

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD



ABRIDGED AND SIMPLIFIED
FROM BAVINCK'S REFORMED DOGMATICS

HERMAN BAVINCK

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by Herman Bavinck

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Preface

This abridged edition of *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of God* is offered to the church with a simple purpose: to make the rich, biblical theology of one of the Reformed tradition's greatest thinkers more accessible to today's readers. Bavinck's original work, written with scholarly rigor and theological precision, can be difficult for many to read—not because it lacks clarity, but because its style, density, and cultural distance require more time and background than many modern believers can offer. Our goal is not to simplify the truth, but to remove unnecessary barriers to its reception.

In creating this abridgment, we have worked carefully to preserve Bavinck's essential arguments, his reverence for God, and the pastoral warmth that lies beneath even his most technical expressions. We have updated the language where needed, condensed lengthy passages, and removed examples, references, or terms that might be unfamiliar or distracting to modern readers—unless they are essential to understanding the point. Every decision was made with prayerful intent: to let Bavinck speak clearly to a new generation without misrepresenting his thought or diminishing the glory of his subject.

What remains is not a paraphrase, but a faithful distillation. We hope it will serve as a bridge—an introduction to Bavinck, but more importantly, an invitation to contemplate the majesty of the Triune God. Bavinck himself reminds us that “the knowledge of God is the only dogma, the exclusive content of the entire field of dogmatics.” Theology, at its best, should lead us to doxology. May this small work stir your heart to know God more deeply, worship Him more truly, and rest more fully in the grace of Jesus Christ.

All glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

J.W.H

Chapter 1

Knowing God

Standing Before His Mystery

The heart of theology is mystery. When the Bible speaks of “mystery,” it doesn’t mean something abstract or mystical like in Roman Catholic tradition, nor something we can fully grasp through scientific study. Rather, it speaks of truths about God that are real, revealed, and yet far beyond human comprehension.

God has made himself known in nature and in the Scriptures, but even that revealed knowledge surpasses our understanding. Theology, or dogmatics, isn’t about figuring out the world alone—it’s about knowing God, the eternal and infinite Creator. Everything theology studies—creation, humanity, salvation, Christ—is ultimately about God. All things come from Him, exist through Him, and are for Him (Romans 11:36).

So, theology doesn’t begin with us. It begins with God, and it ends with God. That’s why theology must always remain focused on who God is and what He has done, both in creation and in redemption. And this focus does not make theology cold or abstract. On the contrary, the more we learn about God, the more we are moved to worship. Real theology leads to real life, because knowing God is life itself (John 17:3).

That's why thinkers like Augustine said they only wanted to know God and themselves. That's why Calvin began his *Institutes* with the knowledge of God and self. The aim of human life, as stated in the Genevan Catechism, is to know the God who made us.

But here's the question: How can we even speak about God? He is infinite, and we are finite. He is eternal; we live in time. He is the Creator; we are the created. The distance between us and God seems impossible to cross.

And yet, the Bible insists that God can be known. Scripture never tries to prove God's existence—it assumes it. It also assumes that every human being has a sense of God, placed in us by God himself. This knowledge doesn't come from our own searching but from God's self-revelation in creation, in history, in miracles, in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

So while God is infinitely beyond us, He has come near. He has revealed himself, so that we might know Him and have eternal life. The fool may say there is no God, but the evidence of His power and divine nature is all around us (Psalm 19:1–4; Romans 1:19–20).

The whole purpose of God's revelation is that we would know Him—and in knowing Him, find life, joy, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

God: Personal and Present Everywhere

Because of God's revelation to us in Scripture, we know that God is personal—He is not a distant force, but a conscious, willing Being. He is not part of the world like in pantheism, but above it, sovereign over all. This truth is clear throughout the Bible.

At times, though, the way Scripture speaks of God may seem to limit Him, describing Him in human terms or associating Him with specific places. For example, it says God walked in the garden, came down to see the tower of Babel, appeared to Jacob at Bethel, gave the law on Mount Sinai, and dwelled between the cherubim in Jerusalem. Scripture also refers to Him as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of Israel.

Some modern scholars argue that Israel's early belief in God was very limited—that God was originally seen as a local mountain or fire deity and only later became understood as the one true God. They suggest that belief in one God (monotheism) developed slowly over time. But this theory doesn't hold up under the testimony of Scripture itself.

From the beginning, the Bible presents God not as a local or tribal deity, but as the Creator of all things. When He walks in the garden or comes down to see Babel, it is clear He is coming from heaven, His true dwelling place. When He appears to Jacob in a dream, it's not the place or a stone that is sacred, but God Himself who speaks and promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes.

God's presence on Mount Sinai, or His connection to Israel's land and people, never means He is limited to those places. He comes down, but He is not confined. He is with Joseph in Egypt. He hears the prayer of Elijah in a foreign land. He is praised by Naaman, who learns that the Lord is not just the God of Israel, but the God of the whole earth.

While God chose Israel and made a covenant with them, He was never restricted to Israel's land. His covenantal presence among His people was special, but not exclusive in power or location. The same God who revealed Himself at Sinai is present everywhere, ruling over

all, drawing near to those whom He calls, and working out His purposes across all nations.

The One True God: Personal, Present, and Supreme

In the Old Testament, God's deep relationship with Israel is central. Because of this, some passages seem to speak of other gods as if they were real. For example, the first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me," and some verses mention the Lord as being greater than other gods. Jephthah and David even speak in ways that appear to acknowledge the existence of foreign deities.

However, these expressions do not teach that there are other real gods. Instead, they reflect the language and understanding of the people at the time, and often speak in ways that are meant to connect with others. The broader teaching of Scripture is consistent and clear: there is only one true God. He is the Creator of heaven and earth, not just the God of Israel, but of all nations and all creation.

Throughout both the earliest and later writings of the Old Testament, God is described as supreme—above all so-called gods. While His presence is revealed in specific places like Mount Sinai, Bethel, or Jerusalem, He is never limited to those places. He is the God of all the earth.

Some scholars have claimed that Israel's faith evolved from belief in many spirits or gods, to one national god, and finally to one universal God. But Scripture itself does not support this. From the beginning, God is presented as a personal being who exists independently, has a will, and is exalted above all creation.

Here are the key truths the Old Testament reveals about God:

1. God is personal and independent

He is not part of the world but is above it. He has His own life, knowledge, and will. He is the Creator of everything.

2. God reveals Himself in specific times and places

He appeared to people like Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, often through signs, dreams, and angels. These revelations were real, but they were temporary and pointed forward to the fuller, lasting revelation in Jesus Christ.

3. God's presence was shown through outward signs

Things like the burning bush, the cloud and fire in the wilderness, or the ark of the covenant signified God's presence—but none of these contained or limited Him. Even Moses, who spoke with God closely, could not see His full glory.

4. God is both near and far

Though He revealed Himself in particular ways and places, He was never confined by them. He is always far greater than the symbols through which He makes Himself known.

5. God is infinitely exalted

He is beyond time, space, and human understanding. Even when He draws near, He remains the Holy One—unseen, incomprehensible, and full of glory. His name is wonderful. His essence cannot be fully grasped.

6. The New Testament confirms this same God

God is still described as invisible and unapproachable. Yet in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God dwells. Through Christ, God lives in His church and in the hearts of those who love Him. This shows that God is both absolute and personal. He is both infinitely high and intimately near.

God's Revelation vs. Human Speculation

When we move away from the revelation of God given in Scripture, we see that other religious and philosophical systems fail to hold together two key truths: that God is both *personal* and *absolute*. Scripture reveals God as both—He is near, relational, and speaks; yet He is also infinite, sovereign, and exalted above all. But outside of this revelation, these truths tend to be pulled apart.

In many pagan religions, people knew something of God, but they did not honor Him. Instead, they exchanged His glory for images of created things. On the other hand, some philosophical traditions tried to defend God's greatness by making Him so distant and unknowable that He becomes impersonal and abstract.

For example, in some Eastern philosophies, God is thought of as an unnamed, indescribable mystery—something only known by those who stop trying to know. In Islam, although God is described in very human-like terms in the Qur'an, many Muslim scholars have argued that God has no attributes at all and cannot truly be known.

Greek thinkers like Plato also believed that God was beyond description. Plato said it was extremely difficult even to discover who God is, and if someone did, they would find it impossible to explain. Others, like the skeptic Protagoras, simply admitted that they couldn't know whether the gods existed at all.

Philo, a Jewish philosopher influenced by Greek thought, tried to combine the Bible with Platonic philosophy. He said that God is far beyond all human qualities and even surpasses things like goodness, knowledge, or beauty. In his view, we can only say that God *is*—we can't say *what* He is. Only His name, "I AM" (YHWH), gives us a hint of His essence.

Plotinus took this even further. For him, God was not just above all things—He was beyond even being itself. God was pure, undivided unity—so far beyond thought and language that nothing positive could be said about Him. Not even "being," "life," or "thought" could describe Him. He was utterly beyond all comprehension.

Gnosticism made this separation even more extreme. It taught that the true God was so distant and unknowable that He had no real connection to the world, to Israel, or to Christianity. According to Gnostics, God never truly revealed Himself. Instead, layers of lesser spiritual beings stood between Him and the world. To them, God was only an "eternal silence," completely beyond reach.

God Is Incomprehensible — Yet Truly Known

Christian theology begins with a foundational truth: God cannot be fully understood. Whether we look at creation or salvation, God never reveals Himself completely. If He did, we would have to be equal to Him—which we are not. No creature can ever fully grasp who God is. His being, His nature, and His glory are far beyond the limits of our human minds, imagination, or language.

We can know *that* God is, but not fully *what* He is.

Early Christian thinkers recognized this. They often said that even words like "God," "Father," or "Lord" are not full definitions of God but ways we speak about how He relates to us. Some argued that anything we say about God—even the best words we have—only points to what He does, not to what He is in Himself.

Even though God is personal and active, many early theologians emphasized that His inner being is entirely beyond our comprehension. Names and attributes such as "good," "one," or

"creator" help us understand God's power and works—but not His essence. He is not part of creation. He is not made of anything. He has no boundaries. In the words of Athanasius, God “surpasses all being and all human understanding.”

This truth appears in the writings of theologians like Augustine, who said that it is easier to say what God is *not* than to say what He *is*. We know He is not earth or sky or angel. He is not physical, not limited, not changing. But what He *truly is*, we cannot fully express. Even our best thoughts fall short: God’s reality is greater than our words and greater than our thoughts.

John of Damascus said something similar. We can speak truthfully about God—but only because of what He has revealed to us. We do not know how God exists in Himself. We say He is eternal, unchanging, or invisible—but these are ways of describing what He is *not*. They do not define His nature.

Later theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius and John Scotus Erigena pushed this even further. They said that God is so far above all things that even “being,” “truth,” or “goodness” cannot describe Him accurately. In fact, God is sometimes described using the language of “nothingness”—not because He doesn’t exist, but because He is so different from anything we know that our words fail entirely. Even the names we give God based on His works in the world don’t truly describe His essence.

So, they argued that the best theology isn’t just about saying what God *is*, but also about recognizing what He *is not*. This “negative theology,” which emphasizes what we can’t say about God, shows us how infinitely above us He truly is.

Still, even negative theology reaches a limit. In the end, God is greater than all affirmation and all denial. He transcends our best words, whether positive or negative.

Later theologians, especially in the Middle Ages, took a more balanced approach. While they affirmed God's unknowability, they also valued what Scripture tells us positively about God. They taught that our words and concepts describe God only by comparison and analogy. Even so, they held fast to the truth that God's essence remains beyond all human thought and speech. He can be approached, but never fully grasped.

God Cannot Be Fully Known—But He Is Truly Known

Christian theology has always taught that God, in His essence, cannot be fully understood. Whether through His creation or His acts of salvation, God reveals Himself truly, but never exhaustively. His infinite being is far beyond the reach of our human minds. We cannot grasp who He is in His inner nature—only what He has shown us through His works and His Word.

Thomas Aquinas described three ways of knowing God:

1. A direct vision of God's essence (reserved for heaven).
2. Faith-based knowledge through revelation.
3. Reason-based knowledge from observing creation.

But even the clearest revelation does not fully unveil God. We know Him only through the things He has made and the ways He acts toward us. Our best concepts and names for God are drawn from created things and fall short of capturing His full glory.

As time went on, some medieval theologians began to over-explain God's nature through complex systems. They spoke in detailed ways about God's names, attributes, and essence, sometimes forgetting the mystery that surrounds Him. Others, like the philosopher **Occam**, pushed back, saying that we cannot know anything about God's essence—only that He exists and reveals Himself in limited ways.

Mystics sought a deeper, personal experience of God, claiming that true knowledge of God comes not from reasoning but from a kind of spiritual seeing—a faith that rises above logic. One such thinker, **Nicholas of Cusa**, said that the only real knowledge of God is knowing how much we do not know Him.

After the Reformation, **Roman Catholic theology** returned to Thomas's view and even declared that God is “ineffable,” meaning too great to be described in words.

The Reformers agreed. **Luther** spoke of the “hidden God” whom we cannot know and the “revealed God” whom we meet in Christ. Even then, Luther insisted that not all of God is revealed in Christ—God remains majestic and mysterious beyond all human reach.

The Reformed tradition especially emphasized that God is utterly unlike anything created. They took seriously the truth that “the finite cannot contain the infinite.” **Zwingli** said our knowledge of God is as limited as an insect trying to understand a human. **Calvin** warned against trying to define God's essence and urged us instead to focus on what God has revealed about Himself—what we *need* to know.

Reformed theologians taught that God's names and attributes do not define Him but help us understand how He relates to us. **Polanus** put it simply: “Whatever is said of God is not God.” God is infinite,

and all our language is limited. Our words describe not God's essence, but only what He has revealed for our benefit.

Over time, however, even in Reformed circles, this truth about God's incomprehensibility began to fade in practice. While still affirmed on paper, it had little impact on the way theology was done. Other groups, like the **Socinians** and **Remonstrants**, rejected the idea altogether. They were only interested in knowing God's will—not His being—and dismissed deeper reflection on His nature as unnecessary or even distracting.

Later **Rationalists** assumed God's existence but had little desire to explore His majesty. For them, the important thing was doing God's will, not knowing who God is. They lost the awe and wonder that comes from beholding God's greatness.

The Limits of Human Reason in Knowing God

When theology began to lose sight of the truth that God is ultimately beyond our full understanding, philosophy stepped in with a reminder. Rationalism had once been confident—it claimed to prove God's existence and define His attributes with certainty. But that confidence began to unravel, especially through the work of philosophers like Immanuel Kant.

