offers what is probably the most systematized treatment of God's attributes in print. His scheme, which incorporates attributes under the banner headings of **essential** and **relational**, is as follows:

The **essential** attributes describe God in his *being* in ways that are ultimately incomprehensible to finite minds.

There are **essential** attributes that describe what God is: simple, incorporeal, and stable.

There are **essential** attributes describing what God is like: invisible, impassible, and immutable.

There are **essential** attributes contrasted with time: eternality, uncreatedness, unbegottenness, imperishability, and immortality.

There are **essential** attributes contrasted with space: infinity and incomprehensibility.

Finally, there **essential** attributes as we perceive them (i.e., discern from our experience): omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

The **relational** attributes display who God is in the intra-personal relations of the Godhead and in personal relationship to his creatures.

These include (with some qualifications, as noted above) love, rationality, volition, holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

Strengths of *The Attributes of God* include its Trinitarian sensitivity throughout, its extensive treatment of divine impassibility (God's inability to suffer) and its relationship to the Incarnation, and its historical survey of approaches to classifying divine attributes (including the early church [to AD 500], Middle Ages [500-1500], and Reformation and after [1500-1800]).

### ***Greatness and Goodness***

(Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 233-71)

Erickson's volume has historically been the most widely used survey of theology among Protestants, so his views are worth knowing. What's more, his classification scheme is perhaps the most unique in print.

Erickson divides the divine attributes into two main categories: attributes of **greatness** and attributes of **goodness**.

Attributes of **greatness** stress God's limitlessness and include spirituality, personality, life (aseity or self-existence), infinity, and constancy (immutability).

Note that Erickson has jettisoned traditional headers such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. He does indeed mention these attributes, but they are embedded in the discussion under infinity. When discussing infinity, Erickson uses the terms "omnipresence" and "omnipotence." But although he affirms that God knows all things, he doesn't use the term "omniscience" in his discussion of infinity (though he uses it elsewhere in the volume). All of this is to say that if you're accustomed to more commonly used classifications, you might not find Erickson's scheme to be user-friendly. Just don't assume he excludes things based on chapter subheadings.

Attributes of **goodness** reflect moral purity (holiness, righteousness, justice), integrity (genuineness, veracity, faithfulness), and love (benevolence, grace, mercy, and persistence).

Like other schemata, this one draws some fuzzy lines. We might ask, for example, what the difference is between the **greatness** of constancy and **goodness** of persistence.

Overall, Erickson provides a biblically balanced treatment of divine attributes from the vantagepoint of classical theism. His theology has been called "gently Calvinistic" and generally recognized for its irenicism and impartiality. But as Erickson himself has noted, "it is important to distinguish between impartiality and neutrality" (*What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?*, 9). Though he doesn't write with a triumphalist tone, he is hardly neutral in his analyses of progressive trends within evangelical theology.

### ***Incommunicable and Communicable***

(Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 185-268)

Grudem appears to lean on the earlier work of Herman Bavinck (*The Doctrine of God*, 136-42) and distinguishes God's attributes that are **incommunicable** (not shared with others) from those that are **communicable** (shared with us, albeit in a limited sense).

**Incommunicable** attributes are not without some representation in human beings, so they're best understood as those attributes of God "less shared by us" (*Systematic Theology*, 186). Though we might instinctively think that these attributes find no analogy in humans, we wouldn't be able to conceive of them if there weren't some degree of resemblance in us (e.g., God's eternality is partially reflected in our immortality). As Bavinck perceptively noted, "if they were totally **incommunicable**, they would also be totally unknowable and unnamable" (*The Doctrine of God*, 134, emphasis added).

Because we are less familiar with these attributes than the ones "more shared with us" (*Systematic Theology*, 186), Grudem offers balanced definitions to ensure that we know both what he means and doesn't mean.

Grudem's list of God's **incommunicable** attributes includes independence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, and unity.

