

We Believe in God

LESSON
TWO

HOW GOD IS DIFFERENT



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We Believe in God

Lesson Two

How God Is Different

INTRODUCTION

I was once told about a young man who was taking his friend to hear a new musician in town. “You’re going to love this guy,” he assured his companion.

“Who is he like?” his friend asked.

The young man replied with excitement in his voice, “He’s not like anyone you’ve ever heard before. You’ll be amazed at how different he is.”

We’ve all had experiences like this. There are always ways in which people we admire are like others, but these commonalities usually don’t catch our attention. More often than not, what makes us admire them most is how different they are from others. And in many ways, the same kind of thing is true about God. Every faithful follower of Christ honors and worships God for all that he is and all that he does. But what frequently lifts our spirits in amazement is how gloriously different God is from everything he has created.

This is the second lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, a series devoted to exploring the doctrine of God, or theology proper in systematic theology. We’ve entitled this lesson, “How God Is Different.” In this lesson, we’ll focus on what theologians have often called God’s incommunicable attributes, how gloriously unlike his creation God is.

In our last lesson, we defined divine attributes as:

The perfections of God’s essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

The attributes of God are those qualities of his essence without which he’d no longer be God.

We also saw that theologians have commonly spoken of two main types, or classes, of God’s attributes. His communicable attributes are those qualities of God’s essence that creation can share in limited ways. His incommunicable attributes are those qualities of God’s essence that creation cannot share. In this lesson, we’ll concentrate on the second of these classes, God’s incommunicable attributes — how he is wondrously different from his creation.

When we talk about who God is and what Scripture reveals to us about who God is — what people call the attributes of God — people break them up into communicable, which mean things that are like us, or incommunicable, things that are very different between God and us... Why is that distinction important? It’s important because it helps us to understand who God is — God as distinct... If we think about a word like “aseity,” which means that God exists only by making himself exist. In other words, he depends on nothing;

whereas, we are dependent on him for our existence — that’s the kind of thing that tells us, okay, there’s something very different about who God is from who we are. So, the incommunicable and communicable attributes distinction is good for helping us to know who God is, but also helping us to know how God is God and we are not.

— Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.

Our lesson on the attributes that reveal how God is different from his creation will divide into two main parts. First, we’ll look at the process of identification, how we should identify and define God’s incommunicable attributes. And second, we’ll explore the process of integration, how we should integrate our beliefs about this set of divine attributes with our understanding of God’s other perfections. Let’s begin with the identification of God’s incommunicable perfections.

IDENTIFICATION

There are many ways to approach the identification of these divine attributes. But for the sake of time, we’ll touch on just three key issues. First, we’ll see the biblical foundation for pursuing this goal. Second, we’ll note the theological variety among evangelicals on these matters. And third, we’ll focus on the breadth of biblical perspectives we must keep in view as we define God’s incommunicable attributes. Let’s look at the biblical foundation for identifying these divine perfections.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

General revelation gives us many insights into God’s incommunicable attributes when we contrast the qualities of God’s essence with the qualities of his creation. Medieval Scholastics called this strategy “*via negationis*,” or “the way of negation.” But, as we’ve seen, throughout history God has given his people special revelation to guide us as we reflect on general revelation. And for followers of Christ today, this means that we must do all we can to rest our beliefs about these matters on the foundation of biblical teaching.

As we mentioned in our previous lesson, in the patristic and medieval periods, theology proper was deeply influenced by concepts of God in Hellenistic philosophies. Hellenistic philosophies emphasized that God is transcendent and, therefore, utterly removed from history. Under this influence, Christian theologians recognized the incommunicable attributes of God on nearly every page of Scripture. But, in the modern period, many influential critical theologians, and even a number of evangelicals, have turned from these Hellenistic influences. Rather than stressing God’s transcendence, they’ve focused on his immanence — his involvement in history. And for this reason, it’s quite common for many sincere Christians to downplay, and even deny, that the Bible

supports the traditional doctrine of God's incommunicable attributes. Because of the doubts about these matters, it will help to point to a basic outlook on God that permeates the Scriptures. We have in mind here how biblical authors and characters often referred to the fact that God is incomparable — he is matchless; without equal; supreme. For example, in 1 Kings 8:23, Solomon praised God at the dedication of the temple in this way:

O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below (1 Kings 8:23).

Notice how Solomon's declaration about God's incomparability is without exception. There is no god whether "in heaven above or on earth below" who is "like [God]". We find similar declarations in Psalm 71:19; Psalm 86:8; and Psalm 89:6. And in 2 Samuel 7:22 David said this:

How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you (2 Samuel 7:22).

As we see here, David spoke about God's incomparability in a way that revealed what it means to be God. David said that God is great and that no one [is] like [him]. But he also claimed that the Sovereign Lord — "the Lord, Yahweh," or *Adonai Yahweh* (אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה) in Hebrew — is so great that "there is no God but [God]." In saying this, David revealed that God's incomparability is essential to what makes God, God. Passages like Isaiah 40–46 and Job 40–41 do much the same.

These and similar passages establish the biblical foundation that justifies a careful study of God's incommunicable perfections. These verses reflect the consistent biblical teaching that God is beyond all comparisons with his creation. In a day when this facet of theology proper has been called into question in some circles, and dramatically minimized in others, Scripture continues to reveal God's incomparability. And his incomparability calls on us to learn all we can about how God is different from his creation.

Having noted the biblical foundation for the identification of God's incommunicable attributes, we should turn to a second issue, the theological variety that exists among evangelicals on these matters.

THEOLOGICAL VARIETY

The Scriptures don't give us anything even close to a complete, authoritative list of God's incommunicable attributes. Instead, biblical teachings on these matters appear here and there, in this way and that. For this reason, identifying these divine perfections is similar to constructing intricately designed stained-glass windows out of shapes and hues that appear in different parts of the Bible. As you can imagine, there are many complex processes that go into recognizing these shapes and colors and synthesizing and cataloging them. So, even though we hold many outlooks in common, it shouldn't

surprise us that evangelicals have created different lists of God's incommunicable attributes.

We can gain a sense of this theological variety in a number of ways. But for the sake of convenience, let's look at three historical documents from different branches of the protestant church. First, we'll review the *Augsburg Confession*. Second, we'll consider the *Belgic Confession*. And third, we'll look at the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Let's turn first to the *Augsburg Confession*, written in 1530.