Kant argued that while we have a natural tendency to think about the soul, the world, and God, we cannot truly *know* these things in any scientific or objective sense. Our minds are shaped by how we experience the world—not by direct access to unseen realities. So, while the ideas of God and the soul help us organize our thinking, they don't increase our actual knowledge. For Kant, reason alone cannot reach God.

Instead, he said that *practical* reason—especially our moral sense—allows us to believe in God. We can act as if God exists, and we may even speak of God’s attributes like will and intelligence, but these are not truly descriptions of His being. They are useful ideas for ethical living, not statements of fact. According to Kant, God belongs more to morality than to metaphysics. In the end, even when we speak about God, we are left only with words that reflect human ideas, not divine reality.

Fichte, following Kant, allowed for belief in God as a moral necessity and described God using words like “holy” and “eternal.” But he didn’t think these helped us know God as He truly is. To him, religious language was symbolic, not literal—just a way of expressing our inner moral need. Such representations weren’t wrong, as long as people didn’t treat them as objective truth.

Schleiermacher built on this, saying that God is not someone we know through reason or concepts, but the source of our existence, felt in our deepest sense of dependence. God is not the object of knowledge, but the ground of our being—something sensed, not understood.

Over time, this idea—that God cannot be known—grew more popular. **Hegel**, however, thought differently. He believed human reason could, step by step, rise to a full understanding of truth. For Hegel, philosophy could express God’s being as pure thought or “the Idea.” He saw logic itself as a kind of theology—the unfolding of the divine.

Some thinkers followed Hegel and tried to refine their concepts of God to get closer to ultimate reality. Others, however, took a darker turn. They concluded that we can never get beyond human ideas

when we talk about God, and so they ended up denying God altogether.

Feuerbach went so far as to say that the idea of God is simply a projection of human nature. According to him, when we speak of God, we're really just speaking about ourselves. All God's attributes—love, justice, wisdom—are borrowed from humanity. Religion, then, is just people worshiping an ideal version of themselves. For Feuerbach and many who followed him, belief in God collapsed into a kind of refined atheism.

Can We Know God? A Modern Challenge

As theology drifted away from the mystery of God's incomprehensibility, philosophy stepped in with a different message: maybe we can't know God at all.

Some philosophers rejected outright atheism as too extreme. Instead, they argued that human knowledge is limited. Since we can only know what we observe with our senses, anything beyond that—like God—should be treated as unknowable. This approach took several forms:

- **Positivism** said we should only trust what we can see, measure, or test.
- **Agnosticism** admitted we simply don't know whether God exists or what He is like.
- **Abstentionism** urged people not to make claims about God at all.

Philosophers like **Auguste Comte**, **Herbert Spencer**, and many in Germany rejected metaphysics (the study of ultimate reality). In

the late 1800s, agnosticism became widespread. Only the physical and observable were considered trustworthy; theology was pushed aside as uncertain or unscientific.

Even within the church, theology became timid. It distanced itself from deep reflection on God and began calling itself a “science of religion,” focused more on human religious experience than on God Himself. Although this shift kept some religious vocabulary, it denied real knowledge of God.

Kant, for example, claimed we could not know God through reason. Our minds shape what we perceive, and we never access the thing itself—only how it appears to us. God, the soul, and the world are helpful ideas, but they are not provable truths. According to Kant, we can act *as if* they are real, but we can’t truly know them.

Fichte took it further. He argued that it’s impossible for God to be both *absolute* and *personal*. Personality, he said, involves limits—and God, being unlimited, cannot be personal without contradiction. For Fichte, the moral structure of the universe is all religion really needs. A personal God isn’t necessary—and is even dangerous to true morality.

This line of thought became common. People believed that you must either:

- Lower God to human terms, making Him a bigger version of us (a limited, personal being), or
- Remove all creaturely language from our idea of God, leaving behind only a cold, abstract principle—something that inspires no worship and brings no comfort.

The result was a tension that felt unsolvable. We were left to choose between two unsatisfying options:

1. A God who is too much like us to be truly divine.
2. A God so abstract and distant that He can't be known, loved, or trusted.

This struggle—between God's greatness and His closeness—is not new. Christian theology has long wrestled with how to speak of God without making Him either unknowable or too familiar. But modern thought turned this tension into a dead-end. It declared that if we think about God at all, we must either bring Him down to our level or strip Him of all meaning.

So the argument goes: our minds are too tied to time, space, and physical reality. We cannot lift ourselves to know anything truly spiritual or eternal. The very act of thinking involves making distinctions and definitions—and to do that to God would make Him limited, which contradicts His nature as absolute.

This way of thinking leads people to conclude that God cannot be known at all. We either invent a God in our image, or we imagine an impersonal force that leaves us cold and disconnected from true faith.

The Mystery of an Infinite, Personal God

The Bible and the historic church clearly affirm a vital truth: God is far beyond our comprehension. We are human—limited, dependent, finite—and He is the infinite, eternal Lord. No name can fully capture His essence. No definition can contain Him. He cannot be compared to anything in creation. He is unique, holy, and beyond

measure. We can know *about* Him because He reveals Himself, but we cannot grasp Him completely.

Throughout history, some thinkers have claimed that we *can* know God fully—like we might know a triangle or a mathematical formula. But Christian theology has always pushed back, warning against the pride of trying to contain God in human concepts.

As **Augustine** said: “If you understand Him, it is not God you understand.” The mystery of God is not a flaw in our faith but part of its glory. The more we realize how high and holy God is, the more we are moved to worship. And though we cannot comprehend Him, we *can* know Him truly—because He chooses to make Himself known.

This kind of knowledge is unique. It’s **positive** in that we know God is real, alive, and not like created things. But it’s also **negative** in that we can’t define Him using the categories we use for creatures. So, it’s **analogical**—we speak about God using comparisons drawn from our world, always aware they fall short of capturing His essence.

To some, this sounds like a contradiction. How can the infinite be revealed in the finite? How can the eternal enter time? But Christian theology calls this not a contradiction, but a **mystery**—something too deep for our minds, but not nonsense. Just because we cannot explain it fully doesn’t mean it’s false.

Pantheism, which says that everything is God or that God is everything, confuses mystery with absurdity. It wrongly assumes that if God is absolute, He must be undefined and impersonal. But being infinite doesn’t mean being vague or abstract. God is not a blurry force or the sum of all things. He is *personal*—He knows, wills, loves, and acts.

Some philosophers have insisted that if God is personal, He must be limited like us. But this misunderstands personality. In God, personality is not a weakness—it is the fullest and highest expression of being. God’s self-awareness and self-determination are infinite. His personality doesn’t depend on anything outside Himself.

Even so, we must admit that the word “personality,” like all our language about God, falls short. The early church used it cautiously to describe the Trinity, not because it was a perfect term, but because it was the best available. Yet the weakness of our words does not invalidate the truth they point to.

If we are not allowed to speak about God at all, then religion disappears. If God cannot be known, He cannot be loved, worshiped, or trusted. And this is the dead-end of **agnosticism**: it reduces God to silence and removes Him from the world. In doing so, it strips life of meaning, purpose, and hope.

If God cannot reveal Himself, then we cannot know Him. But if He *has* revealed Himself, then we can truly know something about Him—not everything, but enough. Enough to worship. Enough to live by. Enough to rejoice in.

Agnosticism ends up contradicting itself. If God is completely unknowable, how can agnostics say anything about Him at all? But they do. They call Him “infinite,” “the source of all things,” “unchanging,” “moral,” and so on. In trying to say they know nothing of God, they say quite a lot.

Christian theology offers a better path: **we know God as far as He makes Himself known**, and no further. This knowledge is limited by our finiteness, but it is real and true. As **Basil** said, “The

knowledge of God consists in knowing that He is incomprehensible.” Even that is a deep and meaningful kind of knowledge.

Agnostics often end up drifting into **pantheism**—believing in a vague divine force instead of a personal God—or fall into despair. But Scripture teaches that the true and living God has not remained silent. He has spoken—in creation, in history, in His Word, and most clearly in Jesus Christ. Because of His self-revelation, we can say with confidence: we know God, though not fully; and we worship Him, not as a blurry idea, but as the holy, infinite, and personal Lord of all.

Chapter 2:

The Knowledge of God

All true knowledge of God begins with **revelation**. While we cannot fully grasp God in His infinite being, He has made Himself known—to all people—through His works in creation. The world is not godless. Deep down, everyone knows there is a higher power. Even atheism is often just a reaction to specific ideas about God, not a denial of the divine altogether.

Philosophical systems like atheistic naturalism don’t grow naturally from the heart of humanity. They are often critical responses to religion, not sources of lasting belief. In contrast, belief in a personal God is universal and natural. People everywhere, in all times and

places, have a sense of the divine. Unbelief requires effort to maintain, and it lacks solid grounding.

Throughout history, thinkers have tried to explain this universal religious impulse. Some believed humans are born with “innate ideas” of God and morality. Others argued that all knowledge comes from the senses. The Christian view avoids both extremes. We are not born with full knowledge of God, but we *do* have a built-in capacity and inclination to know Him—a kind of spiritual sensitivity given by God.

John Calvin called this the *sensus divinitatis* (a sense of the divine) and *semen religionis* (a seed of religion). This doesn’t mean we are born with clear thoughts about God, but that we are made to recognize Him when He reveals Himself. Theologians of the Reformation affirmed this kind of *natural theology*—a knowledge of God from creation—while rejecting the idea that humans have full, autonomous knowledge of God within themselves.

All true knowledge of God is **indirect** and **analogical**—we understand Him in ways that correspond to what He has made, but He remains far greater than our concepts. Our knowledge comes through created things, through language, symbols, and the influence of others. If knowledge of God were purely innate, everyone would believe in God the same way—but they don’t.

Still, humans have both the capacity and the inclination to know God. From the world around us and within us, we are constantly receiving impressions that point to Him. God does not leave Himself without a witness.

There are two aspects to this knowledge of God:

- **Implanted knowledge:** God reveals Himself to human consciousness directly—through nature, conscience, and the structure of our being.
- **Acquired knowledge:** We reflect on God’s revelation using our reason, seeking to understand more clearly what we’ve perceived.

Even believers depend on **Scripture and the Holy Spirit** to truly know God, including as Creator. Revelation, whether in creation or Scripture, is always God’s gracious act, not something we achieve by our own power.

About the “Proofs” for God’s Existence

We should neither overvalue nor dismiss the classical arguments for God’s existence. They have some value, but they are not the foundation of faith. They can support our faith, but they don’t produce it.

Let’s briefly consider them:

- **Cosmological argument:** This says that because the world exists, there must be a first cause. This has some value, but it doesn’t tell us much about *who* that cause is.
- **Teleological argument:** This looks at the design and beauty of creation and argues for a wise Creator. It takes us further than the cosmological argument but still doesn’t get us to the God of Scripture.
- **Ontological argument:** This claims that if we can conceive of a perfect God, He must exist. While it highlights the strong

impression of God in human consciousness, it doesn't convince skeptics.

- **Moral argument:** This points to the human conscience, moral law, and the sense of justice as evidence for a moral Lawgiver. This is compelling to many but still falls short of being a definitive proof.

Each of these arguments shows something important, but none can fully demonstrate the reality of the personal, holy, loving God revealed in Scripture. They can support faith, but they don't create it. Objections to these proofs don't destroy faith, just as the proofs themselves don't generate it. At best, they are testimonies that strengthen faith already given by God.

The Problem of Atheism

All knowledge of God begins with His revelation. If God did not make Himself known through what He has made, we could not know Him at all. But because He has revealed Himself through creation, His existence is undeniable—though the depth of that knowledge remains limited. God's power and wisdom are far greater than what is displayed in the world, and His infinite being can never be fully known by finite creatures like us. Still, what He has revealed is real and sufficient for us to truly know Him.

Scripture clearly teaches that the universe is the stage for God's self-revelation. God has made Himself known not only in creation but also through human beings—made in His image—and supremely through His Son. According to Scripture, the entire world testifies to God's presence and power.

In that sense, nothing in creation is truly atheistic. There are no godless nations, no cultures without religion, and—strictly speaking—no absolute atheists. Even those who call themselves atheists must depend on the very idea of God to form their arguments. Just as skepticism must borrow from what it denies, so atheism cannot fully rid itself of the knowledge of God.

History and human experience back this up. While some thinkers—like Socinus or Darwin—have claimed that atheism is natural, history proves otherwise. Across all times and cultures, people have worshiped some form of deity. As Cicero once said, no nation is so uncivilized that it lacks belief in gods. That kind of universal belief cannot be a mistake. It is built into human nature.

Most disagreements are not about *whether* God exists, but *what kind* of God He is. There is such a thing as **practical atheism**—living as if God does not matter—but conscious, consistent **theoretical atheism** is extremely rare. Even the term “atheism” is often used loosely to describe rejection of a certain concept of God, rather than a denial of all deity. Throughout history, many people have been accused of atheism not because they denied all gods, but because they rejected *some* gods.

Today, some who claim to be atheists actually embrace views like **pantheism** or **materialism**—beliefs that still affirm some kind of higher power, even if not the personal God of the Bible. Often, these philosophies are less about religion and more about criticism of traditional belief. They don’t arise naturally in the human heart. Instead, they develop in response to other ideas and last only in narrow academic or philosophical circles. They never form the foundation for a lasting community of faith or worship.

Belief in a personal God, by contrast, arises spontaneously in every culture. It is natural and universal. Even Schopenhauer, no friend of Christianity, admitted that an “impersonal God” is no God at all—just a term philosophers use when they've abandoned the real thing.

In truth, it takes effort to suppress belief in God. As one writer said, “No one disbelieves in God unless God’s existence is inconvenient for them.” And no one is so certain of their atheism that they would die for it. That’s because atheism is not rooted in the heart, but in reason—and fallible reasoning at that. It is never fully secure in its claims. The arguments *for* God’s existence may not convince everyone, but they are stronger than the arguments *against* Him. After all, to prove that God does not exist, one would have to be everywhere and know everything—in other words, one would have to *be* God.

The Implanted Knowledge of God

From ancient times, people have recognized that the universal sense of the divine must be rooted in something natural to humanity. It's clear that every person is aware not only of the physical world but also of an invisible, spiritual reality. Things like truth, beauty, right and wrong, or good and evil cannot be measured by our senses, yet we all know they are real—more real, in fact, than many physical things.

