

CHAPTER 3

GOD'S ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTES

[Classic work — Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*]

Those attributes of God which he has in himself, which can be exercised apart from his relationship to his creation, are referred to as his absolute attributes. Those attributes exercised especially with regard to the creation are called relative attributes. Of course, there is some overlap. God's absolute attributes are exercised in relation to his creation as well, and his knowledge and love were exercised before the creation within the Godhead. The Shorter Catechism describes God as "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being." The characteristics of infinity or immensity, eternity, and immutability are descriptive of all his attributes. These qualities are studied under this category of absolute or incommunicable attributes.

Aseity of God

Aseity means "self-existence." God's existence is "necessary," that is, his existence is not conditioned on anything outside himself; he is totally independent. His existence is grounded totally on himself:

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod 3:14)

This necessity of existence is not only a logical necessity (as with the ontological and cosmological arguments), but also a necessity of nature. God's existence is not grounded on the will of God, but on the nature of God. God's nature is prior to his will (in this regard Aquinas was correct over William of Occam).

Since God absolutely exists, he is the source of all existence and life for us.

Ps 36:9, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."

Jer 2:13, "My people . . . have forsaken me, the spring of living water"

John 5:26, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”

Acts 17:25, “[God] is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

Simplicity of God

God’s simplicity means that he is not composed of diverse elements, and also that his attributes cannot be separated from his substance.

“It follows also that God is a simple Being, not only as not composed of different elements, but also as not admitting of the distinction between substance and accidents.”
(Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:379)

God is an indivisible unit, and has always been and will always be the same God in all his attributes. Spiritual creatures do not have the same simplicity of nature, since, although being simple substances, many characteristics of creatures may change, and thus are accidents rather than attributes of their essence.

The Bible frequently mentions the unchangeableness of God (see verses in that section). It also stresses the unity of God, and that he cannot be confused with any other supposed god or any creature:

Deut 4:35, 39, “You were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other. . . . Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.”

Deut 6:4-5, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

Job 23:13, “But he stands alone, and who can oppose him?”

Isa 44:6-8, “This is what the Lord says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. . . . You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

Isa 45:5-6, “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. . . . there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

John 5:44, “the praise that comes from the only God”

John 8:42, 47, “Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. . . . He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.’”

John 10:30, “I and my Father are one.”

John 14:9-11, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. . . . I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. . . . I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

Rom 3:29-30, “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”

1 Cor 8:4, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.” (cf. 10:19-20, “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God.”)

1 Tim 2:5, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Jas 2:19, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

Since there is only one God, who is simple in essence, there is unity in creation and unity in our salvation. We can be grateful that we do not live in a universe torn apart by conflicting deities (it is a *uni*-verse!). Likewise, we do not have to worship and please different and opposing gods, but rather, the one true God, who consistently leads us to be like him.

Infinity of God

There is no limit to God. God’s infinity refers to all his attributes. Here are some examples from Scripture:

infinite in thoughts (Ps 40:5)

infinite in righteousness and salvation (Ps 71:15)

infinite in mercy and faithfulness (Ps 89:2)

infinite in forgiveness (Ps 103:12)

infinite in understanding (Ps 147:5)

God is infinite in being, filling all of space and time (immensity and eternity), in intelligence, in power, and in all moral qualities (being absolutely perfect in each). These will be considered separately in the following sections.

Immensity of God

God fills all of space, not only our entire space-time universe, but any other universes as well that may exist or could exist. This attribute is also called his omnipresence.

His filling of space is not similar to a gas, which expands to fill its container by spreading out its molecules. Rather, God is totally present in all of his personality and attributes in every point of space. Neither is he present everywhere by being many Gods, for he is one and indivisible. This presence is spiritual, not physical or material.

The Scriptures often speak of God's immensity in terms of his omnipresence throughout the creation. We should remember that even heaven is described as a part of creation (Gen. 1:1; Exod. 20:11).