Augsburg Confession

In our last lesson, we noted how the first article of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* summarizes God's attributes in this way:

There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

As we can see, this article speaks of six divine perfections. Although it's something of an oversimplification, it's been common to associate the terms power, wisdom and goodness with God's communicable attributes. These are qualities that his creation, and especially humanity, shares on a creaturely scale. And it has also been common to identify eternal, without body, without parts and the term infinite with God's incommunicable attributes. These are ways in which God is different from his creation.

Keeping in mind the incommunicable attributes listed in the *Augsburg Confession*, let's observe the theological variety among evangelicals by turning to the Reformed *Belgic Confession*, written in 1561.

Belgic Confession

In the first article of the *Belgic Confession* we read these words:

There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ... he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.

As we see here, along with noting that God is a spiritual Being, based on Jesus' words in John 4:24, the *Belgic Confession* describes God with ten other terms. Once again, it's an oversimplification, but by and large, theologians have treated the designations almighty, wise, just and good as communicable attributes, because we share power, wisdom, justice and goodness with God on a creaturely scale. The terms simple — which means that God is not divided into parts — eternal, incomprehensible — which means that we cannot understand anything about God completely — invisible, immutable — or unchangeable — and infinite have usually been taken as references to God's incommunicable attributes.

In our discussion on the theological variety involved in identifying God's attributes, we've seen how the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession* present the incommunicable attributes of God. Now, let's turn to our third important document, the Puritan *Westminster Shorter Catechism* written in 1647.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Question and Answer number 4 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* reads this way:

What is God?

The catechism answers:

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

After describing God as a Spirit, the *Shorter Catechism* lists ten divine perfections. Again, we'll see later that these matters are complex, but it's common to speak of being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth as communicable attributes. And it's also common to identify infinite, eternal and unchangeable, or immutable, with God's incommunicable attributes.

When we set these lists of God's incommunicable attributes alongside each other, we can see that they are not the same. All three documents mention that God is eternal and infinite. But only the *Belgic Confession* and the *Shorter Catechism* state that God is a spiritual Being or a Spirit, and that God is immutable or unchangeable. Only the *Augsburg Confession* claims that God is without body and without parts. And only the *Belgic Confession* says that God is simple, incomprehensible and invisible.

As we can see from these comparisons, evangelicals have expressed God's incommunicable attributes in different ways. But how many substantial differences do these lists reflect?

When theological students first learn that evangelicals don't all use the same terminology for God's incommunicable attributes, they often assume that we believe very different things about God. As in every facet of systematic theology, it's true that variations among us often represent different theological emphases. But more often than not, differences in our lists of God's incommunicable attributes represent little more than variety in terminology. We speak in some detail about theological technical terms in our series *Building Systematic Theology*. So, it will suffice to make this simple point here: Although faithful followers of Christ have used different technical terms to list God's incommunicable attributes, by and large, these lists don't represent substantial differences in our concepts or beliefs about God.

As we've just noted, the *Augsburg Confession* mentions that God is without body. Although the *Belgic Confession* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* don't use this expression, they still convey the same belief or concept. The *Belgic Confession* touches

on this when it says that God is a Spiritual Being and invisible. And *Westminster* affirms that God is a Spirit, and therefore, without body.

The *Augsburg Confession* also states that God is without parts. And the *Belgic Confession* says the same thing when it describes God as simple. As we mentioned earlier, “simple” is an older way of saying “undivided” or “without parts.” And *Westminster* covers this attribute when it says that God is infinite. He has no parts because his perfections have no limits.

In a similar way, only the *Belgic Confession* says that God is incomprehensible. But the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* imply this divine attribute by their use of the term infinite. Because God’s mind is without limits, we cannot comprehend him.

Clearly, theologians have catalogued the incommunicable attributes of God in different ways. But, as we’ve seen, our *concepts* of God aren’t significantly different. So, we should always look beyond particular technical terms and focus on the concepts or beliefs that they signify.

When theologians do their work, or even when a number of believers come together to try to build confessions to be able to give to the church, to be able to describe the beliefs and the theology of the church, in all of those cases, you’re trying to describe the same reality, if the people really do agree. But they may make different choices. If we were to think about a description of God, I mean, we understand that God is one being in three persons, but God is one. And yet God has different attributes... It shouldn’t be a surprise that if we start talking about something that is that immense and that important that we might use different words... We need to try to seek what’s underlying what the words are trying to describe and be able to compare those things. And what can be more confusing is when two different groups of people use the same word to describe two very different things. And then we have to understand that we can’t just put the words next to each other. We have to try to dig behind the words to find out what those theologians, what those authors of these confessions are trying to describe, to be able to take what sits underneath it and to be able to compare that and see where there is and isn’t difference. And very often when we do that task we find there is less difference than we think there is because these are still confessions that are rooted in the authority of Scripture and the work of Christ. And so even if they take different words to describe that one reality, it’s still that one reality that they’re aimed at.

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

This is especially important when we realize that other terms have been commonly used for these attributes as well. For instance, evangelicals commonly refer to the omnipresence of God, the fact that God is everywhere; the omniscience of God, the fact that he knows everything; and the omnipotence of God, the fact that God is all-

powerful. Many theologians also speak of the aseity of God, the fact that God is self-sufficient and independent from his creation; and the sovereignty of God, the fact that God is in total control of creation. To be sure, there are disagreements over some details of these doctrines. But, by and large, differences in terminology don't represent major differences of opinion among well-informed evangelical theologians.

Now that we've considered the biblical foundation for identifying how God is different from his creation, and the theological variety among evangelicals in this facet of the doctrine of God, we should give attention to the wide range of biblical perspectives that help us define these divine perfections more fully.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

It's one thing to come up with a list of terms to describe how God is different from his creation. It's another thing to identify these terms with the many relevant teachings of Scripture. God's incommunicable attributes are some of the most abstract concepts in Christian theology. As a result, Christians have often gone to extremes when determining what these terms mean. As we're about to see, we have to take into account a broad range of biblical perspectives about God if we hope to avoid serious misunderstandings of his incommunicable attributes.

To see the breadth of biblical perspectives that we must keep in mind, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll see how the Scriptures focus on divine transcendence to clarify God's incommunicable attributes. And second, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach about divine immanence. Let's look first at the biblical teaching on divine transcendence.