While science may focus on physical forces like gravity and electricity, it is things like love, hope, and conscience that have shaped human history and held back moral collapse. As Augustine said, it’s absurd to believe in the reality of what we see with our eyes and not in what we know with our minds and hearts. Principles of logic, justice, and morality are deeply embedded in human nature—they feel as if they’ve been there from the beginning.

Philosophical Views on Innate Knowledge

Greek philosophers wrestled with the question of how we gain knowledge. Plato suggested we remember truths our souls knew before birth. Aristotle believed knowledge starts with sense experience but also held that our minds recognize some basic truths that are universal and self-evident. Later, philosophers like the Stoics spoke of natural or “common” ideas that are part of our mental structure.

Still, these weren’t yet “innate ideas” in the strict sense. Even though they believed some truths are known by all, they didn’t argue that such ideas were present at birth.

That changed with Cicero, who spoke of *notions implanted in the soul*—a built-in knowledge of virtues and of God. Later, Descartes developed this idea further, arguing that the human mind doesn’t get its deepest truths from the senses but from within. For Descartes, the idea of God was like a stamp placed in the soul by the Creator.

Leibniz agreed, but clarified that these ideas are not fully formed from birth; they are potential—like seeds that grow when awakened by experience. They come from within, not from the outside world. Others, like **Malebranche** and later thinkers, believed humans actually perceive all truth by “seeing ideas in God” Himself. This became known as *ontologism*—a belief in a direct, inner awareness of God as the foundation of all knowledge.

Kant rejected innate *ideas* but taught that our minds are shaped by built-in *forms*—like time, space, and categories for understanding the world. Later philosophers like Fichte and Hegel went further, claiming all reality itself flows out of the mind’s own thought process.

The main idea behind all these theories is this: to learn anything, the mind must already have some foundational truths or capacities. Otherwise, we'd have no way to evaluate or understand what we experience. These truths, many argue, must come from within the soul—or ultimately, from God.

Challenges to the Theory of Innate Ideas

But not everyone agreed. Thinkers like **Locke** and **Hobbes** strongly opposed the idea of innate knowledge. They claimed all knowledge comes from experience. If people truly had inborn knowledge, they said, everyone would agree on the basics of morality and religion. But history shows deep disagreements across cultures. They pointed out that some people—even entire groups—seem to have no awareness of God. And children, or those with mental disabilities, show no signs of innate ideas.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, **empiricism** became dominant in places like England and France, and later, **materialism** built on it. Human minds, they claimed, are blank at birth and shaped entirely by experience.

Then **Herbert Spencer**, combining evolutionary theory with philosophy, proposed a middle ground. He said the mind may have started as a blank slate, but over many generations, experience shaped it. What seem like “innate” ideas today are actually inherited results of long evolutionary development. In this way, he tried to reconcile the views of both empiricism and innate knowledge.

Innate Ideas in Christian Theology

Christian theology has long recognized that some truths about God are naturally known to human beings—not learned through study,

but grasped spontaneously. Still, theologians have firmly rejected the idea that people are born with fully formed *innate ideas* about God. Though some have claimed church fathers like Justin Martyr or Augustine taught this, a closer reading shows they did not support the theory in its strictest sense.

For example, **Tertullian** spoke of a natural knowledge of God as something all people recognize, especially in times of crisis. He believed this knowledge came not from Scripture but from within the soul itself. But even he meant that some truths—like the existence of God—are known *by nature*, not necessarily *implanted as ready-made ideas*.

Augustine, heavily influenced by Plato, believed we know certain universal truths through reason, not just through our senses. He described God as the “light” by which we see these truths—much like the sun allows us to see physical things. But even Augustine didn’t believe we could directly and fully know God on earth. He spoke of our current knowledge as limited and shadowed, with full understanding reserved for eternity.

Later **mystics**, drawing from Augustine, taught that in addition to physical sight and reason, we were created with a kind of spiritual vision—the “eye of contemplation”—which, healed by grace, allows rare glimpses of God even in this life. **Bonaventure**, for instance, taught that while we can know some truths without the senses, the full vision of God is a special gift, not something innate to all. Even he didn’t teach that people are born with actual ideas of God already in their minds.

The Scholastic View

Medieval scholastic theologians were clear: humans are not born with pre-loaded ideas about God. They taught that all knowledge begins with **sense perception**, and from there, the mind has the ability to abstract universal truths. These “innate” ideas—like the idea of God—are not present from birth but are formed through the intellect’s natural functioning. What is innate is the **capacity** to form such ideas, not the ideas themselves.

God, they said, is not known by direct vision or mystical intuition, but through His works. By observing creation and reflecting on it, we come to know something of God’s power and nature. The human mind is designed to move from the visible to the invisible, from the created world to the Creator.

This view stood in sharp contrast to later philosophies—like **ontologism**—which claimed we see God directly. The Roman Catholic Church eventually condemned these views as errors, affirming instead the indirect and mediated nature of all human knowledge of God.

Lutheran Perspectives

Early Lutheran theology was less favorable toward natural knowledge of God. Influenced by Martin Luther’s emphasis on human sinfulness, many Lutheran theologians claimed that sin had completely destroyed the human ability to know God. Luther argued that apart from the Holy Spirit, human reason is blind to divine truth. At times, he even spoke as if sin had become the very essence of human nature.

However, this extreme view didn’t last. Even Luther, at times, acknowledged God’s revelation in nature. And his colleague **Melanchthon** taught that humans possess both an implanted and

an acquired knowledge of God. Later Lutheran theologians—like Gerhard and Quenstedt—developed a more balanced doctrine of **natural theology**. They taught that people are born with a *disposition* or *inclination* toward the knowledge of God, though not with clear, formed ideas.

These theologians rejected **Descartes'** view that ideas are built into the mind at birth, as well as mystical views that claimed direct spiritual knowledge. Instead, they saw **implanted knowledge** as a natural *readiness* to know God—an ability to recognize Him in creation and in conscience, even without reasoning it out in full.

Natural Theology

From the beginning, Reformed theologians took a positive view of natural theology—that is, the knowledge of God that can be known through creation and human nature apart from special revelation. **Calvin**, for example, clearly distinguished between *general grace* (what is given to all humanity through creation) and *special grace* (which comes through Christ and Scripture). He believed that every person has an inborn *awareness of God* (what he called the *sensus divinitatis*), something placed in us by God Himself. Calvin also described this as the *seed of religion*, explaining why people everywhere—even without Scripture—seek and worship something greater than themselves.

According to Calvin, this inner awareness is constantly renewed and stirred up by God. Though it's always present, it rarely matures into true faith. Most people ignore it or suppress it. Nevertheless, when combined with the clear revelation of God in the natural world, people are left without excuse. “Wherever you look,” Calvin said, “you’ll see sparks of God’s glory.” Human beings are a kind of microcosm—small reflections of the Creator—and so is all of

creation. In fact, Calvin said that creation is like a mirror of God, making Him visible in every part of the universe.

Other Reformed theologians affirmed the same truth. **Ursinus** taught that God reveals Himself both internally, through impressions on the mind, and externally, through His works. The fact that religion is found in every culture shows that this knowledge is universal. **Zanchius** argued that some moral and logical truths—like the difference between good and evil—are naturally known, even by children. **Polanus** taught that this natural knowledge is written on the human heart and is shaped by the divine Logos (Word), who reveals truth both through creation and conscience.

Still, the Reformed tradition carefully distinguished this natural theology from later philosophical errors. For example, **Voetius** strongly opposed **Descartes'** theory of *innate ideas*, which claimed that we are born with fully formed ideas, like the idea of God, already present in the mind. Voetius objected to how Descartes used the word “idea,” and how he downplayed the role of the senses in gaining knowledge. He argued that our awareness of God is not a ready-made concept in the mind, but a **capacity**—a God-given ability to recognize truth when we encounter it.

This implanted theology, Voetius said, is more like an instinctive drive of the intellect toward truth, much like the eye is naturally drawn to light, or the will is inclined toward the good. In this view, natural theology is not opposed to sense perception but works alongside it. As the saying goes, “There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses”—meaning, knowledge begins with experience, but the mind is designed to rise from that experience to recognize greater truths, including the reality of God.

Objections to Innate Ideas

Christian theology has consistently rejected the idea that human beings are born with *innate ideas*—that is, fully formed truths already present in the mind, whether about God, morality, or the world. The reason for this rejection is twofold: to avoid the errors of *rationalism* and *mysticism*.

If we were born with complete knowledge already inside us, we would be self-sufficient. We wouldn't need God's revelation in creation or Scripture. We could turn inward, ignoring the world around us and God's external works. This would separate the mind from the body and make the material world irrelevant to knowing God. But Scripture teaches the opposite: that the physical world is God's creation and a clear testimony to His glory. The whole universe reveals His presence. Human beings are not meant to retreat into themselves to find God—they are meant to know Him through His works.

This is why the theory of innate ideas has led either to mysticism (where people try to experience God apart from the world) or rationalism (where everything, including God, is constructed from human reason). Both trends disconnect us from God's self-revelation in creation and history. In contrast, the Bible emphasizes that we know God *indirectly*, through the things He has made, and through the Word He has spoken.

It is true that God gives light to every person—He is the source of reason and truth. But we do not have *direct* access to God's thoughts. We walk by faith, not by sight. We do not “see” eternal truths clearly while on earth. Instead, we learn about God through the reflection of His glory in nature and in Scripture, like seeing in a mirror dimly.

Mysticism and rationalism make the mistake of equating human reason with divine reason, and human knowledge with God's knowledge. They confuse our ideas about God with God Himself. But God is first in the order of being. He created the world from His own mind and will—not because He discovered it, but because He willed it into being.

We, however, are creatures. We don't start with knowledge of God and move to the world; we begin with what we can see and hear, and from there learn about the invisible God. This is why we rely on *symbols, language, and teaching* to understand the unseen. A child does not begin life with ready-made knowledge. Instead, they receive impressions, are taught, and slowly gain understanding. Even those born without sight or hearing lack direct understanding of things they've never sensed—just as someone blind from birth cannot truly know what light is.

This reality also explains the wide diversity of human thought across cultures. If people were born with the same ideas of God, morality, or beauty, we would all agree on the basics of justice, religion, and ethics. But we don't. The fact that different peoples define good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and truth in such varied ways shows that knowledge is shaped by experience, education, and environment—not preprogrammed.

So, while people are born with the **capacity** to know God, they are not born with **fully formed truths** about Him. What we call *natural theology*—the knowledge of God through creation—is real, but it's not automatic or innate. It must be nurtured, developed, and clarified by God's special revelation in His Word. Without that, our knowledge remains limited, fragmented, and often distorted.

Innate Disposition: How We Naturally Know God

While it is true that human knowledge comes through experience, it is just as true that we must be *capable* of receiving that knowledge. We need both the **light of the sun** and the **eyes to see it**. In the same way, we learn about God through the world and His revelation, but we also come equipped with a *built-in capacity* to recognize Him.

Language is a good example. We learn to speak from others, but we are born with the ability to speak. The same is true in every part of life—whether it's science, art, morality, or religion. There are certain basic principles that everyone naturally accepts. These include things like logic, numbers, the difference between right and wrong, and the sense that there is a higher power.

These foundational truths don't come from detailed instruction or scientific reasoning. Instead, they are built into human nature. Everyone, everywhere, has some kind of awareness of God. This awareness comes from what Scripture calls the “*sense of divinity*” or the “*seed of religion*.” God has written His law on human hearts, and every person bears His image.

When Christian theology speaks of an “innate” or “implanted” knowledge of God, it doesn't mean we are born with full knowledge of doctrine or that we don't need revelation. Rather, it means that we are born with a **natural tendency**—a readiness—to know God. This knowledge develops naturally, without needing to be forced or proven through argument. It's not a fully formed set of ideas, but a capacity that leads us to recognize God when He is revealed to us through creation, providence, and Scripture.

Even though we are not born with explicit ideas about God, we respond to God's revelation because it matches something deep inside us. When we hear that God exists or that good and evil are real, we instinctively recognize these truths. We don't need to be convinced—they resonate with us immediately. That's why theologians have called this knowledge "innate."

This also shows how Christian theology stands between two errors. On one side, it rejects **rationalism** and **mysticism**, which teach that humans can know God entirely from within themselves. But on the other side, it also rejects **empiricism**, which says we only know what our senses tell us and denies any natural awareness of God.

Scripture teaches that God reveals Himself not only outside of us, in nature, but also within us. Human beings themselves are part of the creation that points to God. We were made in His image, and He has not left Himself without a witness. From the world around us and from within our own minds and hearts, we receive impressions that point us toward a divine Creator—even before we hear a sermon or read a verse.

The Acquired Knowledge of God

Although we distinguish between "implanted" and "acquired" knowledge of God, these are not opposites. The implanted knowledge refers to the natural awareness and capacity that all people have to recognize God. The acquired knowledge refers to the more developed understanding that comes through reflection, observation, and reasoning.

We are not born with full knowledge of God. Rather, we are born with the *capacity* to know Him. Like eyes needing light to see, our minds need God's revelation to perceive truth. The "seed of religion"

within us must be nourished by our environment and experience in order to grow.

So, acquired knowledge is not knowledge invented by human effort alone. It still comes from God's self-revelation—through creation, providence, and especially Scripture. God acts first, making Himself known in everything He has made. We then respond by recognizing and reflecting on that revelation.

In this way, the difference between implanted and acquired knowledge is mostly one of process. The implanted knowledge arises naturally and spontaneously from within; acquired knowledge grows as we apply our minds to what God has revealed. The first gives us a basic sense of God's existence. The second builds on that foundation, striving to understand who He is and what He has done.

However, this should not be misunderstood to mean that we can come to know God *without* His special revelation. True knowledge of God—even when it appears to come through nature—is always shaped and completed by what God has revealed in Scripture and made clear in Jesus Christ. Even believers rely on Scripture to rightly interpret what they see in nature. Without it, God's revelation in creation remains unclear and easily misunderstood.

The Bible assumes this. It never tries to prove God's existence but takes it for granted, speaking with the authority of One who is already known. It appeals not to abstract logic but to our whole being—our reason, conscience, and heart. It shows us God in the beauty and order of the world, in seasons and harvests, in the stars, the rain, and even in the simple things like lilies and birds. Everything testifies to His power, wisdom, and care.

This is why the so-called “proofs” for God’s existence—cosmological, moral, teleological, and others—can be helpful, but they are not necessary foundations for faith. They are reflections *after the fact*, explanations that arise as faith seeks understanding. Scripture, by contrast, speaks directly and powerfully to the heart. And because we are made in God’s image, this witness resonates deeply within us.