**Communicable** attributes are shared "to some degree, but none of these attributes is completely communicable" (*Systematic Theology*, 186). Though Bavinck adopted the categories of **incommunicable** and **communicable** attributes, he forcefully noted the problem with the term "**communicable**": "Everyone admits that the **communicable** attributes in an absolute sense—as they exist in God—are just as **incommunicable** as the others" (*The Doctrine of God*, 132, emphasis added).

Grudem's list of **communicable** attributes includes those that describe God's being (spirituality, invisibility), mental attributes (knowledge/omniscience, wisdom, truthfulness, faithfulness), moral attributes (goodness, love, mercy, grace, patience, holiness, peace righteousness/justice, jealousy, wrath), attributes of purpose (will, freedom, omnipotence/power/sovereignty), and "summary" attributes (perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory).

Grudem adopts the **incommunicable/communicable** scheme since it's probably the most popular approach, but he's careful to note that "this distinction, although helpful, is not perfect" (*Systematic Theology*, 186), "there is room for difference of opinion concerning which attributes should fit into which categories" (*Systematic Theology*, 219), and "the division of various attributes is not a matter of great doctrinal significance but is something that must be based on one's judgment concerning the most effective way to present the biblical material" (*Systematic Theology*, 219).

We can either address God's attributes randomly or we can follow some sort of organizational scheme. The latter tack seems most prudent. As we saw above, though theologians quibble over terminology, there's a general trend toward twofold classifications and significant overlap in the placement of various attributes. Of all these

approaches, the **incommunicable/communicable** division seems most user-friendly. We'll thus follow Grudem's approach outlined in *Systematic Theology*. From this point forward, all parenthetical references, unless otherwise noted, are to page numbers in *Systematic Theology*.

The remainder of this Theological Equipping Class will focus on the **communicable** attributes of God and follow Grudem's terminology. Our next Theological Equipping Class will address God's **incommunicable** attributes.

## Communicable Attributes of God: Meaning and Relevance

### *Meaning*

Some of the following **communicable** attributes could have easily been labeled **incommunicable**. Agreement with the list is hardly a matter of orthodoxy. Besides, as Grudem notes, "understanding the definition [i.e., meaning] of each attribute is more important than being able to categorize them in exactly the way presented" (219).

Meanings of the following twenty attributes fall under one of five headings: (1) attributes describing God's being; (2) mental attributes; (3) moral attributes; (4) attributes of purpose; and (5) "summary" attributes.

For each attribute listed, we'll consider Grudem's definition and one biblical reference exemplifying the attribute. Of course, several biblical passages should be considered and evaluated in context when constructing a theology of that attribute. Indeed, entire books have been published on many of them. We're not advocating a prooftexting, hit-and-run method of doing theology. Rather, our aim is simply to give a 30,000-foot flyover of the attributes as a whole and provide a framework for further study.

#### *Attributes Describing God's Being*

**Spirituality**. "God's spirituality means that God exits as a being that is not made of any matter, has no parts or dimensions, is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses, and is more excellent than any other kind of existence" (222).

"God is spirit" (John 4:24).

The "stuff" God is made of is unlike anything in creation. He has no physical body, but "he is also not like vapor or steam or air or space" (222). He cannot be limited to any spatial location, yet he has no size or dimensions (even infinite ones) and no place can contain him.

Of course, God's nature is entirely unique to him. But Grudem places this attribute in the **communicable** category because we have been given spatially limited spirits that relate to God now and pass into eternity when we die. Grudem rightly denies that our spirits are merely scaled-down versions of God's.

**Invisibility**. "God's invisibility means that God's total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us partially in this age and more fully in the age to come" (222).

"To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

God's total, unmitigated essence has never been seen by human eyes and never will be. Nonetheless, in the Old Testament God allowed some outward manifestations of himself to be seen through earthly glimpses of his glory (Exodus 33:21-23), heavenly visions of this throne (Isaiah 6:1), various theophanies as a man (Genesis 18:1-33; 32:28-30; Exodus 24:9-11[?]; Judges 13:2-22), and visual revelations through symbols like fire (Exodus 3:2; 13:21-22) and clouds (Exodus 13:21-22).

