



new creation teaching ministry: tuesday night studies 2009

the things we firmly believe

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Study 2: The Existence and Nature of the Triune God

Does God exist?

Christian theology presupposes God's existence. This reflects the Bible where God's existence is not argued for, but rather assumed. There is nothing self-conscious in the assertion of God's existence in the Bible. What the Bible is more interested in discussing is the nature of the God who is. *Existence* is a word in which the stress is on the *state* or fact of being, rather than the *mode* of being. When in Hebrews 11:6 we read that whoever would draw near to God must believe that He is, more is meant than simply that God exists. James 2:19 tells us:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!

In Biblical terms, an atheist is not simply a person who does not believe that God exists so much as one who does not believe He works in the manner the Bible claim is His way. Similarly, when we talk with people who are atheists today, very often we find that they have a clear picture of the God that they do not believe in. 'I could not believe in a God who . . .' [Fill in the blank with the *mode* of the God in whom they do not believe.]

When we come to the Bible what is of paramount interest there is not simply the fact of God, but rather His nature and actions. The fact of God is taken as granted. What we don't have though is a structured theology, carefully setting out a summary of the nature and action of God. As we saw last week, God is to be known through His revelatory actions; He is to be known relationally. The best theology is doxology, or praise of God as we worship God for who He is and thank Him for all He has done. In fact, in the Bible some of the purest theological statements are cries of worship. They are the surest and most trustworthy statements about the nature and action of God.

"Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory." (Isa. 6:3)

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." (Rev. 4:8)

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)

God is love. (1 John 4:8, 16)

There are relatively few of these statements in Scripture, and so we should treasure these clear and direct statements concerning the nature of God. We must see also that, whilst these statements are clear and direct, it takes the whole of the Scriptures to unpack them, so that we know what they mean in God's own terms rather than in our terms. For example, while nearly everybody could say, 'God is love', in fact apart from revelation from God nobody would understand what that actually means. It is possibly one of the most misunderstood statements in the world!

Arguments for the existence of God

Throughout the history of the church there have been attempts to provide arguments that establish the fact of the existence of God. Each argument has its own presuppositions, and while they may be useful tools in talking of God, none of the arguments can actually prove the existence of God, since one must have faith in order to believe. Some of these arguments are summarised in *The Things We Firmly Believe*¹, pages 18 to 20. Some have had a very influential role in Christian apologetics, but each of them has been criticised at various times, either from in the believing community or from outside it. Remembering our discussion last week, the lack of human objectivity in the matter needs to be recalled. Human beings have a vested interest in *not* knowing the truth of God.

The nature of God: His attributes

‘The attributes of God are really His qualities, elements or characteristics, to use very loose terms.’² These ‘attributes’ are not secondary to the being of God—He is His attributes. So God does not just have righteousness, holiness and love—He is righteous, holy, love. For this reason God is all of His attributes all the time. He does not move between the attributes picking and choosing what He will be like in a certain situation. When we consider the attributes of God, we need to keep in mind then that we cannot understand them in isolation from one another, but must try to see them all in the God who is One.

Roughly speaking God’s attributes fall into two general categories. There are those attributes that belong to God alone (His *natural* or *incommunicable* attributes) and those that He has given for us to share in as creatures made in His image (His *moral* or *communicable* attributes). The incommunicable attributes are unnecessary for a human being to live to the fullness of his or her humanity, but true human living is in living fully in the communicable attributes. In the Fall, human beings demanded the first and refused the second, and this has been our pain ever since!

The incommunicable attributes of God are:

- a. *Omnipotence*: This means that God is all-powerful. ‘All power belongs to God’ (Psa. 62:11). We must not understand this as analogous to the power in humanity and our way of using power. By omnipotence we do not mean ‘the ability to do anything’ but rather ‘the action of doing all and only what is consistent with His character and purpose.’ God’s omnipotence means then to have power to *not* do that which other may insist He ought to do. (See Isa. 45:5-7; Jer. 32:27; Matt. 19:26)
- b. *Omniscience*: God knows all things. As Creator He does not *come to know* all things, but has knowledge of the essence of things and His will for them. Our knowledge is always acquired; this is never the case for God. His knowledge of all things is not simply formal, but dynamic—that is He knows all things in an active and relational way. Thus, all His knowledge is active in blessing or judgment. (See Deut. 2:7; 1 Sam. 16:7; Psa. 139; Jer. 17:10, 29:11; 1 John 3:20)
- c. *Omnipresence*: God is free to be present to His creation entirely and at every point. There is nowhere that He is not. ‘In Him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:24-28). This presence of God is again not formal but dynamic. Even as rebellious men and spirits seek distance from God, they are wholly dependent upon Him for their continued existence, for

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, 2nd ed., New Creation Publications, Blackwood, 1986. (If you find this discussion difficult, don’t be too disheartened—I did also. You can proceed with the reading and not be disadvantaged by not getting this section.)

² *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 22

He upholds everything by His powerful word (Heb. 1:3). The transcendence and immanence of God are in His omnipresence. The High and Lofty One dwells with the lowly and the contrite (Isa. 57:15).