In short, the knowledge of God—whether basic or deep, natural or reasoned—is always a response to His revelation. It is never human achievement but God’s gracious self-disclosure that opens our minds and hearts. Whether through the sky above or the Scripture in our hands, it is always the same God who speaks, and we, made in His image, cannot help but hear Him.

Proofs for God’s Existence

Throughout history, even before the rise of Christianity, people have tried to demonstrate God’s existence through reason. Ancient thinkers like Plato and Aristotle pointed to the order, beauty, and purpose in the world, to human reason and moral awareness, and to the shared religious instincts across societies as signs pointing to a divine Creator.

Christian theologians later took up these arguments and developed them further. They did not see a conflict between faith and reason. In fact, they believed that studying the world could support belief in God. While some Church Fathers warned that human reason is too darkened by sin to truly know God on its own, many still thought these proofs could point us in the right direction.

Over time, however, these arguments began to lose their deeply spiritual character. Instead of seeing them as testimonies of faith or

responses to divine revelation, they were treated more like mathematical or scientific demonstrations—cold, rational, and detached from worship. God was no longer simply the Lord to be trusted and adored, but a logical conclusion to be proven.

The Roman Catholic Church, especially at the time of the Reformation, formalized this approach. It taught that God's existence can be proven by reason alone through the observation of creation. The Reformers, including Calvin, agreed that creation clearly reveals God, but emphasized that we are too blind in our sin to see this truth without the help of faith and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Without grace, the seed of religion in us remains dormant.

Eventually, Protestant theology also began to treat natural theology as a purely rational enterprise. Rather than beginning with God's revelation in Scripture, theologians increasingly treated natural theology as a self-sufficient discipline for unbelievers, disconnected from faith. They developed detailed classifications of proofs for God's existence—arguments based on motion, design, history, morality, and more.

This rationalism came under sharp critique by philosophers like Immanuel Kant, who argued that God cannot be proven through reason alone. Others went further, insisting that trying to prove God this way made Him just a conclusion to an argument. Some theologians responded by minimizing or even discarding these proofs altogether, viewing them as unnecessary or ineffective.

Yet despite all this, interest in the arguments for God's existence never completely disappeared. Philosophers and theologians continue to revisit them, debate their strength, and offer new versions.

These various arguments generally fall into six main types:

1. **Cosmological Argument:** Points to the fact that the universe exists and needs a cause—God.
2. **Teleological Argument:** Focuses on the order and purpose in creation, suggesting a wise designer.
3. **Ontological Argument:** Begins with the idea of God as the greatest conceivable being and argues that such a being must exist.
4. **Moral Argument:** Looks at human moral awareness and concludes that there must be a moral Lawgiver.
5. **Consensus Argument:** Points to the universal religious impulse across cultures as evidence of God's existence.
6. **Historical/Theological Argument:** Draws from the impact of religion, prophecy, and history to support belief in God.

Each of these arguments has been affirmed, questioned, and reworked in different ways. Some thinkers see them as pointing to a personal God; others stop at an undefined cosmic force.

Though they can be helpful, these arguments cannot produce saving faith or replace the self-revealing power of God's Word. They may support the truth but do not compel belief. They are not the foundation of faith, but reflections that flow from it. At best, they prepare the ground for belief and strengthen those who already believe. Faith, ultimately, comes not from proofs, but from hearing the voice of God in His Word and receiving the witness of the Spirit.

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument points to the existence of the world and asks: “Where did all this come from?” Since the universe exists and is made up of things that clearly did not cause themselves, there must be a first cause—something that exists by itself and does not depend on anything else.

Over time, different versions of this argument have emerged. Some point to movement, change, or the chain of cause and effect, and reason that there must be something (or someone) that started it all—an unmoved mover, a first cause, or a necessary being. While each version is a bit different, they all argue that the world must have a source or foundation that doesn’t need anything else to exist.

This kind of reasoning makes sense. If we can’t assume that things need causes, then all science and logic fall apart. Still, the argument depends on a few big assumptions: that the universe itself is not self-existent, that an infinite chain of causes is impossible, and that the universe as a whole needs a cause just like its parts do.

Assuming these points are true—and most people intuitively accept them—the cosmological argument leads us to conclude that the world must have come from a self-existent, eternal, and absolute source. But this argument alone doesn’t tell us what that source is like. It doesn’t prove that God is personal, wise, good, or loving. It just gets us to the idea that there is something uncaused behind everything else.

Some thinkers have tried to build on this and argue that if people are intelligent, moral, and free, then the cause behind them must also be intelligent, moral, and free. But this line of reasoning doesn’t necessarily hold. Others argue that the very nature of a first cause must include personhood and spirit, but again, that goes beyond what the cosmological argument can prove on its own.

In the end, this argument gives us something important: the idea of a self-existent and eternal cause of the universe. But it cannot, by itself, tell us whether that cause is personal or merely a force.

The Teleological Argument

The teleological argument focuses on the design and purpose in the world. When we look at creation—whether the stars, ecosystems, human organs, or even the seasons—we see incredible order, structure, and usefulness. This argument says such design must point to a designer.

This kind of reasoning has always been compelling to people, even acknowledged by philosophers like Kant. But in recent times, objections have been raised. Materialists argue that the world is governed only by mechanical laws, not by purpose or design. Pantheists say that even if there's order, it doesn't mean there's a conscious mind behind it. Some, like Kant, have said the most this argument can give us is a cosmic "architect" but not a Creator.

Despite these objections, the idea of design in the universe is hard to deny. The Bible clearly teaches that God created the world with purpose and wisdom. Philosophers throughout history have also affirmed that the universe shows signs of intelligent direction. It seems far more reasonable to believe that the world was designed than to believe it came about by chance.

Even evolutionary theories, which initially tried to explain life through random processes, end up depending on the idea of functionality and purpose. Life, intelligence, morality, and beauty all suggest that more than just physical forces are at work. Many modern scientists are coming back to this view, realizing that

purpose and design must be taken seriously alongside cause and effect.

So, while the teleological argument might not prove every detail about who God is, it strongly points to an intelligent mind behind the universe. Even if it could only get us to the idea of one or more “world-shapers,” it would still show that intelligence is essential to explaining the world. But once we acknowledge that there is purpose in creation, it becomes hard to deny that there must be a wise and conscious Creator behind it.

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument tries to prove God's existence by reasoning from the idea of God in our minds. It takes different forms:

1. Some say that because we have ideas of perfect truth, goodness, and beauty, there must be an ultimate source for these ideals—an absolute Reason or divine being.
2. Others argue that because the very idea of God includes existence (since a God who exists is greater than one who doesn't), God must exist.
3. Still others say the idea of God must have come from God himself—implanted in us from birth.

While these arguments highlight how deeply rooted the idea of God is in the human mind, they cannot by themselves prove God's existence. Just because we can think of something doesn't mean it exists. We can imagine a perfect being, but that doesn't make that being real.

However, the ontological argument has some value. It shows that when people think of God, they naturally think of him as real. It presses us to face a choice: either trust this deep conviction within us or doubt the reliability of our own minds. But if we try to move from this idea to proving God exists in reality, we're no longer using an ontological argument—we're using reasoning that belongs to other kinds of arguments, like the cosmological one.

The Moral Argument

This argument looks at the moral aspects of human life—our sense of right and wrong, feelings of guilt, desire for justice, and the belief that good should be rewarded and evil punished. From this, it concludes that there must be a moral God who created and upholds this order.

Some people focus on conscience, which seems to be a voice within us that points to a Lawgiver. Others note how often justice is lacking in this life and suggest there must be a future time and a righteous Judge who will set all things right.

Objections are often raised. Evolutionary theorists say morality developed over time as part of human survival and social behavior. Others argue that morality can exist without a personal God—just as a general “moral order.” Still others point to the reality that injustice often prevails in the world, which challenges the idea of a moral order governed by a just God.

But none of these objections fully explains where morality comes from or why our conscience feels so bound to it. The idea of a “moral order” without a personal, holy God lacks clarity and leaves us with a vague power instead of a righteous Judge. Despite the world's injustice, our hearts still cling to the hope that good will ultimately

triumph, which points us back to the reality of a God who is just and good.

So, even though this argument may not convince everyone logically, it remains powerful because it speaks directly to our conscience and affirms what we all deeply feel—that justice matters and that behind it stands a righteous and living God.

The Argument from Universal Consent

This argument points to a simple but profound fact: people everywhere and in every age have believed in some kind of god or divine power. There is no known culture in all of history without religion. This widespread belief suggests that religion is not a learned behavior or a passing cultural trait, but something deeply embedded in human nature.

Modern studies of religion—both historical and psychological—have confirmed this. No one has found a time or place where religion wasn't present in some form. Even those who don't want to admit the truth of religion are often forced to acknowledge that it is natural to humanity. Many are now returning to the idea that humans were created in the image of God, with a built-in capacity to know and worship him.

Some critics say religion is a kind of mental illness or a stage of development we'll outgrow with more science. But if we say that about religion—something found in every people group and across all history—then we have to start doubting all of human nature. And if we can't trust the deepest instincts of humanity, then how can we trust anything?

So while this argument may not logically compel someone to believe in God, it still carries great weight. The fact that religion is so universal tells us something essential: belief in God is not an illusion—it reflects something true and deeply rooted in who we are.

The Historical-Theological Argument

Alongside the other testimonies to God's existence, there is what we can call the historical-theological argument. This argument reflects on the course of human history—how civilizations, cultures, and societies have developed—and sees in it evidence of purpose and direction. It suggests that history is not random but moves toward a goal, revealing a wise and powerful hand guiding it.

Of course, history also presents many hard questions. There is much we cannot understand. Injustice, suffering, and confusion are everywhere. So much of what happens in the world seems at odds with any clear, rational plan. Some think history shows progress, especially in science and culture, while others doubt that we've made any real improvement in morality or spirituality.

Even so, most historians—whether consciously or not—treat history as if it has meaning and direction. That's why many were drawn to the idea of evolution, not just as a biological theory, but as a hopeful story of forward movement. Whether someone believes in God's kingdom, or simply hopes for a better future for humanity, people instinctively treat history as going somewhere. They believe in some kind of purpose, even if they can't prove it.

This belief can't be settled by logic alone. A person who is convinced the world is hopeless won't be persuaded by argument. But the deep sense that history has meaning is hard to deny. It's another pointer—

written not just in nature but in the unfolding of time—that the world is not ruled by chance, but by a God of wisdom and purpose.

The Proofs: An Appraisal

It's not entirely accurate to call these testimonies to God's existence “proofs,” as if they belonged in the same category as math or science. That term can mislead. It makes it seem like belief in God depends on cold, logical arguments—as if you must solve an equation before you can pray. But faith doesn't work that way.

In everyday life, we don't prove the most important things by argument. We don't prove our own existence or the reality of the world. We accept these things naturally, instinctively, because they press themselves upon us. The same is true of God's existence. The so-called proofs might help clarify and explain what we already believe, but they're not the foundation of faith. Rather, they are the result of it—an attempt by faith to make sense of the world.

These arguments—whether from order, design, morality, or human experience—are ways of organizing the countless impressions we all receive that speak of God. Every part of creation testifies to him. Everything in our hearts and in history bears witness to his presence. These arguments are not airtight philosophical chains. They are not designed to force belief. But they are signs—testimonies—that appeal to every person's heart and conscience.

We must understand: people don't believe in God only because everything confirms it, but in spite of all the confusion in the world. And still they believe. That belief is deeper than argument. The so-

called proofs are not what create faith—and objections to them do not destroy it.

Even though we cannot explain everything, that does not mean we abandon what we know to be true. Just as we trust the laws of logic and morality, even when we don't fully grasp them, we trust the witness of God in the world. For Christians, these arguments are not merely intellectual exercises. They are reflections of the one true God—Creator and Redeemer—who speaks through both nature and grace.

Together, they reveal the God who is necessary, eternal, and personal; who governs all things with wisdom; and who, above all, is holy and near to those who believe. These testimonies are not cold proofs. They are God's way of revealing his name, inviting us to know him, trust him, and call upon him.

Chapter 3:

The Names of God

Biblical Names for God

In Scripture, the "name" of God refers to everything God reveals about himself. A name isn't just a label—it signifies a person's character and how they make themselves known. Even today, we feel the importance of our names. They represent who we are. In the ancient world, and especially in the Bible, this connection between

name and person was even stronger. Names revealed identity and purpose.

This is why names in the Bible often have meanings tied to a person's calling or story. Sometimes God changes a name to mark a new stage in a person's life, like Abram becoming Abraham, or Jacob becoming Israel. Even Jesus was given his name because he would save his people from their sins. These names weren't just convenient labels—they were part of how God revealed himself and worked in history.

The same is true for God's own name. In Scripture, God reveals his name—not arbitrarily, but purposefully. We don't invent names for God; he tells us who he is. His name represents his glory, power, holiness, and character. In this sense, God's name is not just a title, but his presence, his being, and his work made known to us.

The most significant name God revealed in the Old Testament is **YHWH**, the name he gave to Israel. Through this name, God showed himself as faithful, present, and unchanging. His name dwelt among his people—in the temple, in worship, and in the promises he made. Because of this, God's people were commanded to honor and not misuse his name. Instead, they were to praise it, proclaim it, trust in it, and call upon it in worship and prayer.

In the New Testament, God's name becomes even more fully revealed through **Jesus Christ**. The Son makes the Father known. To know Jesus is to know God. His name carries power—salvation, forgiveness, healing, and eternal life all come through him. We are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, showing our union with the one true God. And one day, in the new creation, God's name will be written on the foreheads of his people, marking them as his own forever.

So, when Scripture speaks of God's name, it's not referring to an abstract title. It's talking about God as he has revealed himself to us—how he makes himself known in his relationship to his creation and to his people. God's name includes all that he is: his glory, truth, holiness, mercy, and love. And because he has made his name known, he calls us to honor it.

To know God's name is to know him as he has revealed himself. To call on his name is to trust, worship, and walk in fellowship with him. Every name by which God is known teaches us something about who he is—and every name calls us to respond with reverence, obedience, and praise.

God's Self-Revealed Names and Human Language

The names we use to speak of God are not inventions of our imagination. They come from God himself. He reveals his name to us through nature and through his Word. Because God's revelation is given to humans, it uses human language—words and images we can understand. If God were to speak to us in his own divine language, we would not comprehend it. But in his grace, he condescends—he stoops down—to speak to us in ways that are meaningful to us.