The supreme manifestation of God on earth came in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:18; 14:9), who is himself God (John 1:1), "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), "the form of God" (Philippians 2:6), and "the exact representation of [God's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3).

We will behold more of God in eternity, seeing him "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12; cf. Revelation 22:3-4) and "as he is" (1 John 3:2). However, this so-called "beatific vision" will still be in some sense limited (1 Timothy 6:16), since ultimately "his greatness is unsearchable" (Psalm 145:3).

### *Mental Attributes*

**Omniscience**. "God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act" (225).

"For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).

The Spirit of God knows the depths of the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-11), which is unlimited in understanding of everything that exists and occurs. This exhaustive knowledge includes all things that will happen (Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 46:9-10) and even what would have happened (Matthew 11:21, 23). God possess this knowledge all at once. He does not count, calculate, reason to conclusions, recall previous knowledge, or otherwise chronologically learn. God simultaneously knows all eternity past, all eternity future, and everything in between.

This means that God knows more than whatever can be known up to this point in time. Some define omniscience as full knowledge of all that has happened, denying that God knows what will happen. The future is thus not fixed in the mind of God, but rather open to possibilities determined by human choices yet to be made. Their view has thus been called "open theism."

Open theism is untenable in light of texts like Isaiah 40–48, contrasting God's knowledge of "what is to come" (41:23; 44:7)—encompassing "the end from the beginning" (46:10)—with the ignorance of idols. It is also hard to square with the plentitude of predictive prophecy in Scripture. One study has amassed a list of more than 4000 prophecies, over half of which involve free human choices (https://evangelicalarminians.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Roy.-Predictive-Prophecies-Involving-Future-Free-Human-Choices.pdf).

Of course, God's omniscience isn't entirely **communicable** (Romans 11:33). Humans do not have an exhaustive grasp of all things knowable, cannot know the future apart from divine inspiration, and the knowledge we do possess is acquired sequentially. However, we do possess knowledge and have access to the mind of God as he reveals it. God's knowledge has thus been imparted to us in a limited sense.

**Wisdom**. "God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals" (231).

"To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Romans 16:27).

God's wisdom ensures that his omniscience will produce decisions that bring about optimal results in optimal ways. That wisdom is clearly seen in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30), the plan of redemption (1 Corinthians 1:26-31), and the racially, culturally, and socially diverse church (Ephesians 3:6-10).

Like omniscience, divine wisdom isn't entirely **communicable** (Romans 11:33). Yet we are exhorted by Scripture to seek wisdom (Proverbs 4:7; James 1:5), value it (Proverbs 8:10-11, 18-19, 21), and walk in it (Proverbs 28:26; Ephesians 5:15; Colossians 4:5).

**Truthfulness (and Faithfulness)**. "God's truthfulness means that he is the true God, and all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth (233)…. God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised" (234).

"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

God's knowledge is perfect (Job 37:16) and always proves true (Proverbs 30:5; John 17:7). It is not deemed true by measure of some source external to God, but rather true in and of itself. It is thus the first word in defining truth and the final word in judging all claims of truth.

Because of God's faithfulness, he is neither deceitful nor double-minded and he never deviates from truth in his actions (Numbers 23:19).

We are called to imitate (Ephesians 5:1) God's truthfulness and faithfulness by perpetually pursuing truth (Psalm 25:5; Proverbs 23:23; Philippians 4:8; 2 Timothy 2:15), proclaiming truth (Ephesians 4:15, 25), practicing truth (2 Corinthians 4:2; 3 John 1:4), and prizing truth (Psalm 139:17; Proverbs 12:22; 1 Corinthians 13:6; 2 Thessalonians 2:10).

### *Moral Attributes*

**Goodness**. "The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and all that God is and does is worthy of approval" (236).