- d. *Immutability and eternity*: God is unchanging, not in a static or formal way but dynamically so. 'I AM who I AM'—i.e. I remain who I am and am always in action as I am

In all His being God remains free. In trying to understand all these 'attributes' of God, we must always keep in mind the fact that He *is* these things, and that He is all of it at once. He never simply expresses or adopts these attributes; He is not the prisoner of His attributes. We must also be wary of ever trying to work from human attributes to God. God's being is not creaturely and creatures cannot provide an analogy by which to understand the uncreated.

The communicable attributes of God

In coming to this topic we are coming to things that God has been pleased to share with us in creating us in His image. We need to have in mind that God is Creator, Father and Lord. Human beings are creature, children and servants. All of the communicable attributes of God are known rightly in human experience only as we are humbly and obediently related to the Father, and through Him to all creation as His designated co-regents. All the communicable attributes of God are with a view to our proper living in this vocation.

- a. *Goodness*: God's goodness is His active determination to seek the blessing of others before Himself. God's goodness means that His intentions and actions towards His creation are always good and beneficial. E.g., it is the goodness of God that moves Him to rescue His people from Egypt (Exod. 18:9); and ensures that His people are richly provided for (Neh. 9:25,35). His goodness is often linked with mercy, love and forgiveness. Goodness is very dynamic and warm, not simply 'pure'.
- b. *Holiness*: The idea of holiness has *separation* or *cutting* deep in it. Holiness is very difficult to define. God as holy stands in contrast to all the false gods (Exod. 15:11). Holiness is His utter commitment to the truth of His being and His opposition to all that is evil.
- c. *Righteousness*: God's righteousness is His determination to have justice in all the earth (Gen. 18:25), to vindicate those oppressed by injustice (Psa. 103:6), and to have no element of sin left to disfigure or pollute His creation (Deut. 32:4). It is closely linked to the holiness of God, but also with His grace in salvation (Isa. 45:21). It is the righteousness of God that is expressed in giving the law to humanity.
- d. *Truth*: God's truth is 'God as He really is.' God's truth is His utter faithfulness to His being and purposes. Every word of God is true and trustworthy, for 'God is not a man that He should lie' (Num. 23:19). God's truth reaches to the clouds and is eternal (Psa. 108:4, 146:6).
- e. *Love*: God is not only loving but is actually love (1John 4:8, 16); the definition of love is to be found only in knowing the reality of God Himself as He is. Love is actional, not merely affectional or emotional.

These communicable attributes of God are the ways in which we are to know and relate to God. His incommunicable attributes are there and we acknowledge them, but they cannot really be explored by us; they remain a kind of mystery to us. There is a real danger in trying to pry out of God knowledge of Him that is not given for us to know. What may be known about God is given to us in Jesus Christ, and in Him, we have a human being revealing God to us. Jesus does not open for us the

mysteries of God's omnipresence or omniscience; but in Christ we are given access to understanding the holiness, goodness, righteousness, truth and love of God. We must seek contentment in this!

All of God's attributes are actional—not static states, but God in action towards others. These attributes of God are His eternal being; they are not things attributed or added to Him later. God never *became* any of these things. This tells us something very deep—God has always been in a movement outward from Himself to others in eternity. Even before anything was created, God has been the God of relationships. It makes no sense to speak of God being good, holy, righteous, true or love without it being relationally so. This leads us on to the important doctrine of the Trinity.

Knowing the truth of the Trinity

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God who made Himself known in the Old Testament. We do not discover a new or different God in Jesus Christ. (The other view was an ancient heresy called the Marcionite heresy.) Throughout the Bible we hear that God is One. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which was Israel's 'motto', says this most clearly:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

This command was quoted by Jesus as the greatest command of all and put alongside the second, which was like it, to love your neighbour as yourself (Matt. 22:38, 39). Clearly the One-ness of God is deeply connected to the love of neighbour, and this tells us that the Oneness of God need not be interpreted necessarily as singularity. There is the oneness of love.

This is the secret to unlocking the way in which the Scriptures speak of God. The doctrine of the Trinity has emerged from the New Testament primarily, but there are hints and suggestions leading to it from the Old Testament. Some Christians have found significance in the fact that in Genesis 1:26 God speaks of Himself as plural ('Let us...'), that there is a three-fold blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, and that there is the three-fold cry of 'Holy!' (the *Trisagion*) at Isaiah 6:3. Also in the Old Testament there is the Wisdom of God and the Word of God that stand at places almost as counterparts alongside God (see Psa. 33:6, Job 28:23 and Prov. 8:22ff.). There is an intriguing verse in Isaiah 48:16:

Come near me and listen to this:
From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret;
at the time it happens, I am there.
And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me with His Spirit.

This One sent by the LORD is sent with the Spirit of the LORD, and has been there from 'the first announcement'—'Let there be light!' at the start of the creation. As well as this mysterious figure there are others in the Old Testament that set minds wondering, especially the Angel of the LORD.

When we get to the New Testament the material about God being Father, and Jesus His Son and the Lord, and the person of the Holy Spirit is immense. We will trace the persons of each of these three in coming weeks. What we will say briefly here is that the social nature of the Trinity is inescapable. He is not a solitary unit; all of His actions and attributes are the expression of His social life within Himself. His goodness, righteousness, truth, love and holiness have been at the heart of those relationships. This has been the reality of their oneness-in-trinity. These are not mathematical ideas, but deep, rich, moral and relational realities. And in loving our neighbour as we love the LORD tells us that true human life is found in being in the goodness, righteousness, truth, love, and holiness of God ourselves in relating to Him and to one another.