All of the names we use for God are drawn from the world around us and from human experience. We call God “Father,” “King,” “Judge,” “Rock,” “Light,” and “Shepherd”—terms familiar to us in our daily lives. Even God's attributes, like eternity or immutability, are expressed in human terms. The Bible doesn't describe these qualities in abstract, philosophical definitions. Instead, it tells us what God is like in relation to his world and his people.

Because of this, the Bible is full of what theologians call *anthropomorphisms*—descriptions of God using human traits.

Scripture speaks of God having hands, eyes, ears, a heart, even emotions like joy, grief, anger, love, jealousy, and compassion. It says he speaks, remembers, forgets, walks, sits, writes, heals, and more. These are not literal descriptions of what God is physically or emotionally, but they communicate who God is and how he relates to us.

The Bible also describes God using metaphors from nature. He is called a lion, a lamb, the sun, a rock, a fountain, bread, water, fire, light. All of creation—animate and inanimate, visible and invisible—is used to help us grasp something of who God is. Though God is beyond all comprehension, these images help communicate aspects of his character and glory.

This richness of language doesn't limit God; it reflects the vastness of his being. No single name or image can fully capture who God is, so Scripture uses many. The diversity of these names helps us draw near to him with reverence and understanding. As Augustine said, God is everything we need—light for our darkness, food for our hunger, shelter for our vulnerability. Though none of the names we use can describe God perfectly, they each point us to a true part of his glory.

The Danger of Dualism

However, we must be careful not to separate God's revelation from the world he made. Some philosophies have drawn a false line between the spiritual and the material, treating creation as something outside of God's concern. This view wrongly limits God's revelation to only religious or moral experiences within the heart or conscience.

But Scripture teaches that God is Lord over all: not just the heart, but also nature, history, society, and culture. His glory is revealed not only in our personal faith but in the whole world. The Old and New Testaments show us a God who is active in creation, government, justice, and the arts—who speaks not just through private experience, but through everything he has made.

When we limit God's voice to only personal religion or inward feelings, we lose sight of his majesty and his rightful place over every part of life. Theology becomes weak, and the church's witness in the world fades. But when we remember that God has spoken in nature and in grace, in creation and in re-creation, we see him as he truly is: the one living and true God who rules all things and makes himself known to us by name.

Naming the Nameless God

Scripture tells us that God is beyond our full understanding—greater than anything we can imagine. Yet throughout the Bible, God reveals himself using names that we can understand. This creates a tension: God is infinite and cannot be fully known, yet he gives us names so that we may know him truly. How can this be?

The answer lies in God's own act of creation and revelation. Though creation is infinitely below God, it is still his work. Everything that exists was made by him and designed to reflect something of who he is. That means creation is not separate from or opposed to God—it is his handiwork, meant to reveal his glory. God has chosen to make himself known through what he has made.

This is why we can speak of God using creaturely and human language. He has come down to our level and revealed himself in forms we can grasp. From the beginning, he has spoken to humanity

in our language, using images and terms drawn from our world. This isn't a limitation—it's grace. If God spoke to us in purely divine terms, we couldn't understand him. So he accommodates himself to our weakness, using names and images from the created world to speak of himself.

This means that all our language about God is necessarily *anthropomorphic*—it uses human forms to describe divine realities. But this isn't wrong or misleading. In fact, it is the only way we can truly speak of God at all. If we reject all creaturely language, we end up with silence. But silence isn't faith—it's agnosticism. And faith requires words.

Even the most abstract theological terms—like “Being,” “Spirit,” “Reason,” or “the Absolute”—are still drawn from human experience. They too are limited and creaturely. So whether we speak in concrete or abstract terms, we are always using finite language to speak about the Infinite. And that's okay—because God himself has chosen to reveal himself in this way.

True, Though Incomplete

Of course, this language doesn't give us full or exhaustive knowledge of God. We never grasp God in his essence. But the knowledge we do gain is still true. In every area of life, we deal with mysteries. Even in science, we work with concepts—like atoms or energy—that we never fully see or understand. Yet we still speak meaningfully about them.

The same is true with God. Though our knowledge is limited, it is real. We learn about him by observing the world and hearing his Word. Since all spiritual realities are invisible, we must describe them using terms from the visible world. That's why Scripture uses

metaphors, images, and human terms for God. These don't distort the truth—they help us see it.

Poetic or symbolic language is not false—it is often the truest way to express something profound. Just as we describe emotions or thoughts using physical imagery (like “broken-hearted” or “a bright idea”), so we describe God using terms that point to realities beyond what we can see.

Creaturely Names, Divine Origin

While we use human words for God, those names are not invented by us. They reflect truths that were first in God himself. All good qualities—love, justice, strength, wisdom—exist in God perfectly. We experience them only in part. He is the source; we are the reflection.

So when we call God “Father,” “Shepherd,” “Light,” or “Rock,” we are not projecting our ideas onto him. Rather, we are naming what he has already revealed. In fact, God created the world in such a way that it would reflect his attributes. The creatures and relationships we know—fathers, rulers, friends—are modeled after his eternal perfections.

Scripture confirms this: just as the temple on earth was patterned after a heavenly design, all things on earth reflect the reality that first existed in God. Every good gift we enjoy—truth, beauty, love, life—has its source in him. He is the original; everything else is a copy.

We call God by many names because God has revealed himself in many ways. While no name can fully express who he is, each name gives us a glimpse of his glory. Speaking of God with human language is not a flaw—it is the only way we can truly know him. And

we speak this way not because we are trying to bring God down to our level, but because God has graciously come down to us.

All our knowledge of God begins with his grace—his choice to reveal himself. And all our speech about God, however limited, is rooted in his revelation. He gives us names to call on him. And in calling his name, we draw near to the One who made us, knows us, and saves us.

Knowing the Infinite God

The Bible speaks of God using images and language from our everyday world. He reveals himself through creation, and most fully through Jesus Christ, who took on human nature. Although Christ's human form didn't fully display the glory of God, he still made the Father known. This shows us an important truth: even though our knowledge of God is limited, it can still be true, faithful, and sufficient.

We name God based on how he has revealed himself—not because we have the ability or right to define him on our own. God has taught us how to speak about him, giving us his names through nature and Scripture. These names are not inventions of human reasoning, but come from what God has objectively revealed about himself.

Historically, theologians have used the terms *archetypal* and *ectypal* to describe this distinction. *Archetypal knowledge* refers to God's perfect knowledge of himself. *Ectypal knowledge* is the limited and creaturely knowledge we have of him, based on his revelation. This protects us from two common errors.

Avoiding Two Errors

First, some claim that humans can have direct, exhaustive knowledge of God—whether through mystical experience or intellectual reasoning. But Scripture teaches otherwise: no one has seen God fully, except the Son. We only know God as he reveals himself, and always indirectly. Like Moses who only saw God’s back, we too see only reflections of God’s glory. We live by faith, not by sight.

Second, others claim that all the names we use for God—like “wise,” “good,” “just”—are just poetic symbols, not meant to describe God in any real way. But this view falls short. If God’s attributes were only symbolic, we could just as well call him “silver” or “stone,” since he created those things too. But we mean more when we say “God is good” than just “God causes goodness.” God is not simply a distant force behind the world. He personally reveals himself in meaningful ways that correspond to what we call goodness, wisdom, or love.

Some modern thinkers, especially those influenced by rationalism or idealism, have tried to reduce theology to symbolic language. They keep using biblical terms, but only as vague spiritual metaphors. This approach empties theology of its power. If God’s names are only symbolic, then religion becomes nothing more than a reflection of our inner thoughts—and God becomes whoever we imagine him to be.

The Biblical View of Knowing God

Scripture takes a different approach. It teaches that:

1. **God is the Creator.** Everything that exists was made by him and reflects him in some way. The universe is not just creation—it is also revelation. There is no part of the world that doesn’t point to God.

2. **Humans are God's image.** While all creation displays God's glory, humans do so in a special way. This gives us a unique capacity to know and speak about God, especially using language from human life.
3. **God is both near and far.** He is above all creation—transcendent—and yet intimately present in it—immanent. This balance is crucial: he is not identical with creation, but neither is he distant or detached from it.

Because of this, our theology is not symbolic in the imaginative or artistic sense. It is **ectypal**—a real but limited reflection of God's own perfect self-knowledge. Our knowledge is shaped by analogy. We know God *like* a child knows a parent—not fully, but truly. We know God *as he reveals himself*, not as he exists in his inner essence.

Key Points of Ectypal Theology

1. **All true knowledge of God comes from God himself**—through his revelation, not human invention.
2. **God accommodates himself to our level**—he speaks in ways we can understand, using creaturely language to communicate infinite truths.
3. **This is possible because God created us** with the ability to know him. Finite creatures can receive true knowledge of the infinite when God reveals it.
4. **Our knowledge is always analogical**—we know God in relation to how he has acted toward us, not by directly grasping his essence. We understand him through his works and words.

- 5. Even though our knowledge is limited, it is real and trustworthy.** It is grounded in God's own perfect knowledge of himself and in his choice to make himself known to us.

Classifying God's Names

Scripture uses many names to speak about God, but it never starts with a cold, abstract idea of God. Nor does it highlight one of God's attributes in a way that overshadows the others. Instead, the Bible reveals all of God's perfections in beautiful harmony. God is never fragmented into isolated traits—he is always presented as a whole person, consistent and glorious in every way.

Just as Christ is not a collection of characteristics but a living person, so God is fully and perfectly revealed through the unity of all his attributes. When Scripture speaks of God's being, it does so through his revealed names and actions—not as some hidden essence apart from how he makes himself known.

We do not find in the Bible a sharp distinction between God's essence and his attributes. His "being" is shown to us in how he acts, in the names he gives himself, and in the works he performs. This means that when we speak of God's names, we are also speaking of his perfections—his glory, his wisdom, his justice, and so on.

God's Essence and Revelation

That said, it's still important—especially in contrast to false views like pantheism—to affirm that God has a real, distinct nature. He is not just another part of the universe; he exists independently and eternally. Yet, we cannot access this divine essence apart from his self-revelation. God doesn't show us something different from who

he truly is—he shows us himself. His revelation is not a mask but a window into his actual being.

Though God is infinitely greater than we are, and our understanding of him is only partial and analogical, what he reveals to us is real. Each of his attributes gives us a glimpse of his full being from a particular angle. We never get the whole picture, but each name he reveals draws us closer to knowing him as he truly is.

Theological Tradition

In the early church, theologians understood that everything they could say about God—his names, attributes, and even his triune persons—belonged to the category of God’s self-revelation. When Augustine spoke of God’s “essence,” he did not separate it from God’s attributes. For him, God’s being included his simplicity, eternity, goodness, wisdom, and more. These weren’t added to God—they *are* God.

Later theologians sometimes tried to make sharper distinctions between God’s nature and his attributes, but many still recognized that we only know God through what he has shown us. And in that revelation, his attributes are not separate parts, but ways we come to know his one, perfect being.

Names That Speak of God’s Being

As Christian thinkers have studied the names and attributes of God, they’ve often asked: Is there one central truth or attribute that captures who God is most fully? Is there a starting point from which all other attributes flow?

Historically, many theologians have answered this by pointing to God's **being**—his self-existence, independence, and unchanging nature. This idea was linked to the name **YHWH** (the LORD), which in Scripture emphasizes that God simply *is*—he is not made, he depends on no one, and he alone gives existence to everything else.

From early on, this focus on God as “the One who is” became a foundation in Christian theology. Theologians like Augustine described God as the **supreme being**, perfectly good, wise, true, and beautiful. God is not a collection of qualities added to a base; all that he is—his love, justice, power, and more—is fully and eternally identical with his essence. He simply *is*, without change or need. His being is perfect and complete.

Later thinkers also highlighted other attributes as central—some emphasizing God's **infinity**, others his **personality** or **intellect**. But even then, most agreed that God is the One who exists in and of himself, independent of all else.

The Reformation and Afterward

The Protestant Reformers didn't fundamentally change this view. Most Reformed theologians continued to define God as the **independent, self-existent, and simple Spirit**—meaning he is not composed of parts, and he is utterly sufficient in himself. They maintained a strong emphasis on God's transcendence and holiness, but always in the context of his personal, triune being.

However, some groups like the **Socinians** moved away from this classical doctrine. They focused almost entirely on God's will—reducing theology to moral commands and obedience. God became distant and unknowable apart from what he commanded. This emphasis continued in movements like **Rationalism** and **Deism**,

which rejected mystery and majesty for a God who was logical but detached.

In response, others like **Spinoza** returned to talking about God's essence, but did so through a **pantheistic** lens—seeing God as identical with the universe. God was “everything” and nothing in particular. This made room for deep spiritual feeling, but blurred the lines between God and the world.

Romanticism and philosophers like **Schelling** and **Hegel** tried to reunite spirit and nature, the infinite and finite, into a grand process of becoming. For Hegel, God was not the eternal One who is, but the world-spirit becoming self-aware through history. In this view, without the world, God would not even be God.

Recovering the Biblical God

Yet many thinkers pushed back. They defended the classic Christian belief in a God who is both **personal and absolute**—a God who exists apart from the world, yet reveals himself in it. Some added richer reflections on God's **Trinitarian nature**, seeing the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit as the heart of God's eternal life.

In all these debates, what remains essential is that **God is not a concept or force**, but the living, self-existent Lord who reveals himself in Scripture and creation. His **name**—YHWH—testifies that he is eternally and unchangeably himself, not becoming or developing, but always perfect, always God.

Personal and Moral Names of God

In more recent times, many thinkers turned away from philosophical or abstract discussions about God and instead focused on **God's moral character**, especially his **love**. As a result, the doctrine of God became more centered on his **fatherly care** and **ethical goodness** rather than on his sovereignty or metaphysical nature.

Some theologians emphasized **God as Father**, portraying him as loving and morally good, in contrast to earlier views that saw him primarily as a sovereign ruler or impersonal force. Others, like Ritschl, argued that religion isn't a matter of law or power but of personal relationship. In his view, God's essence is not raw authority or abstract perfection but **relational love**. For him, Christian faith is built not on fear or obedience to law, but on fellowship with a loving God—like the bond between a parent and a child.

Ritschl criticized traditional theology for making God seem like a distant ruler who governs by strict justice. He rejected the idea that God rewards or punishes based on human merit. Instead, he believed that all doctrine should flow from **God's love**, the central truth of Christianity.

Some theologians agreed with this shift, going so far as to say that **God's kingdom**—his reign of righteousness and peace—is the true starting point for understanding who he is. From that, they argued, we can understand that God must be **personal** and **loving**.