"You are good and do good; teach me your statutes" (Psalm 119:68).

God is the definition of good and thus the definitive standard of good. His will is good (Romans 12:2), his word is good (Hebrews 6:5; 1 Peter 1:25), his acts are good (Genesis 1:31; Psalm 119:68), and his gifts are good (Psalm 84:11; Matthew 7:11; James 1:17).

We are accordingly called to reflect God's goodness, seeking his good gifts (Matthew 7:11), doing good (Luke 6:27, 33-35; Galatians 6:10), and equipping others for good works (2 Timothy 3:17).

**Love**. "God's love means that God eternally gives of himself to others" (237).

"God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Some argue that God needed to create in order to love, but Jesus declared that the Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). We can infer from this an intra-trinitarian love that has eternally flowed in all directions. As Gerald Bray notes regarding the Trinity:

> Because those persons are eternal, whatever applies to their inner relationships is eternally present in God. The obvious attribute in this category is love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and both love the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a communion of love within the eternal being of God. That was not revealed to us until the coming of the Son into the world, but the timing does not matter. The Incarnation of Christ did not create the relationship between the Father and the Son but merely revealed it to us. Most importantly, that relationship, and the love that characterized it, did not come into being because other spiritual creatures rebelled against God. It has always been there… (*The Attributes of God*, 86).

In his mercy and grace, God chose to extend this love to sinful human beings (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10), and he bestowed it in eternity past (Ephesians 1:4-5).

The cross was the greatest earthly expression of this love, since "greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The love of Christ thus "surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19).

This love has been poured into us (Romans 5:5) so that we might love God (Matthew 22:37), love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:10), love one another (John 17:26; 1 John 4:11; cf. John 13:35), and love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). We are to stir one another to such love (Hebrews 10:24).

**Mercy, Grace, Patience**. "God's mercy means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress. God's grace means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment. God's patience means God's goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time" (239).

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

Because the Old Testament often mentions these three attributes in one breath, there is significant overlap in their meanings. Yet we can identify some distinctions, too. Mercy is often tied to comfort for the afflicted (2 Samuel 24:14; Matthew 9:27; 2 Corinthians 1:3). Grace emphasizes the unmerited nature of God's favor bestowed on his people (Psalm 119:32), especially in his granting of salvation to them (Romans 3:23-24; 11:6). Such grace is only received through the instrument of faith apart from works (Romans 3:24; 4:16; 5:15, 17; Ephesians 2:8-9). Finally, patience underscores God's slowness to anger (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; et al.) and his merciful, gracious allowance of time to repent (Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

Our lives should be lived in recognition that we are products of grace (1 Corinthians 15:10), preserved by grace (2 Corinthians 12:9; cf. Galatians 3:2-3), and prepared for good works by grace (Acts 14:26; Romans 12:3, 6; 15:15-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Ephesians 2:8-10).

**Holiness**. "God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor" (240).

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3).

Grudem's definition "contains both a relational quality (separation from) and a moral quality (the separation is from sin or evil, and the devotion is to the good of God's own honor or glory)" (240-41).

God is himself the "Holy One of Israel" (Psalm 71:22; Isaiah 1:4; et al.) with whom no one can compare (Exodus 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:2; Isaiah 40:25). He is not merely more holy than his creatures; his holiness places him in a class all by himself. Greg Nichols thus speaks of God's holiness not merely as his "moral supremacy," but as his "supreme separateness" (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 1:475-76).

God's dwelling place is holy (Psalm 24:3), his law is holy (Romans 7:12), and he expects his people to be holy (Leviticus 11:45; 19:2; 1 Peter 1:14-16). His holiness commends his glory (Isaiah 6:3), commands worship from his creatures (Psalm 22:3), and compels his judgment of sin (Isaiah 1:1-15; Revelation 6:10).