Divine Transcendence

Transcendence has this concept of above, above and beyond, so when we talk about the transcendence of God what we're saying is that he's — in a sense, it's picture language — we're saying in the way we think of God, we're to think of God as bigger and above merely human. So to talk about God's transcendence, or the divine transcendence, is to describe God as inherently, in his nature, God... not simply an idol, not a god who is maneuvered by humans or magically manipulated, but God. And so part of thinking through who God is, is accepting that he is actually God, and therefore worthy of worship... Isaiah: "holy, holy," this great, enormous God, the Creator, the master of time and space, above and beyond merely his creation, and above and beyond the manipulation of humans — transcendent. God in his own inherent nature.

— Dr. Josh Moody

Simply put, when we speak of “divine transcendence” we mean that God isn’t restricted by the limitations he established for his creation. He’s above and beyond creation. *Every* standard list of God’s incommunicable attributes rests on what the Bible teaches about God’s transcendence. But for the sake of time and simplicity, we’ll explore the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 4, to illustrate what we mean.

The *Shorter Catechism* speaks of divine transcendence by listing three incommunicable perfections. It tells us that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Let’s note first how the Scriptures teach that God is infinite.

Infinite. Many Christians are surprised to learn that the word “infinite” isn’t found in the Bible. Rather, it’s a philosophical technical term for a concept that appears in a variety of ways throughout Scripture. In English, we often translate “infinite” from two Latin theological terms. The first is *immensus*, which means “immeasurable” or “incalculable.” The second is *infinitus*, which means “unending” or “unlimited.” So, when we say that God is infinite, we mean that God is the opposite of his finite creation. He is immeasurable, incalculable, unending, and unlimited. Simply put: God’s perfections are without limits.

A number of biblical passages rather explicitly refer to different ways in which God is infinite. For example, in 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon indicated that God cannot be limited by space when he declared to God, “even the highest heaven, cannot contain you.” And, in Romans 11:33, Paul indicated that God’s knowledge and wisdom can’t be measured when he spoke of God’s “unsearchable . . . judgments, and . . . paths” that are “beyond tracing out.” And, as the Psalmist put it in Psalm 139:6, God is so great that knowledge of him is “too wonderful . . . too lofty . . . to attain.” These and similar passages indicate that it is right to speak of God as infinite in his perfections.

God’s infinity is a way of speaking about God's unlimitedness. We live in the coordinates of time and space. There is a progression of our own lives that takes place in time and in space. Even those two coordinates are difficult to talk about in the abstract. And so, when we speak of God's infinity, we’re trying to articulate, communicate that God is not bounded in the same way we are by time and by space. So, God's temporal existence, or spatial existence, is a kind of misuse of categories. God in one sense — again, we’re using language to speak about an experience beyond our own experience — is outside of time, but even then we’re using spatial language to talk about time. So to speak of God's infinity is to say God is not limited in the ways that we are limited.

— Dr. Richard Lints

In addition to affirming divine transcendence by revealing ways that God is infinite, the Scriptures also refer directly to the abstract idea that God is eternal.

Eternal. Our English word “eternal” is often used to translate the biblical terms “*ad*” (עַד), “*olam*” (עוֹלָם) and occasionally “*natsach*” (נָצַח) in the Old Testament, and “*aión*”

(αἰών) and “*aiónios*” (αἰώνιος) in both the Greek Old Testament — or Septuagint — and the New Testament. Of course, these terms are also applied to facets of creation, but not in the same sense as they are applied to God. Creation is temporal, limited by time in many different ways. But God is not. God is eternal in the sense that God’s perfections are not subject to time.

A number of biblical passages speak of different dimensions of the eternality of God. For instance, 1 Timothy 1:17 speaks of God as the eternal ruler. It says, “Now to the King eternal ... the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.” Revelation 4:8, praises God as eternal when the heavenly creatures call him the one “who was, and is, and is to come.” And 2 Peter 3:8 speaks of how God transcends all of history when it says, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” These and many similar passages make it clear that God’s perfections are eternal.

The Bible often speaks of God as eternal. That means from everlasting to everlasting, so there was no beginning when there wasn’t a God or when God did not exist. Creation is not eternal. Creation had a beginning. All of the universe had a beginning. God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. But God does not have a beginning. God has been from eternity without end, and God is God forever, so from everlasting to everlasting. And so, "eternal" would refer to that he’s from everlasting and to everlasting. There’s no time when God does not exist, either in the past or in the future.

— Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

The Scriptures not only demonstrate divine transcendence by establishing that God is infinite and eternal, they also explicitly point to the fact that God is unchangeable.

Unchangeable. There are a number of biblical expressions that indicate that God is unchangeable. The Hebrew verb “*shanah*” (שָׁנָה) means “to change.” The verb “*nacham*” (נָחַם) means “to change one’s mind.” And the New Testament Greek noun “*parallage*” (παράλλαξις) means “change” or “variation.” Common experience and the Bible make it clear that everything in creation is, at some level, changeable. But when these terms are applied to God, they speak of another way in which God is amazingly different from his creation. According to the Bible God’s perfections cannot change.

God himself said he was unchangeable rather plainly in Malachi 3:6. In this verse, he contrasted his own constancy with the instability of Israel’s commitment by stating, “I the Lord do not change.” Numbers 23:19 contrasts God with human beings by saying, God is “not a human being, that he should change his mind.” And in James 1:17, James assured his audience of God’s consistency by describing him as “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” These and similar passages depict God as one who is immutable or unchangeable.

God doesn’t change, and that comes specifically straight from the Bible in many places, but most obviously, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.” The Bible is clear that God doesn’t

change, and yet it does describe things that look like change... For example, when we're talking about God's law, the Bible doesn't indicate that God over time gets a little softer, you know. God doesn't lower his standards, you know. It isn't like he's looked at the human race for thousands of years now and said, "Well, you know, I knew they weren't perfect, but now I see how really imperfect they are, so they don't have to live up to the same standards." Those things never change. What God told Moses on Mount Sinai and what God has revealed throughout the Scriptures, still the same. We are held to the same standard, which would be very frightening if it were not for the fact that the gospel message doesn't change either, that God has always loved his creation and specifically, very purposefully, loved human beings enough that he came into the world to make a difference in our lives, to change it so that we wouldn't be consigned to hell forever but could live with him in heaven forever... God's immutability is a warning to us on the one side and a great comfort to us on the other.

— Dr. Jeffery Moore

When we consider both general revelation and the Scriptures, it's difficult to deny that God transcends his creation in all three of these ways. Creation is finite, but God is infinite. Creation is temporal, but God is eternal. Creation is changeable, but God is unchangeable.