Others, however, believed that this view went too far. They warned that focusing only on God's love could lead us to ignore other vital truths, like his holiness, justice, or absolute majesty. Some, like Kaftan, argued that the idea of **God as absolute**—the One who is above all things—is still important, even if it needs to be shaped by the truths of Christian revelation. Others tried to combine both

views, calling God the perfect union of personal love and absolute being.

The challenge has always been to describe God in a way that fully honors **all his attributes**. Some emphasize one aspect over others—God's power, goodness, truth, or love. But the task of Christian theology is to reflect the wholeness of God's character, just as Scripture does. God is not partly love and partly just; he is **all-wise, all-good, all-just, and all-loving** at once. His attributes are not in tension but in perfect harmony.

God's Simplicity: His Being and Attributes

Christian theology has long taught that **God is simple**—meaning he is not made up of parts. His essence is not something separate from his attributes. Unlike creatures, where who we are can be distinguished from what we have (like a person being human while lacking righteousness), God is what he possesses. He does not merely have wisdom, power, or love—he is wisdom, he is power, he is love. All of God's attributes are fully and perfectly present in him at all times and are not separate from one another or from his essence.

This doctrine of **divine simplicity** protects us from imagining God as a collection of traits or as being divided into pieces. It also guards us from the danger of treating God's qualities like competing forces, which historically has led to errors such as **polytheism**, where various powers in creation are personified and worshiped as separate deities. Similar ideas crept into early theological errors like **Gnosticism**, where divine attributes were imagined as separate beings flowing out of God. These views compromised the unity and transcendence of God.

Even within Christian thought, some have misunderstood this point. For instance, certain medieval theologians mistakenly spoke as if God's nature (or "divinity") was something he *had*, rather than what he *is*. Others claimed that God's attributes could be formally distinguished from his essence and from one another, though not completely separated.

In more recent theology, some have drifted even further. They've proposed that God's attributes are added onto his essence, almost

like extra qualities layered on top of his being. This weakens the biblical view of God's simplicity and threatens to divide him internally, making him more like a creature than the infinite, self-existent One.

But Scripture never portrays God this way. It reveals a God who is perfectly united in his being—a God whose power is his wisdom, whose justice is his love, whose immutability is his goodness. All that is in God is God himself, not separate parts or aspects that can be peeled away. This unity is not a cold abstraction but the living fullness of the God who reveals himself in Scripture and in Christ.

God as Personal Absolute Being

In true Christian theology, we must not treat God's attributes as though some are more essential than others or as if certain traits, like love, were added only after creation. This kind of distinction suggests that God isn't fully or equally all his attributes—an idea that weakens the biblical view of his perfection. Classical theology avoided this error by affirming **God's simplicity**—that God is fully and perfectly himself in every attribute.

Some critics say theology borrowed from philosophy when it described God as “Being” or “the Absolute.” But in Scripture and Christian theology, these terms were never meant to strip God of his richness. Instead, “Being” referred to **God's fullness**—his life, wisdom, truth, and love—all united and real. Theology doesn't arrive at this view by emptying God of content, as philosophy does, but by acknowledging that all perfections found in creatures come from him and exist in him in absolute form. So when theology calls God “Being,” it means the most real, full, and perfect existence possible—not a vague or abstract idea.

This is why theology emphasizes that God's attributes (like love, justice, power, and holiness) are not separate from who he is. He is all of these—eternally, perfectly, and fully. That's why God's essence must be described in terms that reflect this richness, and why describing God simply as “a person” or only as “love” falls short. These descriptions are true, but if taken alone, they miss the full picture and risk turning God into a one-dimensional figure. For example, calling God “love” is scriptural and right, but if that becomes the only defining trait, it may overshadow his holiness, justice, or sovereignty.

Instead, Christian theology has often focused on **God's aseity**—that he exists from himself, dependent on nothing and no one. This is what is meant by God being **absolute**. He is not a part of the world. He isn't shaped by creation. He is above all things, the source of everything, and perfectly self-sufficient. This makes him the only true and necessary being—everything else exists because of him.

The Bible supports this high view of God throughout. God creates by speaking. He rules all things. He alone is from everlasting to everlasting. He is the Alpha and the Omega. This vision of God as the absolute, independent, perfect Being is deeply biblical and foundational for Christian faith.

So, rather than choosing one trait to represent God (like personality or love), Scripture and sound theology teach us to see God as the infinite fullness of all perfections. His **aseity**—his self-existence—is what sets him apart from all creation and affirms that he is truly God.

Understanding the Attributes of God

Although we cannot divide God into parts—because each of his attributes fully expresses who he is—that doesn't mean we should treat his attributes as if they're just different names for the same thing, without real distinctions. Some have made that mistake, saying that if God is perfectly simple, then “love,” “wisdom,” and “power” all mean exactly the same thing when applied to God. But this view creates problems, especially when it denies real distinctions and ultimately undermines key Christian teachings, like the full divinity of Christ.

Throughout history, various philosophers and theologians have struggled with how to describe God's attributes. Some, like certain medieval thinkers or pantheists, treated them as either separate from God (as if they were lesser beings) or just as poetic ways of talking about God with no real meaning. Others said these attributes are only ways our minds interpret God's actions, not real truths about who God is.

But Scripture and sound theology teach something different: while all God's attributes are fully united in him, they are still distinct in meaning. For example, God's love is not the same as his justice, and neither is identical to his wisdom. They are all true of God at the same time, and yet they tell us different things about who he is. These differences don't divide God but instead help us understand his infinite richness.

The early church fathers rightly said that we have many different ideas about God—not just different names—because each attribute reveals something real about him. Each name gives us a true, though limited, glimpse into his character. Think of it like light: though it's one thing, it appears in many colors when it shines through a prism.

Or like fire: the same fire gives warmth, light, or consumes, depending on how it relates to you.

The fact that God is described in so many ways in Scripture isn't a contradiction to his simplicity. It's actually a testimony to how full and rich his being is. His simplicity doesn't mean uniformity or lack of content. It means that everything he is—love, justice, wisdom, power—is united in perfect harmony. We just experience and understand those perfections from different angles.

Most importantly, we must remember that we use these names not because we invented them, but because **God revealed them to us**. He makes himself known in this way so that we can relate to him. Though our understanding is limited and our language is finite, it is still meaningful. There is a real connection—an analogy—between God's attributes and the things we know about in the created world. That's why we can say God is righteous, merciful, and wise, and mean it.

So while we can't fully grasp God's being, we are not left in the dark. His many names, drawn from his own revelation in Scripture and creation, help us to truly know him—even if we can never know him exhaustively. Every name, every attribute, gives us a window into the same glorious reality: the one, living, infinite, holy God.

How We Know God: Affirmation, Negation, and Causality

In the early church, everything said about God was grouped under his “names.” But as Christian theology developed, the need arose to organize those teachings more clearly. Over time, God's personal names (like “God” or “Lord”) were distinguished from his attributes (like “holy,” “eternal,” “merciful”), and the doctrine of the Trinity came to be treated separately.

To describe God's being and attributes, theologians began to ask: *How can we speak about a God who is beyond all human understanding?* They found that we often come to know God in three ways:

1. **By way of negation** – we deny that God has any of the limits or imperfections we see in creation (e.g., God is not changeable or limited like creatures).
2. **By way of affirmation or eminence** – we ascribe to God, in a perfect and exalted form, all the good qualities we see in the world (e.g., wisdom, power, love).
3. **By way of causality** – we recognize God as the source and cause of all that exists, and from his works we gain knowledge about who he is.

These three approaches—especially the first two—have shaped Christian theology through the ages. Some thinkers criticized these methods, claiming they reduce God to human ideas or rely too heavily on reasoning from creation. But these approaches don't invent ideas about God; they reflect on what God has already made known in his creation and in Scripture.

It's important to understand that we don't know God *as he knows himself*. We know him only as he has revealed himself to us—in the world he made, and in his Word. That knowledge is real, even if it's limited. We don't describe God directly, but through comparisons, or analogies, to created things. Because creation reflects God's glory, these analogies are meaningful and true, even if they don't capture the fullness of who he is.

So, when we speak of God's power, wisdom, or love, we must affirm these as real perfections while also recognizing that God possesses them in a way far beyond anything we experience. He is not wise in the same way we are wise—his wisdom is perfect, eternal, and complete. This is why, in Scripture and Christian thought, we affirm God's attributes while also denying that he possesses them in a merely human way.

Mystics and theologians alike have described God as both known and unknowable, as both named and beyond naming. He is the source of every perfection and yet surpasses every description. Scripture itself supports this: the same God who reveals his glory also dwells “in thick darkness” (Exodus 20:21). The closer we draw to him, the more we realize that his greatness exceeds our grasp.

In the end, true knowledge of God comes through both affirmation and negation. We must say, “God is,” and also confess, “He is not like anything we know.” This doesn't lead to confusion, but to reverence. It reminds us that our God is both intimately present and infinitely beyond us—the One who is holy, wise, just, and good, yet always greater than our best thoughts about him.

Classifying God's Attributes

Throughout church history, theologians have tried to organize the many ways Scripture speaks about God. Since God reveals himself in so many names and attributes, some structure is helpful—but difficult. One of the oldest and most common ways to classify God's attributes is to divide them into **negative** and **positive** categories.

- **Negative attributes** describe what God is *not* (e.g., he is not limited, not changeable).

- **Positive attributes** describe what God is (e.g., he is good, wise, just).

Another important distinction is between **incommunicable** and **communicable** attributes.

- **Incommunicable attributes** are those that belong to God alone, such as his independence, unchangeableness, infinity, and unity.
- **Communicable attributes** are those that, in some way, are reflected in us as his image bearers, such as wisdom, righteousness, love, and power.

This distinction helps us remember that while God is totally distinct from us, he has also made us in his image and revealed himself in ways we can understand—at least in part.

The Purpose and Limits of These Categories

Though useful, these divisions have their limitations. They can give the false impression that God's attributes are divided into two disconnected halves: one that belongs to God "in himself" and another that only appears in relation to creation. But in reality, *all* God's attributes are part of who he is. They are not things he picks up along the way.

Even so-called "negative" or "incommunicable" attributes (like eternity or immutability) are still made known to us through creation. We come to understand God's eternity only because we live in time; we grasp his immensity only because we live in space. These truths about God are not direct knowledge of his essence, but they are real and meaningful.

Similarly, while "positive" attributes like love or holiness are seen in creation and reflected in humanity, they exist in God in a way that is infinite, perfect, and unique. We know these qualities only in part and by analogy, but they are true.

God's Attributes Revealed Through Creation and in Christ

All of God's creation reveals something of his character. Everything he has made, from the smallest creature to the vastness of the heavens, shows his power, wisdom, and goodness. Yet not all creatures reflect his attributes equally. Human beings, made in his image, display his likeness in a unique way: in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

The clearest and fullest expression of God's attributes is found in **Jesus Christ**, who is the image of the invisible God. In him we see God's attributes not only in their divine form but also as they relate personally to us.

A Practical Way to Organize the Attributes

Though we cannot perfectly systematize the infinite being of God, Christian theology typically groups his attributes like this:

1. Incommunicable Attributes – those unique to God alone:

- **Aseity** (self-existence)
- **Immutability** (unchangeableness)
- **Infinity** (eternity and omnipresence)
- **Unity** (oneness and simplicity)

2. Communicable Attributes – those which God shares with creatures in some measure:

- **Spiritual nature:** God is spirit and invisible.
- **Intellect:** God knows all things, is wise and truthful.
- **Moral attributes:** God is good, righteous, and holy.
- **Will and power:** God acts freely, powerfully, and sovereignly.
- **Glory and joy:** God is blessed, perfect, and glorious.

These attributes are not just abstract ideas. They come from God's revelation—in nature, in Scripture, and most fully in Christ. We don't know God in his essence, but we do have real, reliable knowledge of him because he has made himself known.

God's Proper Names

When we speak of God's "names" in a narrow sense—different from his attributes—we mean the names used to directly refer to or address God as a personal, independent being. Every culture and language has some word for God. Even though God, in himself, has no name like we do, we need names to speak of him and to relate to him. Without a name, we cannot speak meaningfully about anyone or anything.

Historically, many languages have connected their word for "God" with ideas of the heavens, light, lordship, or mystery. For example:

- In Greek, **theos** has been linked to ideas like seeing, shining, or being called upon.
- In other ancient cultures, words for “God” often meant “**Heaven**”, “**the One who shines**”, “**the Ruler**,” or “**the One who is hidden.**”
- Our English word “**God**” has uncertain roots, possibly related to ideas of goodness, being called upon in worship, or self-existence.

In the Bible, God’s “name” often means more than just a title—it refers to his whole character, reputation, and presence. That’s why Scripture speaks of the greatness, glory, and holiness of God's name.

The Jewish tradition identified **many names** for God—sometimes listed as seventy or more. Early Christian theology also grouped God's attributes under the idea of his “names,” but over time, theologians began distinguishing between God's *proper names* (like “LORD” or “El Shaddai”) and his attributes (like wisdom or love).

One early scholar, Jerome, limited God’s proper names to ten key Hebrew titles used in the Old Testament, including:

- **El** – the Strong One
- **Elohim** – God (a plural form emphasizing majesty)
- **Elohe** – another form of Elohim
- **Sabaoth** – Lord of Hosts
- **Elyon** – the Most High

- **Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh** – “I AM WHO I AM”
- **Adonai** – Lord
- **Yah** – a short form of God’s name
- **YHWH** – the covenant name of God, often rendered “LORD”
- **Shaddai** – the Almighty

These names are not just labels. They reveal who God is in his covenant, his power, his nearness, and his majesty. God gives us these names so we can know him, call on him, and worship him in truth.

El, Elohim, and El Shaddai

One of the most basic names for God in the Bible is **El**. It appears throughout the Old Testament and is common in ancient Semitic languages. Scholars debate its origin, but it likely means either “the Strong One” or “the One who is above all.” The name emphasizes God’s power and supremacy.

Another common name is **Elohim**, which is actually a plural form but almost always used with singular verbs and adjectives when referring to the one true God. This shows that the name doesn't imply multiple gods (as in polytheism), nor does it directly teach the Trinity, though some Christians have seen hints of it. Rather, the plural form probably serves to express **God’s greatness and fullness of power**—a plural of majesty or intensity. It portrays God as the **all-powerful Creator** who stands above all things and sustains everything.

The singular form **Eloah** is more poetic and rare, while **Elohim** is the most common name used for God in the Old Testament.

