

Spurgeon Room Studies ~ Knowing God ~ Fall 2018

Introduction—Prolegomena¹

Thou hast created us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. Augustine

- I. Can we really know God, in any meaningful way?
 - A. God, the Creator and we, the created
 1. We were made by God
 2. We were made like God
 3. We were made for God
 4. We have rebelled against God
 - B. God, incomprehensible? “Because God is infinite and we are finite or limited, we can never fully understand God. In this sense God is said to be *incomprehensible*, where the term is used with an older and less common sense, ‘unable to be *fully* understood.’ This sense must be clearly distinguished from the more common meaning, ‘unable to be understood.’ It is not true to say that God is unable to be understood, but it is true to say that he cannot be understood fully or exhaustively.”²
- II. Starting with the gospel, the good news about a crucified Messiah.

“Only when we start with the gospel—the most controversial point of Christian faith—are we ready to talk about who God is and how we know him. I do not believe the gospel because I believe in God; rather, I believe in God because of the gospel. There are great arguments for the existence of a supreme being, but unless the gospel is true, the claim that a god exists is either personally meaningless or a horrible threat.”³

¹ Things said beforehand—those necessary pre-requisites that lay a good foundation for the study of Bible doctrine.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 149.

³ Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2011, p. 20.

- A. We cannot approach God directly. *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.* (I Timothy 2.5)
- B. God regards us as enemies, by nature. But He has provided a Savior to reconcile us to himself. *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.* (Romans 5.10; cf. II Corinthians 5.18)
- C. Jesus Christ, Son of God is the revealer. *All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.* (Matthew 11.27)
- D. Eternal life and knowing God. *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.* (John 17.3 KJV)

Note: When Jesus speaks of knowing God, the kind of knowledge he has in mind is unique, different from the knowledge we may have of created things. The following is based on the reflections of Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck.⁴

- The *origin* of this kind of knowledge comes from and through Jesus Christ who is himself God. (John 1.1, 14, 18; 14.9; Matthew 11.27) Only Christ has such knowledge which he communicates through the Holy Spirit. (John 16.7-15) Those who believe and accept Christ receive the right to become children of God and to know him. This is in contrast to a world that did *not* know him. (John 1.10-12)
- The *object* of this kind of knowledge is the creator. All other knowledge we may have is of creation, in some form. It is true that some knowledge of God can be gained through the general revelation seen in nature (creation), but if that is as far as you go, if your knowledge never rises above nature.

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1956, pp. 26-31.

You may end up in nature worship, i.e. idolatry (“... worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” Romans 1.25) which is all around us today. (E.g. National Geographic, Public Television nature shows *never* mention God as Creator.)

- The *essence* of such knowledge carries with it personal involvement and concern. We may not approach God as a mere object of study, but as a Person to know and love and serve. Relationship with the one known is an *essential* part of such knowledge. Marriage may serve as a rough analogy. I know my wife in a way and to a degree deeper than my knowledge of any other person. Such knowledge therefore carries with it personal commitment and is reciprocal. *On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ ... And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’* (Matthew 7.22-23)
- The *effect* of such knowledge is nothing less than eternal life. Not only does this kind of life conquer death (John 11.25-26) and is of endless duration (Ps. 16.11; 23.6) but it is also a divine life that God shares with us (2 Peter 1.3-4).
- What is the chief end of man?
Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.⁵

III. Transcendence and Immanence

A. *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:*

*“I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite.”* (Isaiah 57.15)

B. *He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.... It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.* (Isaiah 40.11, 22a)

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q 1.

IV. General and Special Revelation

- A. *General Revelation* is knowledge revealed to a general audience through creation and through an inner sense of moral awareness. (Romans 1.18-20; 2.15; Psalm 19.1-6)
- B. *Special Revelation* refers to God's words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, words that came to specific prophets of the Old Testament and apostles of the New Testament. Special revelation includes all the words of Scripture. (Psalm 19.7-11)

V. God's Name Proclaimed

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34.5-7; cf. Psalm 103.8-13)

A. God is Personal

"Yahweh (LORD) is a personal name, not to deny that it may also connote various levels of theological meaning.... In Exodus 3 God speaks and acts. He commits himself to deliver Israel. He promises redemption and threatens judgment.... He is not, therefore, an impersonal force to be manipulated by human agency. He has his own purposes, his own standards, his own delights and hatreds. He loves the people of Israel [whom He calls His people (Exodus 3.10)] and seeks their love and obedience. He acts on his own initiative, rather than merely responding to events...

"Scripture rarely if ever uses the word *person* to describe God, or even to refer to the Father, the Son or the Spirit. But like Trinity,

person is an extrabiblical word that is very nearly unavoidable for us. It is the word in our vocabulary that applies to beings who speak, act intentionally, and so on.