Still, we have to be careful here. Terms like "infinite," "eternal" and "unchangeable" are so abstract that they can be easily misconstrued. For instance, many beginning students of theology go to an extreme. They act as if God's incommunicable attributes form an impenetrable barrier between God and his creation. Despite many rather obvious teachings to the contrary, in both Scripture and systematic theology, some people *only* see God's transcendence. They convince themselves that because God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, he cannot actually enter into and engage the finite, temporal and changing world.

Many argue, for instance, that because God has infinite knowledge, God never investigates circumstances. But the Scriptures frequently speak to the contrary. For instance, in Genesis 18:20-21, God sent angelic spies to investigate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Similarly, some people hold that because God is eternal, God never waits to react to human obedience and disobedience. Actually, he does this quite often. For example, Deuteronomy 8:2 tells us that God waited to judge Israel in the exodus until after they had failed their tests of obedience.

In addition, many maintain that because God is unchangeable, God never responds to prayers. But God responds to prayer throughout the Bible. We see this in places like Exodus 32:14. After God stated that he was going to destroy the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, he responded to Moses' prayer and refrained from destroying his people.

So, how do these evangelicals reconcile their views of God's incommunicable attributes with these and similar teachings of Scripture? Unfortunately, all too often they treat biblical references to God's engagements with his creation as mere "appearances." From this point of view, God doesn't actually involve himself with his creation. He only gives us the *impression* that he does. But when we conceive of God's incommunicable attributes in ways that diminish the reality of his involvement with creation, we strike at the heart of biblical faith. What could be more important in Scripture than the fact that God is fully and genuinely engaged with his finite, temporal and changing creation? What could be more important to all of us than the reality that God interacts with us?

To avoid these serious misconceptions we must always consider the full scope of biblical perspectives about God's incommunicable attributes. We've seen how the Scriptures refer to divine transcendence. Now, let's see how they also affirm divine immanence.

Divine Immanence

On the whole, "divine immanence," refers to the reality of God's involvement with his creation. In fact, the Bible devotes much more time to God's immanent involvement in the world than it does to his transcendence. We see this in the many ways Scripture reports God's historical manifestations. "Historical manifestations" are the ways God involved himself with the unfolding of biblical history. The Scriptures give us many descriptions of God. They reveal a variety of his names and titles; they offer countless metaphors and similes for God; and they report a number of his actions. In some cases, the Scriptures focus on God's historical manifestations in short periods of time. In other cases, they reflect on his historical displays over long periods of time. They deal with God's activities in his heavenly court and on earth. They disclose things about his interactions with the spiritual world and with the physical world; with large groups of people and with smaller groups; with families and even with individuals.

Unfortunately, some well-meaning Christians have misinterpreted the Bible's emphasis on divine immanence. They've viewed God's interactions with his creation as a denial of his divine transcendence. Some of these outlooks are more extreme than others. But, in one way or another, they all stress divine immanence to such a degree that they reject God's incommunicable attributes.

For instance, they conclude that God must be finite because he asks questions, expresses frustration, and doesn't immediately overcome evil. Some theologians have suggested that God is not eternal because he waits to act until after he tests his people, he offers salvation, and he threatens judgment. These same theologians have concluded that God is changeable because God answers prayer, relents, and revises guiding principles. These points of view deny the full reality of divine transcendence in favor of divine immanence.

But to deny that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in these ways is also to strike at the heart of biblical faith. How can we be confident that God's purposes will not fail if God is limited in his power? How are we to be sure that Christ has secured our eternal salvation if God is subject to time? How can we affirm that God's promises are

reliable if God is changeable? As important as it is to affirm the immanence of God — his full engagement in history — we must also affirm what the Scriptures teach about the incommunicable attributes of God.

To understand God’s incommunicable attributes, we must hold firmly to the full range of biblical perspectives on God’s transcendence *and* his immanence. This isn’t easy to do because we quickly reach the limits of our human abilities to penetrate the mysteries of God. As with many other difficult subjects like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, we come face to face with truths about God that are beyond our grasp. But in the final analysis, the Scriptures call us to embrace both God’s transcendence and his immanence. We stand by the full reality of God’s incommunicable perfections *and* the full reality of God’s engagement with his creation.

Psalm 115:3 succinctly summarizes this biblical point of view when it says:

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him (Psalm 115:3).

Notice how this passage views God’s transcendence — the fact that “God is in heaven” — as the basis upon which we may be confident that “he does whatever pleases him” in creation.

As mysterious as it is, God is infinite, but this doesn’t mean that he’s uninvolved with the finite. From the biblical point of view, it’s precisely *because* God is infinite that he can fully enter the realm of the finite as he wishes.

God is eternal, but this doesn’t mean that he’s outside of time. Rather, his eternity is the reason that he can participate within time in any way he chooses.

God is unchangeable, but this doesn’t mean that he’s absent from the realm of change. It’s precisely *because* God is unchangeable in all of his perfections that he engages his changing creation as he pleases.

As we’ve seen, we must embrace the full breadth of biblical teachings on God’s transcendence *and* immanence if we want to gain a proper understanding of God’s incommunicable attributes.

Theologians speak not only of the transcendence of God, how high and exalted he is, but also about the immanence of God, his closeness and the nearness of his presence. God is intimately involved in what is happening in the world and very close to us. And we see this supremely in Jesus Christ and in his incarnation, where the invisible Son of God became visible in the form of human flesh and actually came into our human situation. I think we also see the immanence of God in the nearness of the presence of God the Holy Spirit... And this is one of the mysteries of the being and character of God. He is both transcendent, far above us, but also so near to us and close to us. He is also immanent.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

As we’ve considered how God is different from his creation, we’ve explored the identification of his incommunicable attributes. Now, we’re ready to turn to our second

main topic in this lesson: the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other perfections.

INTEGRATION

It's been customary for systematic theologians to distinguish God's incommunicable and communicable attributes from each other. But many have questioned how useful this distinction actually is. The Scriptures don't separate these divine attributes into classes. In fact, as we're about to see, biblical authors treated all divine attributes as closely interconnected. So, if we want to know how God is different from his creation, we need to see that he's different from us in all of his attributes. In other words, God is transcendent, beyond compare, not just in some, but in *every facet* of his divine essence.

We'll explore the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other perfections in three steps. First, we'll consider the biblical foundation for integrating God's attributes. Second, we'll note the theological variety among evangelicals on these matters. And third, we'll explore the breadth of biblical perspectives necessary to integrate all of God's attributes. Let's begin with the biblical foundation for exploring the integration of God's attributes.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Integrating God's attributes accords with the longstanding Christian doctrine of the "simplicity of God." God isn't simple in that he's easy to understand. When theologians speak of God's simplicity, they have in mind that God's essence is not a composite; it's not divided. As the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* puts it, God is "without parts". And as the first article of the *Belgic Confession* expresses it, God is "one ... simple and spiritual Being."

