

Newsletter, August 2020

The psalmist exclaimed, **“Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high, Who humbleth *himself* to behold *the things that are in heaven, and in the earth* (Ps.113:5, 6)!** In this article, we shall directly examine the question, “Who is like unto the LORD our God” or “What is God?” Our English word “God” is derived from a Hebrew word *'elôhîym*, as well as a Greek word *theos*; together they identify a supreme divine being. Yet, what exactly is this divine being? – how can we better know Him? The Psalmist David said that **“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. *There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard*”** (Ps.19:1-3). While God has provided a general revelation of his being and glory through his physical creation that universally speaks of Him, He has chosen to reveal Himself to us more specifically through his Word, which has been recorded for us within the Scriptures in the Holy Bible. Part of that revelation concerns God’s triune nature, which we discussed at length in our Newsletter article of January 2014. All three natures are united as one within the “Godhead,” such that the following discussion equally applies to the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever subsisting as one divine being.

The fourth question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which is largely based upon Scripture, gives a brief but useful definition by listing the essential attributes of God’s being. The assembly writers were stunned when it became necessary to define God in words – as must we all. In their dilemma, they asked a young minister, John Gillespie, to pray for divine guidance. He began his prayer with "Oh God, Who is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth...." Not surprisingly, the first words of his prayer found their way directly into the Catechism. Of course, any of our definitions of God must fall short in some respects because we are trying to use common human words to describe a supernatural being.

In the following discussion, an attempt has been made to separate the attributes, brought out in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, along with additional relative content found within Scripture, into three general categories.¹ The first category describes the essential intrinsic attributes of God’s being, while the second category seeks to describe the many ensuing attributes that emanate from or extend beyond God’s being (extended attributes). Together these first two categories are often referred to as God’s “incommunicable attributes” since God does not pass them on to any of his creation. They are unique to God alone. The third category, which we refer to as communicable attributes, are those that God has chosen to share with man when He created Adam and Eve, whom He formed in his likeness (cf. Ge.1:26,27).

We need to gain knowledge of God in three different aspects or categories. First, we need knowledge of the essential intrinsic being of God. The word “being” defines a living entity that possesses a sense of self-awareness, cognitive thought, and ability. What is God like in his elemental being? Does He have a body and brain as we do? Is He “contained” within a limited form? Does He age over time? Secondly, we need to know the implications arising from the essential attributes of God. Those we refer to as God’s extended attributes as they relate to his creation. What is his attitude toward mankind and our activities? What are God’s intentions toward us personally, and toward our world? Thirdly, we need to have some knowledge of God’s activities, the many things that God has already done in this physical world, is doing, and yet intends to do. That said, we must limit our discussion in this article to God’s essential intrinsic attributes, while leaving the discussion of his extended and communicable attributes to additional newsletter articles.

God is Spirit

Thus, we find that we must begin with the rather stunning statement that “God is spirit” or “God is a Spirit.” Here we already find ourselves well beyond our comfortable limits of human knowledge. When

¹ This newsletter article also contains edited texts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity* Book I, Chapter 2.1, in which we discussed God and his many attributes.

we speak of God being a Spirit we are speaking of that unique supernatural underlying substance (*hypostasis*) that is God. This is not a material substance in such a way that we could make a model or image to represent what God looks like. Not only is God not of material substance but, He also is not of corporeal substance. That is, He does not have a body of flesh or bone. The various places in Scripture in which we read of God's hand and arm (cf. De.4:34; Job 40:9; Ez.20:33; Ac.13:17) or eyes and ears (cf. De,13:18; 2Ch.6:40; Is.37:17; Am.9:8); are known as anthropomorphic expressions, which attribute to God human properties as a means of aiding our understanding of God's ability to oversee, command and judge man's activities. Although it is said in Scripture that God had created man in his image, it refers only to man's spiritual properties. Moreover, that image was desecrated by Adam's fall into sin, such that God cannot be remotely represented by a physical human man – or by the image of any other living creature.