1 Kgs 8:27, "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you." (but he does dwell in heaven; cf. v. 30, "Hear from heaven, your dwelling place")

Ps 139:7-10, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths (Heb. שָׁאוֹל *š'e'ôl*), you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

Isa 57:15, "For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit."

Jer 23:23-24, "'Am I only a God nearby,' declares the Lord, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord."

Acts 7:48-49, "The Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: "'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?'" says the Lord. "Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'" (Stephen quoting Isa 66:1-2)

Acts 17:27-28, "God . . . is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'"

Some Scriptures seem to indicate that God is located in one place, or moves from one place to another. God is spoken of as dwelling in heaven, or in the tabernacle or temple, or as appearing in a particular place. The Lord's Prayer is addressed to "our Father, who is in

heaven.” When people built the tower of Babel, it is reported that “the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building” (Gen 11:5; cf. account of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18:20-21). As far as God’s dwelling in heaven is concerned, we understand that to mean that heaven is the place of his special manifestation of himself. His being found, for example, “between the cherubs” of the ark, refers to that place as being the place where he chooses to be seen. References to his moving from place to place refer to his special attention and actions; “going down to see” the tower of Babel is a literary device making the story more vivid, and emphasizing the relative puniness of the work of the proud builders. None of these passages contradicts the biblical doctrine of God’s omnipresence.

Since God is everywhere, he can hear the prayers of people in heaven and all over the earth and bless his children (cf. Ps 14:5, “God is present in the company of the righteous”; this is much of the point of Psalm 139). The omnipresence of God is important for such doctrines as the Holy Spirit’s dwelling in believers, which Jesus Christ said involved himself and his Father as well.

John 14:16, 17, 20, 23, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. . . . On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. . . . If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

This truth also impacts other doctrines, such as that of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 10:16, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?”). The omnipresence of Jesus’ Spirit enables him to be present in our church gatherings and exercises of discipline (Matt 18:20, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”).

God’s immensity provides a warning to those who think they can flee from God. Jonah tried to escape God’s presence:

Jonah 1:3, “Jonah ran away from the Lord”

But he discovered that God was not only on the ship to Tarshish, but even underneath, in the depths of the sea:

Jonah 2:2, 6, “From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. . . . To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.”

Similarly, wicked people may think that God does not exist, or if he does, may not be where they are to observe them. Such thinking is contradicted by Scripture’s declaration of God’s omnipresence:

Amos 9:1-4, “Strike the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake. Bring them down on the heads of all the people; those who are left I will kill with the sword. Not

one will get away, none will escape. Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them. Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them. Though they are driven into exile by their enemies, there I will command the sword to slay them. I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good.”

[The false idea of finite godism is analyzed well by the evangelical writer Robert Morey, *The Battle of the Gods* (1989).]

Eternity of God

This attribute of God is actually an extension of his omnipresence. Since we now realize that time is simply another dimension of our space-time universe, we realize that God, to be infinite, must not exist only through all space, and not only through time past, present, and future, but must actually transcend time, even as he transcends space. Augustine realized this when he stated that God exists above time, and all moments are to him immediately present. However, this transcending of time does not remove God from our universe or our experience. God interacts with our universe in time and space. While this may be a mystery to us, the Scriptures do teach both God’s transcendence and immanence regarding our existence in space and time.

[For a modern view of time and space dimensions as they relate to God, see Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos: The Extra Dimensionality of God* (1999); for a thorough book that wrestles with the question of God’s relation to time, see William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (2001). Craig concludes, “God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation” (p. 241).]

God “existed before” the creation of the universe:

[Note the quotation marks—the past tense “existed” and the word “before.” The universe includes all matter, energy, space, and time. Time itself was created by God when he made the heavens and the earth. To say “God existed before time” is not quite accurate, since the word “before” indicates an earlier time. It’s perhaps more precise to say “God exists apart from time” (as long as “apart from” does not refer to a special separation!). Cf. William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (2001).]