Scripture exhorts us to exhibit God's holiness in our Christian walk (2 Corinthians 7:1) and expect his loving discipline toward this end (Hebrews 12:10). We are to reflect this holiness as a believing community (Ephesians 2:21; 5:26-27).

**Peace (or Order)**. "God's peace means that in God's being and in his actions he is separate from all confusion and disorder, yet he is continually active in innumerable well-ordered, fully controlled, simultaneous actions" (243).

"God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

The “God of peace” (Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20) promises his peace to his people with both respect to their salvation (Romans 5:1) and sanctification (Galatians 5:22).

We reflect God’s peace when, as far as it depends on us, we “live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18), and when we experience “the peace of God, which passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) through prayer.

**Righteousness, Justice**. “God’s righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right” (243).

“All his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4).

God is himself the standard of righteousness; there is no standard outside of him. All his ways are consistent with his righteousness (Psalm 145:17; Proverbs 8:8). He can do no wrong (Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Job 8:3; Psalm 92:15; Romans 9:14). Creatures can thus find no fault in him (Job 40:2).

On the other hand, God finds fault in the most righteousness deeds we can muster (Isaiah 64:5-9). This leaves us in a bind, because God’s righteousness requires that he give people what they deserve and sinners deserve judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:5-6; Revelation 16:5).

Fortunately for us, Christ bore our due penalty on the cross by dying in our place. Paul could thus say Jesus’ death “was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25-26).

We glorify God by reflecting his righteousness when, both individually and corporately, we love his law (Romans 8:7-9) and live in accordance with his moral standards (Ezekiel 18:5-9; Luke 1:6). We do this when, among other things, we give to people what they’re owed (Romans 13:7), exercise fairness in all our dealings (Leviticus 19:36), practice impartiality (Deuteronomy 10:17-18), fight oppression (Job 29:13-17), show compassion to the needy (Matthew 5:42; 1 John 3:17), endure suffering (1 Peter 2:23), and renounce any merit in our salvation (Philippians 3:8-9).

**Jealousy**. “God’s jealously means that God continually seeks to protect his own honor” (245).

“For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Exodus 34:14).

Paul claimed a “divine jealousy” for the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:2). *Zēlos* refers to a zeal or ardor “marked by a sense of dedication” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 427). It carries the sense of being “earnestly protective or watchful” (245).

God is zealous about protecting his honor and so prohibits the serving or worshiping of idols. He will not share his glory with another (Isaiah 48:11).

“It is healthy for us spiritually when we settle in our hearts the fact that God deserves all honor and glory from his creation, and that it is right for him to seek this honor. He alone is infinitely worthy of being praised. To realize this fact and to delight in it is to find the true secret of worship” (245).

**Wrath**. “God’s wrath means that he intensely hates all sin” (245).

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18).

God's people provoked his wrath in the Old Testament by turning to idols and disobeying his law (Exodus 32:9-10; Deuteronomy 9:7-8; 29:23; 2 Kings 22:13). The New Testament likewise speaks of God's wrath toward humanity's sin (Romans 1:18; 2:5, 8; 5:9; 9:22; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Hebrews 3:11; Revelation 6:16-17; 19:15). The only escape from this wrath is through faith in God's Son, for "whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

A hatred for sin (Zechariah 8:17; Hebrews 1:9) reflects God's character in us, as well as a disdain for injustice and similar expressions of evil. A rightful understanding of God's wrath, his hatred for sin, and the just penalty for sin should fill us with compassion for the lost and a zeal for evangelism.

### *Attributes of Purpose*

**Will**. "God's will is that attribute of God whereby he approves and determines to bring about every action necessary for the existence and activity of himself and all creation" (252).

"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11).

God created all things by his will (Revelation 4:11), establishes governments according to his will (Daniel 4:32; Romans 13:1), orchestrated all events surrounding the death of Christ in line with his will (Acts 4:27-28), and subjects the happenings in our individual lives to his will (James 4:13-15; 1 Peter 4:19).