Man is a tripartite being consisting of a physical body, and an immortal soul, which has been made alive through the spirit of life that God has breathed into him. In contrast, God is a simplex being; that is, God is a pure living spirit that is not made up of separate elements or parts. This is very important for us to grasp. As Jesus said, to the Samaritan woman at the well, **“God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”** (Jn.4:24). By spirit, we do not mean that God is some overriding thought or attitude such as we mean when we speak of “the spirit of the age” or when we talk about “getting into the spirit of a thing.” When we speak of God being a Spirit, we speak of that unique supernatural underlying substance that is God. This is not a material substance such that we could make a model or image to accurately represent what God looks like. **“We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device”** (Ac.17:29). This is why God's law expressly forbids any images to represent his person (cf. Ex.20:3–5); such material images can be but a gross distortion of God's real substance and being. God asks, **“To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like”** (Is. 46:5)? The Apostle Paul said of such men **“Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things”** (Ro.1:22,23). God cannot be represented by a human image or by the image of any other living creature. If we attempt to represent God in that way, we become fools because of our supposed wisdom, which only reveals our ignorance.

Therefore, to our physical eyes, God is invisible: **“No man hath seen God at any time...”** (Jn.1:18; 1Jn.4:12). As God said to Moses, **“Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live”** (Ex.33:20). No mortal could look upon the face of an immortal being and live through the experience. God is composed of spiritual substance, which we cannot see or feel. Because we live in a physical world, it is difficult for us to envision any substance that we cannot experience by employing our physical senses. When God spoke to Moses, He spoke to Him from a burning bush. God was not in the bush that was not consumed, nor was He in the fire itself. God chose this way to reveal Himself to Moses, because Moses would not have been able to directly see his person.

While man is a complex being consisting of body, soul, and spirit and is made up of many body parts, God is one in his being. God has many attributes that represent his being, yet are combined in such a way as to make up his entire being that cannot be divided in any way. Each attribute expresses the elemental being of God in his entirety. Therefore, while we may say that God is a simplex being, it does not mean that the exact being of God is easily understood. God's unique being veils Him from our mortal minds since God lives in an eternal dimension that is apart from our temporal dimension; for that reason, no mortal can look upon God's face and continue to live in this temporal dimension.

God is Infinite

God is infinite in his being. This is another essential attribute of God that we find difficult to grasp. Man is a finite being. Although humanity has devised ways to extend his influence (both mentally and physically) beyond his finite presence, each man still exists only within the finite sphere of the space his body occupies.

God is different in two respects. First, as we have seen, God does not consist of a physical body, being pure Spirit. Secondly, God does not occupy space or take up room. God is infinite and has no physical limitations to his being. **“Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD, Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD”** (Je.23:24). Everywhere on earth and throughout the vast reaches of the vast heavens, there is no place where God’s presence is absent. For that reason, no event no matter how small escapes God's notice, and every sin that man commits is an open scandal in Heaven. Moreover, every individual prayer is heard by Him simultaneously with every other prayer that is uttered.

When we consider the vast regions of the universe, mankind can be seen as but a rash on the surface of a small planet orbiting a medium-sized star in a vast galaxy among uncountable other galaxies in God's vast Universe. This caused Job to ask, **“What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? and that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him”** (Job.7:17)? The Psalmist likewise asked, **“LORD, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! or the son of man, that thou makest account of him”** (Ps. 144:3)!

Because God is infinite, He is also self-existent; He encompasses all that is or ever can be. Nothing created Him, and He needs nothing to sustain Him. He cannot be measured; He has no height, width, or weight. He requires no physical house or home in which to sit, lie down, work, or live. Solomon knew this when he dedicated the Temple and said, **“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded”** (1Ki.8:27). God is completely self-sufficient. He depends upon no one or no thing for his comfort or sustenance. It is He who provides all things. **“God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed an thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things”** (Ac.,17:24,25). For that reason, we cannot rightly say that God “exists,” but rather that He “subsists” within Himself. God does not eat to sustain Himself, nor does He need to sleep to regain his strength; He is always awake and aware of everything that takes place – everywhere without limit.

God is the only “necessary being.” He is the “un-created one” and the “un-caused one.” **“All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made** (Jn.1:3). Without the express action of God in speaking everything into existence, nothing would or could exist. This is the obvious answer to the question, “why is there something and not nothing?” We are accustomed to thinking that every thing or being must have a cause. Ultimately, however, all causes must lead back to God as the primary cause. All beings other than God are contingent beings. That is, they do not need to be for anything else to exist. While all other beings and things of necessity must have a cause to exist at all, God does not have or need any cause outside of Himself.