Gen 1:1, “In the beginning God created . . . (implies he existed already)

Ps 90:2, “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

Hab 1:12, “O Lord, are you not from everlasting?”

John 1:1-3, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.
“Through him all things were made.”

John 17:5, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

God will exist forever:

Ps 102:25-27, “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” (quoted in Heb 1:10-12 and referred to Jesus Christ)

Rev 4:10, “The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever.”

God is eternal as a quality, not merely always existing in time:

Gen 21:33, “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God”

Deut 33:27, “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

Ps 90:4, “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.” (quoted in 2 Pet 3:8)

Isa 57:15, “For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever [KJV, “who inhabits eternity”], whose name is holy”

John 8:57-58, “‘You are not yet fifty years old,’ the Jews said to him, ‘and you have seen Abraham!’”

“‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’”

Rom 1:20, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen”

1 Tim 1:17, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Heb 1:2, “his Son, . . . through whom he made the universe (Gk. the ages)”

Rev 1:8, “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’”

Because God is eternal, he is able to punish evil-doers with everlasting condemnation, and to grant to us who believe everlasting life.

Unchangeableness of God

God's essence, character, and attributes cannot change. This is also called his immutability. Note the following eloquent passage from Charles Hodge:

The immutability of God is intimately connected with his immensity and eternity, and is frequently included with them in the Scriptural statements concerning his nature. Thus, when it is said, He is the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever; or when in contrast with the ever changing and perishing world, it is said, "They shall be changed, but thou art the same," it is not his eternity more than his immutability that is brought into view. As an infinite and absolute Being, self-existent and absolutely independent, God is exalted above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are. So God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.

—*Systematic Theology* 1:390

As Hodge points out, if God is immense and eternal, there can be no change in his essence or attributes. This directly contradicts the modern theological school of process theology, which views God as changing over time (exemplified by Charles Hartshorne and John B. Cobb). Some of those verses which have been used to prove these characteristics could be used also to demonstrate his unchangeableness (as Exod 3:14; Ps 102:27).

[See also the good discussion in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 1:204-206.]

God's immutability is specifically taught in many places in Scripture:

Num 23:19, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (words of Balaam, but in his oracle from God)

Ps 33:11, "But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations."

Isa 14:24, “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand.”

Isa 46:9-10, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”

Mal 3:6, “I the Lord do not change.”

Heb 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Jas 1:17, “[the Father], who does not change like shifting shadows.”

Those passages which speak of God changing his mind or “repenting” (as Gen 6:6-7 [creating man]; 1 Sam 15:10-11 [making Saul king]; Jer 18:8-10 [judging a nation which repents, and vice versa]; Jonah 3:10 [destroying Nineveh]) must be interpreted in harmony with the rest of Scripture. This is done by recognizing their literary character, and the figure of anthropomorphism or anthropopathism. It is as though God changes his mind. What actually changes is his outward providence toward his creatures, and this change is based on a change in the creatures (or a particular need in the creature; cf. the situation with Job: “ruin him without any reason,” Job 2:3). Actually, his own character remains constant throughout the process; he would be changing his character if his providence did not adjust to a change in the situation.

The “freedom” of God means that there is no opposing force that can force him to change his will or its free exercise. It does not mean that God could have done anything he has not done or can do anything he will not do. He acts from the necessity of his own nature. (see insightful discussion in Gordon H. Clark, “Absolute Necessity,” in *The Atonement*, pp. 96-109).

For answers to recent attacks on this doctrine (as Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God* [1994] and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* [1998], see R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism* [1996], pp. 220-225, the problem of a finite God. This issue caused a large controversy in the Evangelical Theological Society (http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?51). Also see the entire issue of the *WRS Journal* 12:1 (February 2005), <http://wrs.edu/resources/wrs-journal/volume/12-1/>.

As the passages quoted above demonstrate, God’s unchangeableness is a great blessing for us. These passages encourage the believer to trust in God’s blessings, for he will never change, and his blessings are forever; “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim 2:13).