Names like **El Elyon** ("God Most High") highlight God's exalted position over all creation. Others, like **Adonai** ("Lord"), express God's rule and ownership over everything and his relationship to people as their Master. These names often appear in phrases like "Lord of lords" or "Lord of all the earth," stressing his supreme authority.

In earlier times, the name **Baal** (meaning "lord") was also used for God, but it was later rejected due to its association with pagan worship.

Although these names are not unique to the God of Israel and can sometimes be used of human rulers or false gods, they became the regular way God's people addressed him. In them, the focus is not on philosophical definitions of God's essence but on **his majesty, power, and authority**—especially in relation to his people. The Semitic mindset deeply felt this relationship: God was their King, and they were his humble servants.

El Shaddai: God Almighty

Though God is exalted above creation, he graciously reveals himself to his people. In his covenant with Abraham, God introduced himself as **El Shaddai**, often translated "God Almighty." This name appears throughout the patriarchal stories and highlights God's power to fulfill his promises, even when circumstances seem impossible.

While scholars debate the exact origin of the name, its consistent meaning in Scripture points to **God's supreme strength and ability to rule over all things**. El Shaddai is not merely the God

of creation (as expressed in the name Elohim), but the God who can **bend creation to serve his purposes of grace**. He uses his might not to terrify, but to protect, bless, and uphold his people.

Through this name, God draws near in covenant love. From this point on, he is often referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—personal and faithful to his people. Though all-powerful, he is not distant, but near.

YHWH: The Lord

God revealed himself most intimately through the name **YHWH**—often translated "the Lord" in English Bibles. This is considered God's most sacred name, expressing **his eternal and unchanging nature**, his **faithfulness**, and his **self-existence**. While other names reveal aspects of God's relationship with the world, **YHWH speaks to who God is in himself**.

Out of reverence, the Jewish people eventually stopped saying this name aloud, replacing it with "Adonai" (Lord). As a result, the original pronunciation was lost. Some early Christians speculated on how it was spoken—suggesting forms like *Yahweh*, *Yaho*, or *Iaou*—but no one can be completely certain today.

Later, the form **Jehovah** arose by combining the consonants YHWH with the vowels of Adonai. This pronunciation, however, is not original and likely does not reflect how the name was spoken in ancient times.

Despite the mystery around its pronunciation, the meaning is clear from Exodus 3:14, where God says, "**I am who I am.**" The name **YHWH declares God's absolute existence, his faithfulness to his promises, and his presence with his people**. It speaks

of a God who does not change and who always acts according to his perfect will.

The Meaning and Significance of YHWH

There has been much debate over the origin and meaning of the name **YHWH** (often rendered as “the LORD” in English Bibles). Some have argued that the name comes from foreign sources, such as Babylon or Canaan, but these theories lack strong evidence. Even if similar names existed elsewhere, the meaning and use of YHWH in Israel is entirely unique. In Scripture, YHWH is not one god among many, but the **one true God**, the **Creator**, and the **Redeemer** of his people.

The name is widely believed to be related to the Hebrew verb “**to be**” (היה or הוה). Some have suggested it means “he causes to be” (the Creator), while others see it as “he is” (the One who truly exists). However, the best explanation is found in **Exodus 3**, where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and says, “**I am who I am**” (Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh). This name reveals God’s unchanging nature and his faithfulness to his promises.

When God says, “I am who I am,” he is assuring Moses—and Israel—that he is the same God who was with their ancestors, who is with them now, and who will always be with them. He is not introducing a new deity, but reaffirming that he is the eternal, faithful, and unchanging God. His name is a promise: he will always be what his people need, according to his covenant grace.

So, even though the name **YHWH** may have been known before Moses, its **true meaning** was first revealed at this crucial moment in redemptive history. From that point on, the name became the

divine guarantee of God's covenant loyalty. God is **YHWH**, the Lord who remains faithful through time, trials, and suffering.

This name became deeply connected to Israel's history and identity—the name of the God who brought them out of Egypt and who remained their God forever.

YHWH Sabaoth – The Lord of Hosts

In the Old Testament, the name **YHWH** is God's most sacred and personal name. It is never used for any other deity and never appears in the plural or with possessive endings. Sometimes this name is abbreviated in forms like *Yah* (as in “Hallelujah”) or combined with titles like **Adonai** ("Lord") or **Sabaoth**, forming **YHWH Sabaoth**, which is often translated “Lord of hosts.”

But what does “hosts” mean? Some have thought it refers to Israel's armies or the stars of heaven, but these interpretations fall short. While the term “hosts” can describe various groups—people, stars, or creatures—it never consistently refers to God's military power or abstract cosmic forces.

The most compelling and biblically supported meaning is that “hosts” refers to the **angelic armies of heaven**. Throughout Scripture, God is portrayed as being surrounded by a vast number of holy angels who serve him, worship him, and carry out his will. These heavenly hosts reflect God's majesty and authority as **the King of glory**.

Thus, the name **YHWH Sabaoth** reveals God as the sovereign Lord of all, reigning in majesty over the heavens and the earth. This name portrays God not as a warrior in a worldly sense, but as the **divine King**, glorified by angelic hosts and worshiped in his heavenly

temple. He is not only the Creator (Elohim) and the Almighty (El Shaddai), nor only the Faithful One (YHWH), but also the **glorious King** who rules all things in righteousness and power.

God as Father

In the New Testament, the name “**Father**” becomes the most common and intimate way believers refer to God. Though this name already appears occasionally in the Old Testament to describe God's relationship with Israel, it takes on fuller and deeper meaning in the New Testament through Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, calling God “Father” expressed his special covenant bond with Israel—he had formed them as a nation and loved them as his own. At times, he is also called “Father” as Creator and Sustainer of all (e.g., in his role as the origin of all life and every good gift).

But through Christ, the name “**Father**” reveals much more than origin or authority. It expresses a personal, relational, and ethical bond between God and his people. In Christ, this relationship is no longer only national or corporate, but personal and individual. Believers are not just citizens of a kingdom but children in God's household.

This shift shows the heart of the New Testament gospel. God is still the Lord, the Almighty, and the King—but now he is also known and loved as **Father**. His kingdom is a family, and his rule is one of grace. Believers are born of him, bear his likeness, and live under his fatherly care.

This relationship is possible only through **Jesus Christ**, God's eternal and beloved Son. Through him, and by the working of the

Holy Spirit, believers are **adopted into God's family** and made aware of their new identity as children of God.

The full revelation of God's name is now known as **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**—the glorious unfolding of the fullness that was already present in the name **Elohim**. In the triune name, God is revealed not only as Creator and Sovereign, but as the **eternal communion of love** into which we are graciously invited.

Chapter 4

The Incommunicable Attributes of God

Some theologians argue that the doctrine of the Trinity should come before the discussion of God's attributes. But Scripture itself introduces us first to God's **nature**—his being and perfections—and only later reveals the mystery of the **Trinity**. To truly understand the triune persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we must first know what kind of **divine nature** they share.

God reveals himself in Scripture as the One who exists **independently and eternally**. He is not like any creature. He exists in and of himself, without beginning or end, and everything else depends on him for its existence. The name **YHWH** captures this truth: God is who he is—unchanging, faithful, and self-existent.

God's **incommunicable attributes** are those that set him apart from all creation:

- He is **self-existent**—he exists from himself and depends on nothing.
- He is **eternal**—he has no beginning or end.
- He is **unchanging**—he is always the same in his being, purposes, and promises.
- He is **all-sufficient**—he lacks nothing and needs nothing from anyone.
- He is **sovereign**—he does whatever he pleases, and all things unfold according to his wise and perfect will.

God is not shaped by anything outside himself. He is completely independent in his thoughts, his will, his love, and his power. Everything that exists comes from him, but he is not shaped or constrained by anything he has made. He is the overflowing fountain of all goodness and life.

God's Independence (Aseity)

God's independence means that he exists entirely from himself and depends on nothing. He is self-existent, self-sufficient, and complete in every way. All that he is—his goodness, wisdom, love, power, and life—flows from his own being. He is not caused by anything, nor does he receive anything from outside himself.

This truth is rooted in God's own name, **YHWH**, revealed in Exodus 3:14: "I am who I am." This name expresses that God simply *is*. He is unchanging, eternal, and perfectly complete. All other beings come from him and depend on him for their existence. He depends on no one. This is what theologians have called his **aseity**—his "from-himself-ness."

Throughout history, Christian thinkers have described this independence in different ways. Early church fathers emphasized God's eternal being and fullness. Medieval theologians connected his independence with his perfection and greatness. The Reformers continued this, but especially the Reformed tradition gave more emphasis to God's independence not just in being, but also in his wisdom, will, and works.

When Scripture speaks of God as the one who gives life, who needs nothing, and who acts entirely according to his own will, it is declaring his total independence. He is the first and the last, the cause and goal of all things.

Though creatures are completely dependent on God, we still bear a faint reflection of this attribute. All creatures seek to survive, resist destruction, and strive to continue existing. This drive points—however dimly—to the self-sustaining nature of God.

In short, God alone *is*—absolutely, eternally, and fully. His independence is the foundation for all his other perfections.

God's Immutability

God is unchanging. This truth flows directly from his independence and self-existence. If God exists in and from himself, needing nothing outside himself, then he cannot change. Any change would mean becoming something more or less than he already is—something no perfect being can do.

At first glance, Scripture seems to suggest that God does change. He creates, he acts in history, he shows mercy, becomes angry, and even speaks of repenting. He relates to people in different ways at different times. But the Bible also clearly teaches that God remains

the same. He is unchanging in his being, his purposes, and his promises. He is called the Rock, the One who was and is and is to come, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17).

Christian theology has long held to God's immutability—that he does not and cannot change. This is not a cold, distant stillness, but the perfection of stability, truth, and faithfulness. God is always who he is. His love is always steadfast. His justice is always right. His wisdom is always perfect. His plans do not fail, and his will is never frustrated.

Opposing views have emerged. Some say God's knowledge or decisions change in response to human actions. Others, influenced by philosophy, argue that God is in a process of becoming, gradually unfolding into his fullness—essentially saying that God is still developing. But these ideas blur the line between Creator and creature. They make God more like us, which strips him of his divine majesty and makes him unreliable as our refuge.

Yet, God's immutability does not mean lifeless rigidity. While he never changes in his being, he freely relates to his creation. He enters time, speaks, acts, loves, judges, and saves. These are real interactions—but they come from a God who is eternally and perfectly consistent in character.

So how do we understand God's unchanging nature alongside his active presence in our world?

Think of the sun: it doesn't change, but depending on where you stand, it can warm or burn. Likewise, God's being never shifts, but his creatures experience him differently based on their own positions

and conditions. He is always the same, but his unchanging will determines how and when we encounter him.

This is the glory of God's immutability: he is always himself. And because he does not change, we can fully trust him. He is the Rock—faithful, dependable, and perfect in all his ways. In a world of change and uncertainty, this truth brings rest to our souls.

God's Infinity

When we say God is **infinite**, we mean he has no limits—not in time, not in space, and not in his being. His **eternity** means he is not bound by time. His **omnipresence** means he is not bound by space. These are ways of describing God's infinity in specific directions.

Some philosophies have misused the idea of infinity. They picture God as an undefined force or as a vague substance that becomes everything and everyone. In this view, God is not personal, and creation is just an unfolding of God himself. But this makes God formless, like an empty concept without distinct identity. It erases the boundary between Creator and creation.

The Bible teaches something very different. God's infinity is not a lack of form—it is the fullness of being. He is not limited by anything. He is not infinite because he lacks definition, but because he is **perfect**, unlimited in every way. All his attributes—his wisdom, power, love, justice—are present in him fully and without measure.

So when we speak of God's infinity, we are not talking about size or number. God doesn't have physical dimensions, and he isn't made up of parts that could be counted. His infinity is **spiritual** and **essential**—he is infinitely and perfectly himself.

In this way, God's infinity means he is complete and perfect in every attribute. He lacks nothing. His being is rich, full, and beyond measure. And while this kind of infinity is beyond our full understanding, it is not meaningless. It is the very reason we worship God as the One who is truly and eternally greater than all.

God's Eternity

God is not bound by time. Though he acts in time—creating the world, speaking through the prophets, and sending Christ into history—he himself exists beyond it. Scripture presents God as the One who was, who is, and who is to come. He has no beginning or end, and he does not change. A thousand years to him are like a single day. He is the eternal “I AM.”

Some philosophies have misunderstood eternity. They treat it as simply time stretched out forever—an endless past and future. But that's not what the Bible means. God's eternity is not just longer than time; it's fundamentally different from time. Time has a past, present, and future. It moves. It changes. It measures created things. But God is not subject to any of that. He is not in a process of becoming. He simply **is**—unchanging, ever-present, fully complete in himself.

This doesn't mean God is inactive or frozen. His eternity is not lifeless or distant. Rather, it is the fullness of life. God's eternal being is vibrant and full—more like the rich joy of a worker who doesn't notice time because he's so fully alive in his task, not like someone stuck in a dull moment. His eternity is not a long, boring moment stretched forever; it is perfect, joyful, unchanging life.

God's eternity is also not detached from our time. He made time and rules over it. He enters into time to accomplish his purposes, yet he

remains eternal. Time depends on God—its every moment exists only because God upholds it. So even though he is beyond time, God is also present in every moment, working out his eternal plan. In each second, eternity is at work.

In short, God's eternity means he is beyond time, above time, and yet fully present in time. He does not age, change, or grow. He is the eternal God who always is—and in that, he is the unshakable foundation of our hope and the Rock of our salvation.

God's Omnipresence

God is not limited by space. He is present everywhere, and yet he is not confined to any one location. Scripture teaches that God fills heaven and earth. No one can hide from him. He is close at hand and not far away. In him we live, move, and have our being. Though he transcends creation, he is also fully present within it.

Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself as present in particular places and in special ways. Heaven is often described as his throne, a unique place of glory. Yet God also comes down to earth—walking with Adam, revealing himself to Abraham and Moses, and dwelling with his people in the tabernacle and the temple. He was especially near to Israel, not because he was absent elsewhere, but because he chose to make his presence known in a gracious, covenantal way.

Still, God's presence is not automatic or mechanical. The prophets warned against trusting in mere outward signs of God's presence while rejecting him in their hearts. God draws near to the humble and contrite, but he is far from the wicked. This reaches its highest expression in Jesus Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, God now dwells in his

people, the church, as his temple. And one day, in the new creation, he will dwell fully and visibly with his redeemed people.

