

The God Who Cannot Be Selfish: The Aseity of God

Acts 17:22-34

By Phillip G. Kayser 5-25-2008

Here's one of the accusations that atheists throw at Christians: "Your God is selfish. All he wants is recognition, glory, attention, worship. He commands you to be self-sacrificing, but He wants everything for Himself." Here is a quote from a recent blog: "I am having trouble seeing the Christian God as anything other than totally narcissistic and self-centered. Here is a quick outline of why... God values his own glory and honor over the well-being of humans... God chooses himself over people for his own benefit. God is selfish."¹ What are we to think of that? I have read Christian blogs that have had questions about what appears to them to be selfishness in God. One blog said, "So God is selfish. Get over it." But I don't think that's a good answer. Selfishness is one of the great sins that ruin humans and that God warns us against. In fact, in Philippians he calls us to imitate God the Son's lack of selfishness. So if, as some people assert, God is selfish to the core of His being just like we humans tend to be, we have a major problem.

There are two answers to this accusation: The first answer is that God is not a solitary Person, but a Trinity. The Islamic God, if he were love at all, would have only been able to love himself before there was a creation. It would have been a self-oriented love leading to selfishness. But since God is a Trinity, we see a radically different character to that love. His love is agape love, which is self-giving and self-sacrificing. The Father loves the Son and Spirit. You see examples of the Father deflecting praise to the Son. "This is My beloved Son, hear Him." (Mark 9:7). And on another occasion He said, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." The Father is represented as giving the Son glory, a people, a world and all things. His love is always out-going and sacrificial. In fact, there was nothing that the Father did not give into the Son's hands. The Son's love is the same. He gives all things to the Spirit and at the Second Coming will give them all back to the Father. His intense desire is to glorify the Father and please Him. The Son so honors the Spirit that he promises that any sin or blasphemy against Himself or the Father would be forgiven, but not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And what is the Spirit's passion? To lift up the Son. So you see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are always flowing outward to

¹ From <http://unbelieveanot.blogspot.com/>

each other in their fellowship, praise and glory. Why does the Son want you to glorify the Father? Because that is the passion of His heart. Why does the Father want you to glorify the Son? Because that is the passion of His heart. And it is because Father, Son and Holy Spirit are so God-focused, that they created all things to be God-focused. That is not selfishness. That is considering the interests of each other Person in the Trinity to be better than their own. That is the antithesis of selfishness.

The second answer is the answer of our text. How could God be selfish when He needs nothing? Look at verse 25 again: **Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.** This is the doctrine of God's aseity. Today's sermon flows from this text, but it will largely be topical. But I felt like I gave short shrift to these verses last week. According to Gordon Clark, this is probably the most foundational doctrine for understanding God.

I. What Is Meant By God's Aseity?

A. From the Latin words "a se" meaning "on Himself."² It means that God depends on Himself and no other. He is independent, self-sufficient, self-existent and in need of nothing. This is summarized by His name "I AM."

Let's start by defining terms. The word aseity is taken from the Latin *a se* meaning on Himself or literally from oneself. It means God did not come from anywhere or receive anything from outside of Himself. He depends on Himself and no other. He is independent, self-sufficient, self-existent and in need of absolutely nothing. God doesn't even need your love, service, money, wisdom or good works. Isn't that a surprise? We tend to think a little more highly of ourselves than that. But before creation and time, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit existed alone, yet in perfect love, fellowship and without any sense of need.

Why do I say this is such good news? Someone might feel, if God doesn't need me, than I am insignificant. I am unimportant. I don't like this doctrine. It doesn't give me self-esteem." And I have to admit, this is a humbling doctrine: *God doesn't need me?!* But once we are humbled, it is also an incredibly encouraging doctrine. Can you imagine how awful it would be to discover that the only reason God said He loved you was because He needed you; or was because He wanted to get things out of you,

² Or more literally, "from oneself"; that God came from and owes no one except Himself.

to use you and manipulate you? You've probably all felt what it's like to be used by other people in relationships. You thought the person loved you, but it turns out that all they had in mind was filling their own needs. But if it was not for this doctrine of aseity, God could be misunderstood as the biggest user of all. And I have read books that claim that God created us because He was lonely and needed our love and fellowship. And it was worth the risk of many people rejecting Him so that He could have that fellowship. He wanted fellowship with everyone, but he had to give people a free will in order to have fellowship. So hell is an unwanted and tragic side-note to God's need for fellowship. That atheist website rightly criticized that as selfish. And Scripture says, "No. God was never lonely. He had perfect fellowship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Need is not a good basis for love in human relations, and it certainly would not be good if God had such emotional needs. I think the Scripture is clear on that.