Deuteronomy 29:29 distinguishes between God's secret will (will of decree) and revealed will (will of precept): "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

God's revealed will involves all the moral teachings of Scripture (Matthew 6:10; 7:21; Ephesians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). His secret will includes all things that he has decreed to pass in history but has not revealed by way of prophecy (Matthew 11:25-26; Acts 4:28; Romans 9:18; 1 Corinthians 4:19). The latter are things "inappropriate for us to seek to pry into" (257).

Insofar as we make decisions regarding what to do and not do, we reflect this attribute of God. But, of course, the fallen human will is restricted in several ways.

**Freedom**. "God's freedom is that attribute of God whereby he does whatever he pleases" (257).

"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that pleases" (Psalm 115:3).

The bottom line to this attribute is that "nothing in all creation can hinder God from doing his will" (257). No principality, power, or person exercises authority over God or exerts pressure on him (Daniel 4:35).

We reflect God's freedom in the choices we make, though we must recognize that our freedom is limited in significant ways. We honor God's freedom by leaving his mysterious choices in the realm of his secret will (see above). Though curiosity compels us to wonder why God did certain things (like creating the universe, making humans or angels he knew would rebel, raising the nation of Israel to bring forth the universal Messiah, choosing the cross as the means of redemption, etc.), we honor God's freedom by simply saying "because he wanted to."

**Omnipotence**. "God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will" (258).

"Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:17).

God's power is infinite and he exercises total, sovereign control over all things. Nothing is impossible with him (Luke 1:37) and with him all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

The only constraint to God's power is his own character. Thus, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13), or be tempted by evil (James 1:13). This means that, no, God can't make a rock so big that he can't lift it. The inability to lift the rock would contradict his omnipotence, so such an act wouldn't be consistent with all of God's attributes. Remember, the attributes of God are distinguishable but inseparable.

Inasmuch as we are empowered to enact our wills, we faintly reflect God's omnipotence, and only in this sense can this attribute be labeled **communicable**.

### *"Summary" Attributes*

**Perfection**. "God's perfection means that God completely possesses all excellent qualities and lacks no part of any qualities that would be desirable for him" (260).

"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Psalm 18:30 tells us God's "way is perfect," and this suggests that perfection might be better understood as a quality saturating all of God's attributes rather than an attribute itself. Indeed, each of God's attributes is possessed in perfection; that is, he is completely holy, completely loving, completely truthful, and so on.

What's more, God's combination of attributes is itself perfect. There is no attribute he lacks and all of his attributes work in perfect harmony with one another.

Obviously, this quality is severely lacking in us. However, Christ's work has made us positionally perfect (Hebrews 10:14; 12:23). Further, God is working all things for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28-30), toward our perfection (or completeness) in Christ (James 1:2-4; 2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 John 2:5; 4:17-18). When the perfect comes (1 Corinthians 13:10), we ourselves will be finally made fully perfect (1 John 3:2).

**Blessedness**. "God's blessedness means that God delights fully in himself and in all that reflects his character" (260).

"He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15).

Our "blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:11) is happy in his intra-trinitarian relations, delighted in his own character and expressions of it (Jeremiah 9:23-24), and pleased in what he creates (Genesis 1:31). In eternity, he will "rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5).

"We imitate God's blessedness when we find delight and happiness in all that is pleasing to God, both those aspects of our own lives that are pleasing to God and the deeds of others…. Furthermore, we imitate God's blessedness by rejoicing in the creation as it reflects various aspects of his excellent character" (261).

**Beauty**. "God's beauty is that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities" (261).

"One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

God lacks nothing that would make him desirable; indeed, he has maximum desirableness (Psalm 73:25).

Women display this character when they adorn themselves with respectable apparel (1 Timothy 2:9) and a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:3-4), servants imitate it when they adorn the gospel by their godly conduct (Titus 2:10), and we're all progressively beautified in the pursuit of holiness and journey toward spotlessness as the church (Ephesians 5:27).