God is Eternal

There never was a “time” in which God did not have his being. For that reason, we refer to God as the “Eternal Being” having nothing before Him upon which He owes his existence or continued being. This is the third essential attribute that we need to discuss. Many may confuse “eternal” with “infinite,” but the two words are quite different in meaning. The “infinite attribute” pertains to the fact that God does not occupy any physical dimension in space. The “eternal attribute” pertains to what we refer to as time. What we need to know about God’s eternal nature is that it means He exists apart from or outside of time. In complete contrast, man is locked into time: he remembers a past and can perceive an unknown future. Yet, he is constantly locked into an elusive present. Man's instantaneous present shifts through time to an unknown future leaving behind an unchangeable past.

God is not locked into or even influenced in any way by time. God created time for man's needs. Because God is eternal, He has full knowledge of all past and future events, which He ordained. God is involved in all of the ages of man on earth, as well as existing in eternity that is outside the continuum of time. God is not bound by an age, nor does He experience the passing of time, as does mortal man. God can

see the entire "thread" of earth-time from its beginning to its end. All that has occurred in that time is visible to Him: our past, present, and future. He is in full control of time, and can, has, and does exert his influence over it at every point.

As earth-time passes, we age and grow old. We also acquire additional knowledge as time passes. We experience many things that change us physically, mentally, and emotionally. Sometimes those changes are for the better, often for the worse. Nevertheless, we need not worry that God will change as earth-time goes by, because our time does not affect God's eternal nature. God is incapable of change. Not only is He not waiting to see how his creation will turn out, He also will not change his mind about what He will do with it. God is consistently reliable: his judgments do not change, and his plans are not subject to revision.

God is Sovereign

Therefore, since God is a Spirit being, who is infinite and eternal, it follows that He must also be sovereign – having supreme authority and total independence in all his actions. God is fully autonomous, independent and self-governing. Moreover, God subsists apart from or outside of earth-time in which He has no beginning or end. As Jesus, God in human flesh, stated, **"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty"** (Re.1:8). Therefore, God is an absolute being and fully self-determining.

Since God subsists infinitely and eternally as we have seen, would it be possible for there to be another being with the same attributes? In other words, could there be more than one God? God is very emphatic in saying no: **"That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else"** (Is.45:6). God knows no equal for it would be impossible for there to be more than one infinite and eternal being; therefore, God is absolute in his being: absolutely perfect, absolutely complete, and absolutely pure. There can be none other that holds those same attributes, for God encompasses all that was, is, and ever can be.

For that reason, God does not require a unique name. Names are used among men to distinguish one man from another. However, with God, there is no other. **"Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God"** (Is.44:6). This explains God's response to Moses when Moses asked what he was to tell the Israelites, whom he was to lead out of Egyptian bondage, when they asked him for God's name. **"And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and He said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you"** (Ex.3:14). God was saying that He has no name, for there is but one true God. Why should God distinguish Himself from the false gods that had been invented through man's imagination? Although Old-testament Scripture uses "Jehovah," when referring to God, Jehovah is not a name. It is derived from the Hebrew Tetragrammaton "YHWH" or "JHWH," which when translated to English is "I AM THAT I AM." When we say "Jehovah," we describe the only way in which God can be known by mere mortals – the self-existing One.

God is set apart from all other beings such that He deserves our awe, worship, and reverence. We greatly value the unique glory of God's sovereign being. **"Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens: let thy glory be above all the earth"** (Ps.57:5,11). God is One, who by the nature of his being deserves all praise and honor. Because God is Holy and unique, He alone is righteous. There is none to successfully challenge his authority, neither is there any to correct his ways, nor any who will judge Him **"And the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself"** (Ps.50:6). God is righteous in all that He does and has done – of which the heavens clearly attest.

We have just discussed God as a sovereign living spirit, who uniquely possesses infinite and eternal properties. He also has many other attributes that emanate forth from his essential being that we must leave to future discussions in subsequent newsletter articles. Many of those extended attributes God alone possesses, but as we shall see, some of these many attributes He chose to share to in a limited way with Adam, whom He created in His own image (cf. Ge. 1:27).