“Thus we learn something very important about the biblical worldview. In Scripture, the personal is greater than the impersonal. The impersonal things and forces in the world are created and directed by a personal God.”⁶

B. God is Absolute

This is more of a philosophical concept; it is impersonal. The gods of the Greeks and Romans are personal but not absolute. The God of Scripture is both personal and absolute. He is sovereign over everything. “Only Scripture presents consistently the reality of a God who is both personal and absolute.”⁷

VI. The Attributes of God (Incommunicable)

A. Aseity⁸

1. *a se* –from Himself. All created things are dependent for their existence on an outside source, i.e. God, who is Himself not dependent on anything or anyone outside of Himself. Hence, He is independent. Or we could say all-sufficient, self-sufficient. If creation were to go out of existence, God would still be. God exists necessarily. It is impossible for Him not to exist. God’s being is therefore totally unique, qualitatively different from our being.
2. *As the Father has life in Himself ... so he has granted to the Son to have life in Himself.* (John 5.26)
3. *To whom will you compare God?... The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.* (Isaiah 40.18, 28)

⁶ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R, Phillipsburg, 2002, pgs. 25-26.

⁷ Op. cit., Frame (quoting Van Til), p. 602.

⁸ Also referred to as God’s independence; all-sufficiency; perfection; self-existence; perfection.

4. The response of the believing heart—*Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides thee.* (Psalm 73.25)
5. “God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify Him and bring Him joy.”⁹
6. We are dependent upon him, but he is dependent on no one. (Psalm 104.27 ff.)
7. God did not create man because he was lonely. He created man and all things for his glory. (Cf. Revelation 4.11)
8. ... *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.* (Acts 17.25)

B. Infinity (God is without limitation)

1. God’s infinity with respect to time—eternity
... *The LORD is the everlasting God.* (Isaiah 40.28; cf. Psalm 90.2)
 - God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and He sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time.¹⁰
 - The Bible speaks in ordinary, not philosophical language. So, the idea conveyed by Scripture about God’s eternity is that of the duration of time extended infinitely backwards and forwards. But God’s eternality is of a different quality, a different order. God is beyond time, having created it. Our existence is marked out by time, but God’s existence is not.
 - *Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 168.

*They will perish, but you will remain;
They will wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
But you are the same, and your years have no end.
(Psalm 102.25-27)*

- “There is biblical reason to conclude that God’s relationship to time is very different from our own.”¹¹
- Regarding the definition of time, Augustine famously said, “*If nobody asks me, I know; but if somebody asks me, I don’t know.*”

2. God’s infinity with respect to space—omnipresence

- Also referred to as *immensity*, God is infinite in that He transcends spatial limitation. *Omnipresence* indicates that He nevertheless fills every part of space with His presence.
- *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!* (Psalm 139.7-8)
- God is distinct from the world and is not to be identified with it (contra Pantheism) while at the same time He is present in every part of creation (contra Deism).¹²
- God is always present, but in different ways in different places. Grudem distinguishes among three ways: God’s presence to punish, to sustain and to bless. “... although there are a few references to God’s presence to sustain or presence to punish, the vast majority of biblical references to God’s presence are simply more brief ways of stating that he is *present to bless.*”¹³

¹¹ Frame, op. cit., p. 554.

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1939, p. 61.

¹³ Grudem, op. cit., p. 177.

- *In your presence is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* (Psalm 16.11; cf. Psalm 23.6)

C. Simplicity (Unity)

1. "God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times."¹⁴
2. God is not composite, i.e. He is not made up of parts. When we say, "God is light," we do not deny that God is also love. Nor do we mean that He is part light, part love, part omnipotent, etc. Each of His attributes can be said to encompass all of who God is. We should therefore be careful about elevating one attribute to a place of importance above others.
3. God is also one, in the sense that He is the only God. *Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.* (Deuteronomy 6.4)
4. Are there more Gods than one?
There is but one only, the living and true God.¹⁵

D. Immutability (Unchangeableness)

For I the LORD do not change. (Malachi 3.6; cf. James 1.17)

- "There is change round about Him, change in the relations of men to Him, but there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purpose, His motives of action, or His promises."¹⁶
- What about promises or threats not carried out and indications that God changes His mind, like Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh?

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 177.

¹⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 5.

¹⁶ Berkhof, op. cit., p. 59.

- “Whenever God issues a promise or a threat which He does not carry out, this merely indicates that there was a contingency, either expressly stated or implied, which would determine whether or not the circumstances would take place.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Wilhelms A' Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 101.