The doctrine of simplicity has been disputed over the centuries. What it does not mean is that God has no personality, no movement, no dynamism, no characteristics. It doesn't mean that he is simple in the sense that he's some sort of platonic being with no attributes. What it means is that he's, if I can put it this way, he's one kind of being. He does not add anything outside of himself to himself. He's not composed. He's not a bunch of parts added together the way some theologians think. So he is, the Bible says, God is a spirit. A spirit by definition is a simple being, not composed, not complex, not polytheistic. And again, this is ultimately a very comforting doctrine to us because it means our God is pure; he is not an amalgam of things that were put into his being or that he composed... So, it's not that he is simplistic or has no interest or intrigue or personality or

love or attributes, it is that his being is not an addition of various parts. He is pure Spirit.

— Dr. William Edgar

During the patristic and medieval periods, the influence of Hellenistic philosophies on leading Christian theologians made it easy to affirm the doctrine of God's simplicity. Hellenistic outlooks on God emphasized the absolute unity or oneness of God. And this backdrop led biblical interpreters to be keenly aware of this theme in the Scriptures. But in more recent history, as the influence of Hellenistic philosophy has waned, a number of leading theologians have doubted that the Scriptures teach the simplicity or unity of God's essence. So, it's important to point out the biblical foundation for this doctrine. Moses' well-known words in Deuteronomy 6:4 have often been used to support belief in God's simplicity. There we read:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Modern translators have offered several alternative translations: "The Lord our God is one Lord"; "The Lord is our God, the Lord is one"; or "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

Those who don't see the simplicity of God in this passage argue that it calls for Israel to serve only Yahweh rather than some other god. But, the traditional translation of "the Lord is one" implies the oneness or unity of God himself. Although the Hebrew grammar supports both of these possibilities, there's good reason to think that Moses intended the latter.

We could say many things in favor of the traditional translation, but it will suffice to put it this way: In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses called Israel to be loyal to God and to turn away from all other gods. We know that, at times, the Israelites were tempted to total apostasy by utterly rejecting the Lord and serving the gods of other nations. But more often, the Israelites fell into syncretism and mixed the beliefs and practices of other nations and religions with their own. These other nations referred to their gods, like the Baals, Ashtaroths and other gods, in the plural because they believed that these gods were divided, as it were, among different places. They acknowledged these gods one way in one place and another way in another place.

By contrast, Moses repeatedly taught Israel that God should only be worshipped at the one place that God ordained. Unlike the gods of other nations, God could not be divided into parts between one place and another because "the Lord is one." In this sense then, Deuteronomy 6:4 lays a foundation for the Christian doctrine of the simplicity of God, the fact that God is not divided into parts. In the literal translation of James 2:19, James confirmed this understanding of Deuteronomy 6:4 when he said:

You believe that God is one; you do well (James 2:19, ESV).

James did not write, “You believe that *there is one God*,” as some translations put it. He literally wrote, “You believe that God is one.” In this way, James confirmed that Deuteronomy 6:4 teaches the oneness, the unity, the simplicity of God.

The biblical doctrine of divine simplicity has many implications for theology proper. But as we can see here, this doctrine establishes the biblical foundation for exploring the integration of God’s attributes. God’s perfections are not different parts of God. They are all fully unified, interconnected qualities of his one essence.

With this biblical foundation for the integration of God’s attributes in mind, we should turn to a second issue: the theological variety among evangelical approaches to integrating God’s communicable and incommunicable perfections.

THEOLOGICAL VARIETY

As we saw earlier in this lesson, even though evangelicals have used a variety of terms to sum up the incommunicable attributes of God, there has been a great deal of unity. In many ways, the same kind of thing is true of the integration of God’s incommunicable attributes with his communicable attributes. This integration has been expressed in a number of ways. Yet, to one degree or another, evangelicals, rather consistently, have affirmed the value of integrating these two classes of attributes.

To explore this theological variety among evangelicals, let’s look once again at the three documents we mentioned earlier. First we’ll examine the *Augsburg Confession*. Then we’ll look at the *Belgic Confession*. And third, we’ll spend some time with the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Consider first, the *Augsburg Confession*.

Augsburg Confession

You’ll recall that the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* refers to God as:

Eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

As we mentioned earlier, the terms eternal, without body, without parts and infinite are frequently associated with God’s incommunicable attributes because he is different from his creation in these ways. The last three terms, power, wisdom, and goodness, are usually identified as communicable attributes because we can share these qualities with God on a creaturely scale.

But notice that the *Confession* doesn’t treat these categories as entirely separate. It doesn’t simply speak of God’s power, wisdom and goodness. Rather, it adds the adjective “infinite” — or *immensus* in Latin. The grammar of the Latin text indicates that God is infinite in his power, infinite in his wisdom, and infinite in his goodness.

In effect, the *Augsburg Confession* looks *through* God’s infinity, through the fact that he is unlimited, and views his power, wisdom and goodness *in the light of his*

infinity. And in so doing, the *Confession* acknowledges that God's incommunicable attribute of infinity should be fully integrated with his communicable attributes.

We can see the theological variety in approaches to God's attributes by comparing what we've just seen in the *Augsburg Confession* with the first article of the *Belgic Confession*.

Belgic Confession

The *Belgic Confession* says that God is:

Eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, [and] good.

We mentioned earlier that, more often than not, the terms eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable and infinite are classified as incommunicable attributes. And the last four terms are most commonly associated with God's communicable attributes. But notice that these last four attributes are not listed simply as "mighty, wise, just and good." Although our standard English translations don't make this clear, the original French here uses the phrases "*tout puissant*," meaning "completely or perfectly mighty," and "*tout sage*," meaning "completely or perfectly wise." In addition, the adjective "*tout*" can be extended implicitly to "just" and "good," so that we translate them "*perfectly just*" and "*perfectly good*."

Much like the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Belgic Confession* looks *through* the fact that God is infinite and views his might, wisdom, justice and goodness in the light of his infinity. Although the *Belgic Confession* doesn't use exactly the same words or the same divisions as the *Augsburg Confession*, we can see the similarities.