Another example: Can you imagine how frightening it would be to discover that God couldn't do certain things in your life because He had needs just like any other person? Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, sees God as having needs and insufficiencies. He said, "Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check and limiting the damage evil can do." (p. 45 of Horton) Perhaps your financial deal fell through because God needed more time and He wasn't able to work all things together for good. God could have done it if He had just a little more time, or perhaps a few more people who would have worked for Him, etc. No. Romans 8:28 is true because God has no needs.

The aseity of God is a critically important doctrine, and yet it is a doctrine that many Evangelicals deny continually. I will be giving you a few examples today, but let me start with a quote on prayer.

This comes from an incredibly popular book. And I have to admit, I have enjoyed and benefited from the book myself. But in there the author makes this horrible mistake. He says, "The fact remains that, when we pray for others, somehow or other it opens the way for God to influence those we pray for. God *needs* our prayers, or He would not beg us to pray."³ And quotes like this could be multiplied.

B. God needs nothing

³ The Unknown Christian, *The Kneeling Christian*, pp. 110-111.

1. He doesn't need your service and worship (Acts 17:25; Luke 17:10)

People sometimes say that God needs our worship or our service, but what does this text say? Beginning at verse 24: **God, who made the world and everything in it** [Now just think of that for a sec. If God made everything, then logically God is not dependant upon it. Creation is dependant upon Him. That's a part of aseity.] **since He is Lord of heaven and earth** [as Lord he is not dependant], **and does not dwell in temples made with hands** He is not limited by space. He doesn't need to be in the right place at the right time since He is everywhere.] But notice verse 25: **Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything** [let me repeat that: "as though He needed anything"], **since He gives to all life, breath and all things.** Paul says that God doesn't need our worship. After all, we wouldn't be able to sing praises if God didn't give us breath, and life and all things. There is nothing we can give to God that God hasn't first given to us. Scripture says, **We love because He first loved us.**

In Luke 17:10 Christ said, **So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do."** If Christ commands us to say that we are unprofitable servants, it means that our service doesn't profit God. It doesn't fill up some lack that He has. We are unprofitable servants. It's for our good that we serve, not for His profit.

2. He doesn't need your sacrifices (Psalm 50:8-13)

Turn with me to Psalm 50:8-13. This is another passage which puts us in our place when we start thinking a little too highly of ourselves. God commanded the Israelites to give sacrifices and so it was a duty. No question there. But rather than engaging in this duty out of love and gratitude, the Israelites began doing it in order to manipulate God. "We are doing this for you Lord, what are you going to do for us?" Since God doesn't have a need, He can't be manipulated, so God responds by saying (beginning in verse 8): **I will not reprove you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are continually before Me. I will not take a bull from your house, nor goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the**

day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me. We are the only ones who benefit by glorifying the Lord. He needs nothing.

3. He doesn't need your gifts (Rom. 11:35)

He doesn't need your gifts. Romans 11:35 says, **Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?** God is never indebted to us because He doesn't need our gifts in the first place. And further more, everything we give to Him in the offering plate has been first given to us. We aren't owners. We are merely stewards. So if you think you have earned God's favor by putting in the offering plate, you are mistaken. It is a love relationship, not a merit relationship. And I'm so thankful that part of the overflow of God's heart in giving to us enables us to give to Him even though He doesn't need it. A father doesn't need the scribbled love cards that his three-year-old child so proudly presents to him, but he delights in that love card, and the father's lack of need doesn't keep the child from delighting in giving to the father. It's love, not need that drives that.

4. He doesn't need your wisdom (Job 22:2)

Job 22:2 says, **Can a man be profitable to God, though he who is wise may be profitable to himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that you are righteous? Or is it gain to Him that you make your ways blameless?** God doesn't gain from our wisdom or righteousness. It says that He doesn't profit from our wisdom. You see, this doctrine makes us feel small in a certain sense. And yet it is liberating. We don't have to earn God's favor. The whole world is not going to fall apart because of our limitations.

5. He doesn't need your righteousness (Job 35:7; 22:3)

6. He doesn't need man's testimony (John 2:25)

John 2:25 says, **and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.** Why is it that we are commanded to engage in evangelism and testify to His name? Is it because Jesus needs our testimony? No. He could convert the whole world in the snap of His fingers if He chose. He could just bypass us. It is for an entirely different reason that he calls us to give testimony. And don't get me wrong. Our testimony has significance, and is important, but it is only because God gives it significance. It's a God-centered reason that is for our good because of aseity; because God doesn't have a need.

