

## Unit 1 Introduction

# Attributes of God\*

For Christian faith throughout the centuries, when we have spoken of the “attributes of God” it is because we are trying to describe the God who encounters us in the Bible, and most particularly in the person, words, and works of Jesus. The attributes of God are those characteristics of God that we believe to be those most often, and most consistently, mentioned in the Scriptures’ testimony regarding God.

We must emphasize, though, that the Bible is more interested in God’s activities, or what God has done, than in God’s attributes, or what God is like. However, we must also not draw too harsh a distinction here. Throughout Scripture, who we believe God to be, and what we believe God to be like, are deeply rooted in the things that God has done. Christian faith assumes that God always acts in ways that are entirely faithful to God’s eternal character. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel believed that God’s nature was most decisively revealed through their exodus from Egypt and, later, their reception of God’s laws through Moses. Christians, along with Jews, affirm the importance of those acts of God; but we go on to emphasize the even greater importance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in revealing God’s attributes.

Theologians have developed many different ways of trying to organize the attributes of God into categories. For our purposes, we will adopt two basic categories: 1) God’s essential attributes and 2) God’s moral attributes. In the first category, Christians have tried to describe the nature of God, that is, what kinds of qualities make God God. In the second category, Christians have tried to describe the character of God, that is, what God is like and how God relates to us humans and to all the rest of creation.

### God’s Essential Attributes

Apart from God’s moral character, what sort of characteristics seem most likely, most biblical, in describing what it means for God to be God? This is actually a very difficult question. For every attribute we are going to mention, there are usually numerous dissenting voices in Christian tradition. So we both acknowledge this fact, and accordingly proceed with care!

We begin with the attribute of *omnipotence*. Omni-potence means “all power.” To say that God is omnipotent is to say that there is no power, no agency, no ability for anything to be at all—apart from God’s creating and sustaining power. *Let there be* is the recurring refrain in Genesis 1, underscoring the idea that all power is God’s. To put it another way, when we use the word “God” we mean that Power from which all other things, and all other powers, derive their being.

A second, related essential attribute of God is *omnipresence*, which means that God is everywhere present. There is nowhere that God is not. The great Christian writer St. Augustine (354-430) took this idea further in his *Confessions* to argue that if there were any place where God was not present, there would be no “place” there either! In other words, God’s presence is necessary for there to be any person, any creature, any thing, any place anywhere at all. Nothing exists independently of God’s presence. Much later John Wesley (1703-1791), likely drawing at least indirectly upon Augustine, linked omnipotence and omnipresence tightly together by arguing that God cannot act where God is not present.

A third essential attribute of God is *omniscience*, which means that God knows all things. In the words of Hebrews, before God “no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (4:13). Indeed, if God is omnipresent then it seems inevitable that God is omniscient; indeed, God must know all things everywhere in their most basic, intimate details—right down to the sub-atomic level and beyond.

A fourth essential attribute of God is *infinity*. It is saying simply that God is not finite—not limited by space or time. Whereas you and I and everything we encounter in the world are finite, limited things, God is not. Even the universe, which certainly is mind-bogglingly vast with its virtually countless galaxies stretching out for inconceivably vast distances, is a finite creation of the infinite Creator. And since the attribute of omnipotence claims that God is present everywhere there is creation (and beyond!), another related divine attribute is immensity. (God is huge! If we can put it that way.) Probably the most direct expression of this attribute in the Bible is in Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple: “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!” (2 Chronicle 6:18).

While in some theology texts the list of God’s attributes seems nearly as vast as the universe, we will restrict ourselves to three more of these “essential” attributes. *Aseity* (Lat., a se, “from oneself”) implies that God does not depend upon any other, or prior, power for God’s being; when we say “God,” we mean that who has no “parents” or predecessors or cause. *Aseity*, then, is related closely to divine omnipotence. *Immutability* (Latin root, “not changing”) is the idea that God is incapable of mutation or change. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have appealed to Malachi 3:6 for support of the attribute of immutability: “For I the LORD do not change.”

Finally, we must add the intriguing attribute called *simplicity*. “Simple” in this case means the opposite of that which is “com-

pound,” or composed of different parts. There are no “parts” in God, meaning that what God is, God is that reality “through and through.” One important word that the Bible uses to describe that reality is Spirit (John 4:24). God is not spirit and body, or spirit, soul and body, or any other collection of parts or aspects. This actually is a very important consideration, given that lists of attributes such as we have just considered could easily lead to thinking of God as basically a big bundle of attributes, all bunched together to “make God.” The doctrine of divine simplicity discourages such thinking; indeed, divine simplicity would push us toward considering all of these so-called “attributes” to be different ways of saying, essentially, the same thing: God is One, and what God is, God is that purely and without mixture. In the words of the first of Methodism’s 25 Articles of Religion, edited by Wesley, “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts.”

But if God is not compound, and all of the above attributes are finally different and deeply related ways of saying basically the same thing—*God Alone Truly Is*—then we still have said nothing about the character of God, that is, about God’s moral attributes and how this Being relates to, or interacts with, creatures. Further, nothing we have said thus far bears any essential relation to the revelation we have received through Jesus Christ. Thus, all of the above “essential attributes” in the Christian idea of God are generally shared, without exception, with Jews and Muslims. There is nothing wrong with this, in itself, and in fact should be expected. However, since for Christians Jesus provides the final and authoritative revelation of God’s character, nothing we have said to this point touches the heart of the matter for Christian faith and discipleship.

### God’s Moral Attributes

The Bible generally has much more to say about God’s moral attributes. “I will make all my goodness pass before you,” God said to Moses, “and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19). The people of Israel rejoiced that God “divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever; and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 136:13-14).

The God who liberated Israel from Egyptian bondage, who “is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing,” calls upon Israel to do the same (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Why? Because as God is holy, so also Israel is called by God to be a holy people (Leviticus 19:2).

H. Orton Wiley, in his *Christian Theology*, argues that all of God’s moral attributes can finally be “resolved into two—His holiness and His love” (CT Vol. I, p. 366). While sometimes people may try to contrast holiness and love, if the doctrine of divine simplicity has anything to teach us, it is that these two attributes cannot be set up against one another as though in tension. Further, if we take our Wesleyan tradition seriously, then we should be attentive to Wesley’s strong insistence upon love as the “darling” of all of God’s moral attributes. That is, at the heart of God’s character, radiating out and flowing through all other attributes, whether “essential” or “moral,” is love.

It is no surprise, then, that Wesley loved 1 John 4:8, 16: “God is love.” While Wiley would later modify Wesley’s emphasis into the phrase “holy love,” we again ought not to see these as somehow competing with one another, given the doctrine of divine simplicity. It is important to remember that the first meaning of “holy” in the Bible is “unique” or “totally set apart”; thus, the phrase “holy love” ought to be interpreted as meaning that God’s love is wholly unique, entirely set apart from human loves, a love like none other because it has no limits or measure (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Why do we believe this about God? To put it simply, because of Jesus. The same book that informs us that “God is love” also proclaims, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). At the core of all attributes of God, then, we believe that sacrificial, self-giving, other-receiving love flows as the “darling of all the attributes.”

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\*Biblical translation throughout: NRSV

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