Keeping in mind the theological variety that we've seen in the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, let's turn to the much more extensive pursuit of integration that appears in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

As you'll recall, the answer to Question 4 of *Westminster* begins with the statement that:

God is a Spirit

It then lists three incommunicable attributes of God as Spirit:

infinite, eternal and unchangeable

But rather than allowing us to think of these incommunicable perfections in isolation, *Westminster* explains that all three of them are true of God:

in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

The *Westminster Catechism's* strategy for integrating God's attributes offers many advantages. To begin with, it uses three broad categories to summarize God's incommunicable attributes. How is God different from his creation? He is "infinite, eternal and unchangeable." Then the *Catechism* answers the question of how God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable by looking *through* these three windows, or attributes, to his communicable attributes. God is infinite "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. God is eternal "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. God is unchangeable "in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. In effect, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* provides a systematic way of exploring the full integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his communicable perfections.

Now that we've looked at the integration of God's incommunicable attributes with his other attributes by considering the biblical foundation and the theological variety among evangelicals in this area, let's explore the value of taking into account the breadth of biblical perspectives on these matters.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

Everything we've said in this lesson has been designed to help us answer the question, "How is God different from his creation?" And as we've suggested, God is different from his creation in *all* of his perfections. The Scriptures point us in this direction in so many ways that we can only touch on a few of these biblical perspectives. But the heart of the matter is this: When we consider the full range of what the Bible teaches, it becomes increasingly clear that *all* of God's attributes, not just some, are incommunicable.

We'll illustrate what we have in mind by following the strategy of the fourth question and answer in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. As we mentioned earlier, the *Catechism* systematizes these matters by noting that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in *each* of the communicable attributes it identifies.

To see the breadth of biblical perspectives on integrating God's attributes, we'll consider all seven communicable attributes listed in the *Catechism*, starting with the being, or the existence, of God.

Being

In many respects, God's being or existence is an attribute that is communicable, or shared with God's creation. We know that everything that God has created, including human beings, actually exists. But we fail to grasp the glory of God's existence if we don't acknowledge a fundamental difference between God's being and our own. Our

being is finite, temporal and changeable, and God's being is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In traditional systematic theology the difference between God's being and creation has often been highlighted in two main ways. Systematic theologians have referred to God's "immensity" and his "omnipresence."

On the one side, the immensity of God is his infinite, eternal and unchangeable existence beyond creation. In 1 Kings 8:27, when Solomon dedicated the temple, he affirmed a grand theological presupposition that underlies everything in Scripture. He said, "The highest heaven, cannot contain [God]." God is different from his creation in that his existence is in no way limited to the realm of his creation. He existed before there was a creation, he exists without limits currently, and he will continue to exist beyond all of creation forever.

On the other side, the omnipresence of God can be defined as his existence everywhere within creation. Systematic theologians point out that unlike any facet of the finite, time-bound, changeable creation, God's being is in all places. As God put it in Jeremiah 23:24, "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" Belief in the omnipresence of God is so basic to biblical faith that in Acts 17:28 Paul agreed with Greek poets that, "In [God] we live and move and have our being." A number of other passages, like Psalm 139:7-10; Isaiah 66:1; and Acts 7:48-49, also touch on the omnipresence of God.

The one classic passage on which the doctrine of God's omnipresence is built ... is Acts 17:24-28 in which Paul is speaking at Athens and is amazed that God is able to reach even these pagan Gentiles. And so, as part of what he says to explain, God's not just the God of the Jews; God is the God of all people everywhere, earth-wide. He then launches into kind of universe-wide, cosmic-wide. And along the way he makes this comment about God: God is never far from any one of us, pagan or Jewish believer... In fact, he's the God in whom we live and move and have our being. That is, he's everywhere... The other passage to fuse and synthesize Acts 17:24-28 with is Jeremiah 23:23-24 in which the point in that passage is you can't get away from God. There's no place to hide. You know, you can run but you can't hide. And part of what Jeremiah says is because God fills the whole earth.

— Dr. R. Todd Mangum

In addition to God's being, the *Shorter Catechism* also affirms that God's wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Wisdom

In many respects, wisdom is a communicable attribute of God shared by God's rational creatures. But whatever measure of wisdom we possess, Scripture and general revelation make it clear that our wisdom is limited, temporal and changeable. So, one of

the ways God is different from his creation is that his wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Traditional systematic theologians typically stress the incommunicable dimensions of God's wisdom by referring to God's omniscience and his incomprehensibility.

The omniscience of God is the fact that God possesses knowledge of all things. Job 37:16 refers to God's "perfect knowledge." Hebrews 4:13 says that "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight." And Psalm 33:15 says that "[God] considers" — or understands — "everything [people] do." Many other passages illustrate the omniscience of God by pointing out things that God knows that we do not. For instance, in Jeremiah 23:24, God asked, "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?"

The incommunicable character of God's wisdom is also emphasized in the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. This terminology doesn't imply that we can't know anything of the mind of God. On the contrary, we know portions of his thoughts as he reveals them to us. But God's wisdom is incommunicable in the sense that God's thoughts cannot be fully known. As Paul said in Romans 11:33, God's judgments and paths are "unsearchable ... beyond tracing out." Job 11:7 declares that we cannot "fathom the mysteries of God." Psalm 139:6 declares, "[God's] knowledge is too wonderful ... to attain." Similar passages like 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 139:1-4; and Jeremiah 17:10 also indicate that one of the ways God is different from his creation is that, unlike us, his wisdom is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

The wisdom of God are the transcendent thoughts, the thoughts that belong to God, that reside with God, that he wants to share with us. And the truth is, when we're thinking in terms of transcendent, that's the kind of life he wants us to live. But it's beyond us. It's only by God's grace do we have an opportunity to attain to that kind of level of living... We need these transcendent thoughts of God, and then, of course, his Holy Spirit to come live in us so we can not only live that way, think that way, and then articulate to others, "this is the way of wisdom."

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

In the third place, God is not only infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being and wisdom, but also in his power.

Power

Both the Scriptures and general revelation indicate that, in many respects, God's power is a communicable attribute because power is a quality that creation shares. But even the greatest powers in creation are limited, temporal and changeable. So, the Scriptures clearly teach the ways that God's power is incommunicable.

This contrast between God's power and creation is most often expressed in systematic theology in terms of God's "omnipotence" and God's "sovereignty."

On the one side, when we speak of the omnipotence of God, we mean that God is all-powerful. For example, in Job 42:2, Job exclaimed, "you can do all things." Psalm 115:3 says that "[God] does whatever pleases him." Jeremiah 32:17 praises God by saying "nothing is too hard for you." And in Matthew 19:26 Jesus reassured his disciples that "with God all things are possible."