7. He doesn't need man to glorify Him since He is already "glorious...above all blessing and praise" (Neh. 9:5)

a) It should be remembered that even in glorifying God, God's creatures benefit (Eph. 3:9c-10)

b) Father, Son and Holy Spirit all glorify each other (John 8:54; 17:1) in showing forth His attributes

8. He doesn't need to examine men (Job 34:23)

9. He isn't diminished by man's disobedience (Job 35:6,7)

10. He created all things for the benefit of others (Eph. 3:9c-10).

And you can study some of the other passages in your outline on your own. I will skip over some of them. I give passages that show how the idols of man all need men in some way, but God is self-sufficient. And by the way, that's why we like idols. They are beholden to us in some way. They are dependant upon us in some way. They can be manipulated. They need us. We like to be needed. But God says that He doesn't need us. And that is humbling.

The outline points out that an aspect of aseity is that God owns everything in this universe and does not owe us anything. Now that may raise the hackles of your flesh because the flesh makes us think that everyone owes us. And it's easy for any of us to fall into that mind set. Job began to think that God owed him an explanation. He got a little bit upset with God and was beginning to demand an answer. But God addressed Job on this issue and said, No. **I owe no one anything. Everything under heaven is Mine.** (Job 41:11 Living) Now if God owes us nothing, this means that when he binds Himself with a promise, it is God's Word alone, God alone who makes the obligation true. Now there are promises that God has to come through on (I'm not questioning that), and we can count on those promises. But it is because He obligated Himself. It's not because there was anything good in us. It was totally self-giving. As Acts 17 says, **He gives....all things**

I want you to turn with me to Exodus 3 and we will finish off our description of God's aseity under point I with this passage. This is not in

your outlines. I think this is one of the most beautiful summaries of God's aseity. It is the use of the name "I AM." Moses was a man who sensed a great deal of need in himself. You might say that he was insecure. And God's solution was not to build up Moses' self-esteem. Look at verse 4: **So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."**

Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. God's solution to Moses inadequacy is not to say what a swell guy Moses is. Moses knows he is not even worthy to be standing on the ground where God is. In verse 6 Moses covers his face because he is afraid to look at God. There was no way you could convince Moses to say, "I'm OK you're OK." But God focuses Moses' attention off of himself, and off of his inadequacies and onto God's all sufficiency. You see, if God needs nothing and has everything, and naturally gives out of the overflow of His heart (as Acts 17 says) then He is the one that can meet our needs, isn't He? And so God speaks of all the blessings He has given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in verses 6-9. Then in verse 10 he says, **Come now, therefore** [on the basis of My sufficiency that I have already demonstrated, Come now therefore], **and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.** Now Moses is overwhelmed with his sense of need and he says, "No way. I can't do this." The first excuse is given in verse 11. **But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"** Moses says, "I'm needy. I can't do this. I've got all kinds of lacks and inadequacies. And here comes God's solution. **So He said, "I will certainly be with you..."** Is that selfishness? No. That is agape love; self-sacrificial love. He is in effect saying, "You may not be adequate Moses, but don't worry - I will be with you." And for each excuse that Moses brings up, God points Moses to God and the fact that God can handle any situation. He had a hard time trusting God's sufficiency. He thought that God needed someone who could speak better than he could, and God responded, "Who made the mouth? I did. You don't think I can come through for you?" And God answers all seven of Moses excuses by pointing to God's sufficiency. But I think God's response in verses 14-15 sums up the aseity of God so well. **And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."** **And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you."** **Moreover God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: "The LORD [that's the word Jehovah which is a variation on the root word for I Am: "The**

LORD] God of your Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.

Central to God's character and being is that He is eternally present and self-existing. He didn't come from others. He just is. He exists eternally and independently of all others. And by the way, when Christ used this title "I AM," the Jews knew exactly what He was saying. When Christ said, **before Abraham was, I am**, He was making claims to aseity - to being very God of very God and they picked up stones to stone Him.

But wrapped up in the name "I am" and its sister word "Jehovah" is God's Lordship over all, His self-sufficiency and His aseity. Notice that this text doesn't say, "I will become," but "I am." If God said, "I will become," there would be a need in Him – a need for growth and development. But He says, "I am." And because God has no needs, He can convince Moses that He can supply any needs that we may have. Are you weak? God said, "I am the Almighty." Are you in bondage? God says, "I am the Redeemer of Israel." Are you filled with sorrow and grief? God says, "I am your comfort," "I am the joy of your salvation." "I am the Bread of life. I am the Living Water, I am the light of the world, I am the first and the last, I am the deliverer, and I am the True and Faithful One. And you can fill in the multitude of other I AM's that Christ is. He has no needs, which means that He can supply all our needs.