**Glory**. "God's glory is the created brightness that surrounds God's revelation of himself" (263).

"The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23).

Because God's glory is in one sense the aura created by his essence (Psalm 104:1-2; Luke 2:9; Revelation 21:23) and in another sense the honor due to him from his creatures (Psalm 24:10; Romans 9:23), it's not technically an attribute. It belongs to the created order rather than the ontology of the creator.

Nonetheless, God's glory is unique to him and worthy of consideration alongside his essential attributes. Like perfection, it points to his entire nature: "Each attribute complements the others so that taken together the glory of God embraces and manifests all attributes in perfect tension, correspondence, and complementarity" (Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, 39).

In the Old Testament, the emphasis of glory (as seen in the Hebrew term *kabod*) is on the display of splendor (*Hebrew and English Concordance of the Old Testament*, 458-59). The New Testament highlights glory (as seen in the Greek word *doxa*) as brightness, splendor, radiance, magnificence, greatness, and fame (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 257-58). The overall picture is that of God's unique majesty.

It's noteworthy that the Son shared in the divine glory in his preexistent state (John 17:5), revealed his glory in his transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), was glorified by God in his resurrection (Acts 3:13-15; 1 Peter 1:21), displayed his glory in his ascension into heaven (1 Timothy 3:16), is "the radiance of God's glory" (Hebrews 1:3), and will return in glory (Matthew 24:30; Titus 2:13) to reign in glory (Matthew 25:31).

As God's children, we were created for his glory (Isaiah 43:7) and he intends for us to progressively reflect his glory (2 Corinthians 3:18) until we are ultimately glorified (Psalm 73:24; Matthew 13:43; Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 15:43). We honor God when we live with the realization that our present sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

***Relevance***

We've already mentioned some ways that we reflect each of God's communicable attributes in practical ways. We'll conclude with a few general observations meant to stimulate reflection on things we've learned and encourage further study.

First, whether they realize it or not, everyone already has a theology of God's attributes. Believers can't worship without some implicit recognition that God is holy and true. We can't pray without supposing his omnipresence and omniscience. We wouldn't even bother to pray without assuming his power and love. And how would we comfort one another without speaking of God's mercy and goodness?

Even agnostics and atheists have conceptions of God's attributes. After all, no one can ask whether God exists without first imagining and explaining what is meant by the word "God." More and more, science is discovering that the existence, origin, and design of the universe reveals a First Cause that must by necessity be transcendent, immaterial, eternal, personal, omnipotent, intelligent, volitional, and loving (see notes for the Theological Equipping Class entitled *The Existence of God*). Of course, Scripture has maintained the existence of such a being all along. Indeed, as the late NASA scientist Robert Jarrow observed:

> For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries (Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, 115-16).

Interestingly, early Christian teachers like Novatian, Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Gregory of Nazianzen established *which* God exists before arguing *that* he exists. They believed there was little point to defending his existence before they had defined his essence. They knew everyone already has a conception of God, whether they believe he exists or not. The question is whether that conception is accurate.

Second, we can't live holy lives without a clear understanding of God's attributes. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:1 to be "imitators of God." We can't imitate what we don't know. And what hope would we have of imitating God if he had not communicated to us, in a limited sense, his own attributes and promised to progressively restore their expression in us through his Spirit?

We read of this restoration in Colossians 3:9-10: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is *being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*" (emphasis added). Paul connects knowledge of God's attributes with the ongoing development of our character, further underscoring the importance of our study. The attributes of God are foundational to the practice of our faith.

Finally, we should note that an understanding of God's attributes meets our deepest spiritual needs. Peter opens his second epistle with these words: "May grace and peace be multiplied to you *in the knowledge of God* and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, *through the knowledge of him* who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:2-3, emphasis added).

Grace and peace are *multiplied* to us when we study God's attributes. And the knowledge of God is sufficient for *all things* related to godly living. These facts should suffice for multiplying our efforts to understand him more fully!