Now, we must be sure to add one important qualification here: God's power is always true to his other attributes. He cannot do things that are contrary to the other perfections of his essence. For instance, the Scriptures explicitly declare some things that God cannot do. We learn that God cannot lie, sin, change, nor deny himself in passages like Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; 2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; and James 1:13, 17. If we keep this qualification in mind, we can be assured that God is omnipotent in the sense that his power is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

The passages in the Bible that seem to indicate that there are some things that God cannot do are really not really talking about the real meaning of God's omnipotence... He can only do that which is consistent with his nature. It would be totally inconsistent with his divine nature to lie. So there are some things that God cannot do, but it's totally within the realm of his nature.

— Rev. Clete Hux

On the other side, systematic theologians refer to the infinite, eternal and unchangeable character of God's power as the "sovereignty of God." Simply put, God's sovereignty is his absolute control over creation.

Now, different branches of the church have disagreed over precisely how God exercises his sovereign control over creation. And we'll discuss these issues in a later lesson. But at this point, we should simply note that the Scriptures teach that God has infinite, eternal and unchangeable power to control everything. As King Jehoshaphat declared in 2 Chronicles 20:6, "Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." Or as Job put it in 42:2, "no purpose of yours can be thwarted." In Daniel 4:35, even King Nebuchadnezzar admitted that God "does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth." According to Ephesians 1:11, God's sovereignty is so extensive that he "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." And Romans 8:28 assures us of God's sovereignty even during times of great trials because "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." These and countless other passages clearly indicate that God's sovereignty is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In addition to its treatment of God's being, wisdom and power, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* also points out that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his holiness.

Holiness

In many respects, holiness is a communicable attribute of God because it's shared by some facets of creation. The Scriptures frequently refer to locations, objects, spirits and people as holy. And the biblical adjectives that we usually translate as "holy," "sacred" or "sanctified" — *qadosh* (קָדוֹשׁ) in Hebrew, and *hagios* (ἅγιος) in Greek — simply mean, "separate" or "set apart." But both general revelation and the Scriptures make it clear that the holiness of creatures is finite, temporal and changeable, while God's holiness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In systematics, theologians most often approach the incommunicable qualities of God's holiness by calling attention to God's moral holiness. They also highlight what may be called his majestic holiness.

On the one side, the moral holiness of God refers to the fact that he is separate from all evil. As Psalm 92:15 puts it, "there is no wickedness in him." And Habakkuk 1:12-13 exclaims, "Holy One . . . Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing." God's moral purity is so basic to biblical faith that James wrote confidently in James 1:13, "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone."

On the other side, the Scriptures also point to what has been called the majestic holiness of God. This terminology indicates that God is separate from all creation, including his morally pure creatures.

The difference between God's moral holiness and his ontological holiness, or majestic holiness, as we might say, goes back to the old idea of what the word "holy" means, and it essentially means, "set apart from." And there's two things that God is set apart from. First of all, he is set apart from sinners. He's pure; he never sins; he is perfectly righteous, and so he's set apart from sinners in that regard — morally perfect, pure, *holy*, in that sense. But there's a second sense in which God is also holy. That is, he's higher than us; he's different than us; he's of a different nature and ontological status — a higher being — and in that respect is holy as well. His ways and his thoughts are far above ours. So, God is holy, that is, set apart, in his being and in the righteousness of his character.

— Rev. Dan Hendley

God's majestic holiness is most vividly illustrated in Isaiah 6:3 where seraphim cry out:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:3).

In this passage, seraphim, morally pure creatures who serve before the throne of God, acknowledge that God is to be worshipped as thrice holy, utterly supreme in his holiness. Similar expressions of God's majestic holiness appear in passages like Exodus 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:2; Isaiah 57:15; and Hosea 11:9.

Not only is God infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being wisdom, power and holiness, these incommunicable qualities also characterize his justice.

Justice

In many respects, both general and special revelation indicate that justice is a communicable attribute because moral creatures, especially human beings, can be just and righteous. The concept of God's justice is often expressed by the family of Hebrew terms associated with the word *tsaddiq* (צַדִּיק), and with the family of Greek terms associated with the term *dikaioné* (δικαιοσύνη). We normally translate these terms "righteousness" or "justice." But while human righteousness and justice are limited, temporal and changing, God's righteousness or justice is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

The attribute of God's justice is most often associated in Scripture with the judgments of his heavenly court. As 1 Peter 1:17 reads, we have a Father who "judges each person's work impartially." According to Romans 2:5-6, in "righteous judgment ... God will repay each person according to what they have done." And because God's judgments are always true, in Romans 9:14, Paul asked, "Is God unjust?" And his reply was firm, "Not at all!" Moses declared, in Deuteronomy 32:4, "All his ways are just ... upright and just is he." So, it's no wonder that in John 17:25, Jesus called his heavenly Father, "Righteous" — or just — "Father."

Systematic theologians have drawn attention to the justice of God by focusing on two main areas: God's just rewards and his just punishments.

On the one side, God's nature is to grant just rewards for righteousness. As Psalm 58:11 puts it, "the righteous still are rewarded [because] ... there is a God who judges the earth." And Paul referred to the righteousness that comes to all who are justified in Christ when, in 2 Timothy 4:8, he spoke of "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award ... to all who have longed for his appearing." It may seem at times as if there is no reward for righteousness. But, we can be assured of God's just rewards because God remains infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his justice.

On the other side, it's God's nature to grant just punishments for evil. In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, Paul insisted that "God is just ... He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." And in Acts 17:31 Paul called for repentance because "[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." In fact, the just punishment of God against sin was a pillar of biblical faith. As Paul explained in Romans 3:26, God is both "just and the one who justifies" because Christ's atonement met the requirement of justice on behalf of all who believe. These and many other passages draw attention to how God's infinite, eternal and unchangeable justice is displayed in his just punishments.

Following God's being wisdom, power, holiness and justice, the *Shorter Catechism* refers to the goodness of God.

Goodness

In many respects, goodness is a communicable attribute because the Scriptures often refer to creation as good. In Genesis 1:31, God looked at his creation and said it was “very good.” And Paul reaffirmed this divine declaration in 1 Timothy 4:4. In general terms, *tov* (טוב) in Hebrew and *agathos* (ἀγαθός) in Greek signify the approval of someone or something. So, many facets of creation can be rightly described as “good.” Of course, the goodness of creation is limited, temporal and changeable. But, by contrast, the goodness of God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

When the Scriptures say that God is “good,” they mean that he is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably deserving of approval. Now, in saying this, we must be quick to add that there is no measure of goodness that God must meet outside of himself. God is the very definition of good. As the first article of the *Belgic Confession* puts it, God is “good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”

In systematic theology, God’s goodness is closely associated with a number of familiar biblical teachings. But it helps to think in terms of two main categories: the direct goodness of God and the indirect goodness of God.