C. Unlike other gods, He is self-sufficient (Is. 40:12-31; 41:1-29; 44:9-28; 46:1-10; Jer. 10:1-16)

D. God owns all things (Ps. 24:1; 50:10f.; Gen. 14:19,22; Ex. 19:5; Deut. 10:14)

E. God owes nothing (Job. 41:11; Rom. 11:35ff) and thus all His promises are free, voluntary acts to obligate Himself.

F. God is independent

1. of all things (Psalm 94:8f; Is. 40:18ff.; Acts 7:25)
2. in His thought (Rom. 11:33,34)
3. in His will (Dan. 4:35; Rom. 9:19; Eph. 1:5; Rev. 4:11)

4. in His power (Ps. 115:3)
5. in His counsel (Ps. 33:11)
6. etc.

G. All creation is dependant upon God (Acts 17:25-28)

H. Thus there is a Creator-creature distinction that will never be crossed.

II. What Differences Does His Aseity Make?

A. It means we can never accuse God of being selfish or seeking His own needs (He has none).

Now how do we apply this doctrine of aseity? We can't imitate aseity itself or we would be God. In your systematic theologies, this will be listed as one of God's incommunicable attributes. That means that it is unique to God, He can't communicate it to us, and therefore we will never have any aseity. It is the nature of Godhood to have aseity and it is the nature of creature-hood to not have aseity - to be dependent. So we can't imitate the aseity itself. But we can imitate the self-giving concerns that aseity gives to God – if God indwells us.

Let's think about that for a moment. Because God doesn't have needs, it is impossible for Him to be selfish; to serve His own needs. If He doesn't have any needs He can't logically be said to serve His own needs, right? And yet it would be a mistake to say that because God doesn't need us He doesn't love us. There could be no greater love than God has demonstrated toward us. God values us and delights in us not because we are good or because we contribute anything to Him, but because it is of His nature to be self-giving. So it would be a mistake to say that because God doesn't need us, He doesn't love us as much. It is precisely because He doesn't have any needs that He has the most selfless, highest degree of agape love.

In the same way, it would be a mistake for us to say that we can only love a husband or wife who still meets our needs. That's the root problem with a book on my shelf called *His Needs; Her Needs*. Though it has some helpful stuff in it, a lot of it is so self-focused. I've read books that say that you can only love and accept others after you have first loved and accepted yourself. Scripture says the exact opposite. Christ said that you can't be His disciple unless you hate your own life also. We tend to love people who are

easy to get along with; who are fun, or who in some way meet our needs. But Christ commanded us to love our enemies as well. Paul commanded us, **Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.** (1 Cor. 10:24)

God can do it because He doesn't have any needs. But we can also do it because our needs are met in Christ Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ told us not to be seeking our needs (which the Gentiles seek after) but to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and (the needs aren't ignored) all these things will be added to us. Having needs is part of creaturehood. There's nothing wrong with that. We can't avoid that. But God wants us to not be selfish. Our needs are to be served by serving others. We cannot do this apart from a relationship with the Great I AM and the overflow of His strength into our lives. And as long as we selfishly pursue our own needs first, we will never know the delight of experiencing the Great I AM coming through in our lives as He did in Moses' life. Because selfishness is so hateful to God, He has guaranteed that those who put themselves first will find themselves last; those who seek their own welfare only, will never be satisfied. So we can imitate the logical results of God's aseity because God has promised to meet all of our needs in Christ Jesus.

B. It means that God doesn't love us for what He can get out of us. He is not self-serving or manipulative. His love is the purest form of agape.

C. It means that God cannot be manipulated by us

Point C. God's aseity means that we cannot manipulate God. The way some of us pray, you would think that God was dependant upon us. Listen to this quote from a popular book on the Gospel. The author over and over paints God as dependant upon us, and as having needs. He says, "When God finds us, he comes not as one who confers a favor out of his superfluity [so he is denying aseity there]; He comes asking a favor of us. He stands as a beggar at our door; He makes no effort to break in upon our independence; He merely pleads that we will be so good as not to refuse the gift which He has traveled so far to bring."⁴ That heresy comes from the lips of Culbert Rutenber. I hope you don't pray with that attitude. That strips God of His Godhood. Our prayers need to be more full of praise for who He

⁴ Culbert G. Rutenber, *The Reconciling Gospel* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1960), p. 35.

is; more full of His Scriptural promises we are laying claim to, and more full of thanksgiving for what He has done. In other words they need to be more God centered. I was reading a blog where a Reformed guy was arguing with a Purpose Driven Life guy over whether God was God-centered or man-centered. The Reformed guy said he was God-centered or He would cease to be God. The other guy said He was man-centered or God would be selfish. I hope by now you can see the foolishness of a man-centered theology. It will strip God of His Godhood and ironically rob man of all that man needs. I think it was Michael Horton who said that the God of evangelicals has become too small. If we see God for who He really is, and we see how feeble we really are, our prayer life will be affected. We won't try to manipulate Him. Instead, we will be able to pray in faith for our true needs, knowing that God loves to give all good things, but we will seek to glorify Him with all that He gives.