On the one hand, when we speak of the direct goodness of God we have in mind God’s goodness shown in things like his benevolence, mercy, love and patience toward his creatures. For instance, Psalm 34:8 speaks of God’s benevolence as the proof of his goodness when it says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” God’s goodness is associated with his mercy and compassion in Exodus 33:19 where God said to Moses, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Psalm 25:7 speaks of God’s love flowing from his goodness when it says, “according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good.”

Other passages such as Psalm 23:6; Psalm 73:1; Psalm 145:9, 15-16; and Mark 10:18 also point in a variety of ways to God’s goodness. But the most direct display of the infinite, eternal and unchangeable goodness of God is his eternal love for Christ and for all those who are in Christ. As Paul put it in Ephesians 1:4-6:

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Ephesians 1:4-6).

As the larger context of this verse makes clear, our adoption to sonship was in love, the love of God for us from before the creation. And God’s eternal love for his people is in Christ, in the One he loves. The love of God for those who are in Christ is rooted in the infinite, eternal and unchanging love of the Father for his Son.

The Bible tells us much about God's love for us. God loves us in many ways, and he shows us his love for us in many ways. However, the Bible is clear that God definitively and ultimately shows his love for us in the way that he sends his only Son to us. John 3:16 says, “God so

loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” God’s love is most supremely demonstrated then in the giving of his Son to the world in order to save the world. But we must not stop there because God’s love is demonstrated in what he gave his Son to do for us. His Son came in order to be a sacrifice for our sins. In fact, we are not the ones who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins... So, this should bring great encouragement to us. In fact, Paul picks up on this point in Romans 8 and encourages us with these words, he says, “If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?” And so, God has definitively and ultimately and climactically shown us the way he loves us in the giving of his Son. We should therefore trust him and be assured that he really does love us.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

On the other hand, Scripture also draws attention to the infinite, eternal and unchangeable character of God’s goodness by focusing on God’s indirect goodness. Here we have in mind the assurance that God will bring about good even through troubles and trials that temporarily plague his creation. One of the greatest challenges to belief in God’s goodness is the presence of evil in his creation. But biblical authors insisted that the perfection of God’s goodness will cause good to result from evil. For example, James 1:17 tells us that difficult trials are for our good because, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” And as Paul assured the Roman Christians in Romans 8:28, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

After touching on the biblical perspectives associated with God’s being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and goodness, we come now to the truth of God. This is the last of the communicable attributes mentioned in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

Truth

Both the Bible and general revelation make it clear that, in many respects, truth is a communicable attribute. God’s rational and moral creatures can be true, honest, reliable and faithful. The concept of God’s truth derives from the family of Hebrew terms associated with the verb *aman* (אָמַן), often translated “to be sure,” “confirmed” or “true,” and from the well-known term *chesed* (חֶסֶד) often translated “faithfulness” or “lovingkindness.” This concept also comes from the New Testament Greek terms associated with *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια) and *pistis* (πίστις). These biblical terms signify veracity, truthfulness reliability and faithfulness. God’s creatures can exhibit these qualities, but only in finite, temporal and changing ways. By contrast, the truth of God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Paul reflected on the incomparable quality of God’s truth in Romans 3:4 when he said:

Let God be true, and every human being a liar (Romans 3:4).

By and large, systematic theologians have highlighted this attribute of God in two main ways. God is the faithful source of truth, and he is faithful to his promises.

On the one side, God is extolled as the faithful source of truth. In Psalm 119:43, the Psalmist spoke of the Scriptures as God’s “word of truth.” In this same Psalm in verse 142, he confidently declared, “Your law is true.” Psalm 25:5 is a prayer for God to “Guide me in your truth and teach me.” In John 8:32, Jesus explained to his disciples that if they held to his teaching then they would “know the truth, and the truth [would] set [them] free.” In John 16:13, Christ promised his apostles that “the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth.” And in John 17:17, Jesus prayed to the Father, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” In these and other ways, the Scriptures make it clear that when God discloses truth, it is fully reliable because it is his very nature to be faithful and true.

On the other side, God is also infinitely, eternally and unchangeably truthful or faithful to his promises. God can be relied upon to fulfill all of his promises. Now, we have to be careful here. Many times in Scripture what may *appear* to be a promise from God is actually an offer or a threat from God with implicit conditions. If the implicit conditions aren’t met, God’s offer or threat is not fulfilled. But as Paul wrote in Titus 1:2, “God ... does not lie.” If God makes a promise, he will fulfill it. Numbers 23:19; Psalm 33:4; Hebrews 6:18 and many other passages point to God’s faithful fulfillment of all promises. It’s no surprise, then, that Revelation 3:14 introduces the exalted Christ as, “the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.”

We’ve only touched on a few of the many things that could be said about this facet of the doctrine of God. But the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* gives us glimpses into the breadth of biblical perspectives we must consider as we learn about God’s incommunicable perfections. As we’ve seen, the Scriptures don’t present God as infinite, eternal and unchangeable in just *some* ways, but in *every* way. Every facet of his essence is beyond compare. And in this sense, *every* attribute of God is an incommunicable attribute.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we’ve explored how God is different from his creation in two main ways. First, we studied the identification of God’s incommunicable attributes. We looked at the biblical foundation for identifying his perfections, the theological variety among evangelicals in this area, and the breadth of biblical perspectives needed to identify these attributes. We also examined the integration of God’s incommunicable attributes with all of God’s other perfections by considering the biblical foundation, the theological variety among evangelicals, and the range of biblical perspectives we must consider as we pursue these processes.

All too often, followers of Christ don’t recognize the importance of thinking carefully about the incommunicable attributes of God. But our beliefs about the ways

God is different from his creation are so vital to the Christian faith that they impact all of our doctrines, practices and attitudes. Many pillars of Christian doctrine rest on a proper understanding of God's incommunicable perfections. Our daily activities are guided by these truths as well. And our attitudes of humility, confidence, joy and worship before God are deeply influenced by what we believe about this facet of theology proper. Understanding what the Scriptures teach about the incommunicable attributes of God equips us for every dimension of faithful service in Christ.