D. It means we don't have to impress God. We can focus on loving Him instead.

But point D: God's aseity frees us from having to impress God. That was the point of Psalm 50. Rather than bringing worship out of hearts of love and gratitude, they were seeking to impress God with pomp and ceremony and the amount of skill and sacrifice involved. God sees the heart and He knows whether it is outward show or whether there is genuine love. God would far rather receive singing that was off key with pure hearts that were out and out for Him, then the most spectacular singing with self-seeking, careless hearts. Realizing that God isn't impressed and doesn't have needs, helps us to focus on what is important: relationship with Him.

E. It means that God's actions are all sacrificial and self-giving.

There is a lot that could be said about each of these points, but I will leave some of that for your families to discuss. But point E says that if God needs nothing, this means that all of His actions towards others are self-giving rather than self-serving. And we need to interpret God's providences in this way. When a tragedy strikes, do we have the faith to believe with Joseph, God meant this for good? Or do we feel like God doesn't care, is being stingy or is being selfish with His abundance that He could have given, but withheld? God's wisdom assures us that this thing that came into our lives has meaning, is rational and part of a wise plan. God's power assures us that God is in complete control. God's personality assures us that this was not done in a cold, calculated way. But this doctrine of aseity

assures us that there was not a speck of selfishness involved. Even when you think of reprobation of the non-elect in hell, this is true. Romans 9 tells us that God endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. Doing this was sacrificial. Ephesians 3 tells us that God allowed all this to show forth His glory to the church. We would never have known the depths of God's love if God had not allowed sin. Nor would we have known His wrath, justice, mercy or other attributes in the same glory. God benefited the church in all He did.

F. It means that there is no lack in God. He is the Great I Am for all our needs. He gives out of His superfluity.

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G. Though God has made our work significant, the burden of success does not rest on our shoulders. He has made us significant, even though we are not needed.

H. It means that your relationship to God is more important than trying to impress God (Amos 5:20-23), and God has ordained that it is better for us (Jer. 7:21-23)

I. It is one part of the answer to the puzzle of the "problem of evil" and how even the wicked can glorify God.

J. It gives us due humility

K. It is one of several proofs for a creation ex nihilo.

L. It is the basis for an unconditional election

M. Etc.

III. How To Grow In Your Appreciation For God's Aseity

A. Imitate God by living selflessly.

But I want to skip over the rest of the applications and let you discuss those on your own, and end by admonishing you to grow in your appreciation for God's aseity. Imitate God by living selflessly. You may not need more fellowship, but God calls you to seek fellowship with others in the congregation for their welfare. And as you do so, as you step out of your comfort zone, you will find that God enables you to enjoy what you didn't need. You may not get anything out of cleaning up at church, but as

you think of God giving when He gets nothing out of it, you can experience the God-given joy of serving even when you don't get anything out of it or are unappreciated. Love others because God first loved you. Imitate God's selflessness.

B. Depend upon God for everything

1. give Him the glory

And then secondly, give Him the glory. Remember, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. And it is important to realize that God is so humble. Each Person constantly prefers the other members of the Trinity. And there is a constant outflow of His provision for others.

2. trust His provision

Lastly, we can trust His generous provision. I once read a book on the Amazon River. It is a river of incredible dimensions and force. It accounts for 1/5th of all the fresh water that pours into the oceans of the world. The estuary at the mouth is 150 miles across and its main stream is 50 miles wide. That's a huge river. Its waters are so strong that it pushes fresh water out into the ocean for 200 miles. So you can be out in fresh water and not even see the land. There was a story of a sailing ship in the olden days that was becalmed in the ocean far off the coast of South America and ran out of water. The sailors worried that they would die because it is deadly to drink ocean water. They called out to a nearby vessel and asked if they could spare just a little bit of water. The answer that came back was to lower the buckets. They were in the mouth of the mighty Amazon River! So much fresh water available and yet thirsting to death! The doctrine of God's aseity assures us that there is no need for you to thirst. Lower your buckets and drink from the living rivers of water that Christ offers in His grace. There is more than enough for your every need. Don't make up excuses to offer to God like Moses did. Believe Him, trust Him and go forth in obedience to His word. Amen.