Throughout history, not everyone has accepted God's omnipresence. Some wanted to protect God's purity by claiming he could not truly be present in the material world. Others, like the Stoics and later pantheists, confused God with the world itself. They taught that God was in everything in the same way that air or fire fills space. But this collapses the distinction between Creator and creation.

True Christian teaching avoids both errors. God is present everywhere, not because he is spread out like a substance, but because he is spirit. He is fully present in all places, not in part or by division, but in the fullness of his being. He is near to all his creatures, sustaining and governing them, yet he remains distinct and exalted above them. His presence is not spatial like ours, but personal and powerful—near, active, and sovereign.

God is both transcendent and immanent. He is high above all, yet intimately involved in the world he made. He is not far from any one of us. In Christ, and through the Spirit, his presence becomes our greatest comfort and our surest hope.

Christian theology carefully avoids two errors when speaking about God's presence: the idea that he is far removed from the world (Deism), and the idea that he is one with the world (pantheism). Scripture teaches clearly that God cannot be confined by space, yet he is fully present everywhere.

Even when the Bible speaks of God using human imagery—such as coming, going, or dwelling in a place—it always affirms that God transcends space itself. Heaven and earth cannot contain him, but

neither is he absent from them. He is present everywhere, fully and completely, without being limited by space.

Space and location are qualities of created, finite beings. Everything that is made exists in a specific place and cannot be in another place at the same time. But God is not like that. He is not confined to space, nor is he spread out like a substance. Rather, he is wholly present in every place, sustaining all things by his power.

We must be careful, then, not to imagine God as a distant ruler who governs the world from far away, nor as a force that fills the universe like air or water. He is not part of the world, yet he is present in all of it. Everything depends on him for existence. Every place and moment is upheld by his presence.

This does not mean God is mixed with the world or polluted by its sin. He remains holy, even though he is present in the darkest places. His omnipresence means he is near to everything, yet never part of what is sinful or impure.

God's presence is personal, not mechanical. He is near to the brokenhearted and far from the wicked. He comes to his people in a special way, ultimately through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit, dwelling in the hearts of believers and in the church. One day, his presence will be fully known when he dwells visibly with his people forever.

So, while God transcends all space, he also fills it. He is both above and beyond creation and intimately involved in every part of it. He is always near, always present, always sustaining—our refuge and our strength.

While God is present everywhere, his presence is not the same in all places or to all people. There's a difference between being near someone physically and being close to them in spirit. In a similar way, God is present in all creation, but his presence is experienced differently depending on the creature.

God fills heaven and earth, not with a physical body, but with his power, presence, and being. Yet he does so without limiting himself or losing anything of his divine nature. He upholds all things while allowing them to function according to their design. Everything exists because of him, but nothing is identical with him. God is in all things, but not all things are in right relationship *with* him.

This means God's presence varies: it's not the same in heaven as it is on earth, not the same in a stone as in a person, not the same in the wicked as in the righteous, not the same in the church as in Christ. In Christ alone, the fullness of God dwells bodily. In us, God is present according to what we are—some by nature, some by grace, and some by glory.

Sin doesn't create a physical distance between us and God but a spiritual separation. You can't run away from God like you would from a person; you flee him by resisting his will. But the opposite is also true: drawing near to God doesn't mean traveling to a special place—it means repentance, humility, and seeking his face. He is already near. In fact, "in him we live and move and have our being."

God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. When we try to hide, even in our thoughts, he is already there. So there's nowhere to run from him—only to him. If we try to escape his judgment, we find he is still present. But if we turn to him in faith and repentance, we find mercy and grace. The only refuge from God's wrath is God himself.

The Unity of God

God's unity means that there is only one true and living God. He is completely unique—there is no other being like him. Everything else that exists was created by him and depends on him. This oneness can be understood in two ways:

- **Singularity:** God is the only God. He is not one among many, but the only divine being. There is no other god beside him.
- **Simplicity:** God is not made up of parts or composed of different elements. His being is whole, undivided, and perfectly unified within himself.

The Bible clearly and consistently teaches that God is one. This is not a doctrine that developed late in Israel's history, as some scholars suggest. From the very beginning of Scripture, God is revealed as the Creator of all things, the Judge of all the earth, and the one who enters into covenant with his people.

The prophets didn't introduce a new religion. They called Israel back to the God they had already known—their covenant Lord. Idolatry, in their eyes, was not just a wrong belief; it was spiritual adultery, a betrayal of the one true God.

Some critics claim that Israel's religion evolved from earlier pagan beliefs, borrowing ideas from surrounding nations. But this doesn't hold up to careful examination. The Bible doesn't describe a gradual shift from polytheism to monotheism; rather, it presents monotheism as foundational from the start. Even when God is described in human terms, he is always portrayed as the one who made heaven and earth, who rules over all peoples, and who alone deserves worship.

Throughout the Old Testament, this truth is affirmed again and again: *The Lord is God; there is no other*. Idols are nothing—false, powerless, and lifeless. And where there is power behind them, that power is demonic, not divine.

The New Testament makes this even clearer through Jesus Christ. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three gods, but one God. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

When the Christian church first entered the Gentile world, it boldly proclaimed a truth that set it apart: *There is only one true God*. This declaration challenged a society deeply entrenched in polytheism—a world where gods were many, idols were everywhere, and religious beliefs often blended into a confusing mix of superstition, emperor worship, and mystical practices.

Though some philosophers mocked the gods of popular religion, polytheistic thinking still dominated both culture and politics. From the beginning, Christians found themselves in conflict with this worldview. But they didn't just defend their belief; they went on the offensive. Confident in the truth of Scripture, early Christian thinkers also appealed to philosophy, nature, the unity of humanity, the order of creation, and the moral sense shared by all people to show that God must be one.

They challenged everything that came with polytheism—idolatry, superstition, demon worship, magic, and the worship of human rulers. Over time, through faithful witness and argument, the church helped to break the hold of polytheism, both spiritually and intellectually.

Yet polytheism never fully disappeared. It returned in new forms, especially in modern times. When belief in the one true God weakens, the world loses its sense of unity. Nature and history feel fragmented. Truth and morality become uncertain. And in that spiritual vacuum, old superstitions and idolatries creep back in.

For that reason, the confession that *God is one* remains as vital today as it was in the early church. In a world full of competing voices and false gods, we must hold fast to the truth: there is one God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who alone deserves our worship.

The Simplicity of God

God is not just one in number—he is also one in essence. That means he isn't made up of different parts or components. Everything that is true about God is true of his whole being. When the Bible says that God is life, light, love, truth, and righteousness, it doesn't mean these are pieces of him. Rather, each of these is a way of describing who he is entirely.

This is what Christian theology calls *God's simplicity*. It means that God is not made up of parts like we are. We might have life, knowledge, or love to varying degrees—but God *is* life, he *is* love, and he *is* wisdom. There is no division in him. His attributes are not separate from his being; they are all one with who he is.

This doctrine has been embraced throughout church history. Thinkers like Augustine emphasized that God is pure being—perfect, complete, and lacking nothing. While creatures are composed of different qualities and can grow or change, God is unchanging and indivisible. In him, to exist is to live, to know, to will, and to love.

But not everyone has agreed with this. Some denied God's simplicity because they imagined him having a body or parts, like humans. Others thought that if God were truly simple, then we couldn't talk meaningfully about different aspects of who he is. Some used this idea to argue against the Trinity, saying God couldn't be both one and three. Still others tried to separate God's attributes from his being, as if he had traits that weren't fully united in his essence.

But Scripture does not portray God in this divided way. It never suggests that his power, wisdom, or love are anything other than fully, perfectly, and eternally *him*. There is no composition in God—no matter or form, no parts to be assembled. He is one, perfectly and eternally. And because he is simple, he is wholly trustworthy. We never get just a part of God—he gives himself fully, even when revealing one attribute.

The oneness of God doesn't just mean there's only one God—it also means God is *simple*, not made up of parts. In this context, simplicity means that all of God's attributes—his love, wisdom, power, holiness—are not separate pieces added onto him. Rather, each of these describes the whole of who God is. He is love. He is wisdom. He is life itself. Each attribute is not something he has; it's what he is.

This idea is firmly grounded in Scripture and flows naturally from God's other attributes like his independence, perfection, and immutability. If God were made of parts—like body and soul, matter and form, or even separate attributes—then he could change, be divided, or depend on something outside himself. But God is not like that. He is utterly one and unchanging. All that he is, he is fully and forever.

Some have rejected this doctrine. Certain early critics, rationalists, and modern theologians argued that it's just a philosophical

abstraction or that it contradicts the idea of the Trinity. But these criticisms miss the heart of what simplicity means in Christian theology. It's not about making God a vague, abstract force. On the contrary, simplicity affirms that God is the living, infinite, personal, and perfectly unified being. He is not a mere idea or a blank "being" behind the world. He is the fullness of life, self-existent and self-sufficient.

In contrast to pantheism—which says God is indistinguishable from the world—simplicity teaches that God exists apart from creation. He depends on nothing, but all things depend on him. He is not one part of a greater whole, nor is he assembled from traits. He is pure, indivisible being—completely God in every aspect.

Some feared that simplicity would erase the personal distinctions within the Trinity. But this is a misunderstanding. Simplicity does not deny the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It simply means that God's essence is not divided among them. Each person fully shares in the one divine being. The distinctions among the persons are not parts of God's being but are real relationships within the undivided essence of God.

So far from being a cold abstraction, the simplicity of God is a safeguard. It ensures that God is utterly trustworthy—unchanging, complete, and never lacking. And it reminds us that every one of his perfections is the whole of God given to us in grace, not just a fragment. God is simple, yet rich beyond all imagining. The more we learn about who he is, the more we see how every truth about him flows from one glorious and eternal reality: *the Lord our God is one*.

Chapter 5:

The Communicable Attributes

When we speak of God's justice, we are talking about more than just the narrow sense of giving rewards and punishments. In theology, God's justice refers broadly to the way he upholds what is right and good in all things. This is an important truth found throughout Scripture, and it helps us see the fullness of who God is—even when it's challenged.

Some have tried to divide God's justice and his love, as though the God of the Old Testament is only concerned with law and judgment, and the God of the New Testament is only about grace. But this is a false separation. Justice and grace are not enemies—they belong together in the character of the one true God.

It's true that God is not bound to any law outside of himself. He doesn't owe anything to his creatures. Even when we do all that we're commanded, we are still only unworthy servants. Yet, in his goodness, God has chosen to create a moral order. He gives laws to the world, to human life, to families and nations, to the soul and body. He establishes what is right and fair—not because he must, but because he is good and faithful.

Even after sin entered the world, God did not abandon his creation. Instead, he graciously made covenants—first with Noah, then with Abraham, and finally fulfilled in Christ—through which he binds himself to his people and establishes a framework of justice that he upholds with unwavering faithfulness.

This justice includes both his role as Lawgiver and as Judge. In a perfect world without sin, this justice would be fulfilled naturally through love and obedience. But because of sin, justice now involves judgment and correction. God enforces his moral order not because he delights in punishment, but because it is necessary to preserve what is good. Our own conscience testifies that justice must include consequences.

God's justice, then, is both **remunerative** (rewarding the righteous) and **retributive** (punishing the wicked). But even here, we must not think of God as harsh or cold. He does not punish out of revenge but out of his commitment to his covenant, his truth, and the good of his creation. His justice is not opposed to his love—it is the form his love takes in a world of sin. It is how grace triumphs without compromising what is right.

In short, God is just because he is good. He does not abandon his law or his people. He keeps his promises, upholds righteousness, and ensures that justice will prevail—not to destroy the world, but to save it.

The Sovereign Will of God

God is not only the Creator of all things, but also their Lord and Ruler. Everything that exists belongs to him and depends entirely on him. He alone has ultimate authority. Scripture repeatedly affirms that God's will is the foundation of everything—both in creation and in the smallest details of life.

Everything happens according to God's will: the world exists because of it, history unfolds by it, Christ suffered in submission to it, people are saved or judged by it, and even our daily lives are held in its hand. Nothing is outside the scope of his sovereign purpose.

Theology recognizes this, teaching that God's will is the ultimate explanation for all things. "What God wills, is." While human philosophy has often looked elsewhere for the reason behind existence, it has consistently failed to explain the world apart from God's will. Thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel attempted to ground reality in abstract ideas or pure thought, but these efforts never truly explained the diversity and reality of the world.

Over time, some philosophers began to give priority to the concept of **will** rather than **thought** as the key to understanding existence. They claimed that will—often described as a kind of primal force or desire—was more basic than reason. Some even said that this dark, unconscious will existed in God himself and was the hidden source of all things, including the world as we know it.

But these philosophical speculations fall short of the biblical view. Scripture never speaks of God as a confused mix of light and darkness or as driven by blind urges. Instead, it reveals a God whose will is **wise, good, and holy**. His will is not arbitrary or chaotic but the purposeful expression of his character. His will brings order, not confusion; salvation, not despair.

God is not some force struggling within himself. He is the sovereign Lord who brings about all things in accordance with the good pleasure of his will. His will is the foundation of the universe and the anchor of our trust. And because his will is perfect, we can rest in it with confidence—even when his purposes are hidden from us for a time.

Some philosophers argue that if God has a will, it must mean he desires something he doesn't have—which would imply he's lacking and therefore imperfect. Mystics have gone so far as to say that God is pure silence, having no will at all.

But this misunderstands what it means to will. It's true that people often will something they don't yet possess. But the highest form of willing is not striving—it's **delighting** in what is already possessed. When love embraces its object, it rests and rejoices. This is a deep and powerful expression of the will.

So too with God—but even more so. God is perfect and fully blessed. He doesn't lack anything. He is the highest good, and he finds his joy in himself. His will is not driven by need but by perfect love for what is best—**himself**. God eternally wills himself, delights in himself, and loves himself in perfect, eternal fullness. This is not selfishness, but holiness—because God is supremely good, to love himself is the highest good.

This doesn't mean God created the world because he was missing something. He didn't need creation to be happy. Rather, he willed the world for **his own glory**, not because of what creation could give him, but to display who he is. He remains the goal of all things: “from him, through him, and to him are all things.”

Even God's will toward creation is rooted in his perfect will for himself. His love for his creatures is not in competition with his self-love, but flows from it. He delights in his works because they reflect his glory—and in loving them, he is still delighting in himself. God's love for the world is not a striving for gain but an overflowing of divine fullness.

God's will, then, is not a sign of restlessness or imperfection. It is the expression of his **perfect peace, joy, and power**. In God, rest and activity are one. His will is always at work, and always at rest.

God's Free and Necessary Will

God's will is always one and perfectly unified, but Scripture teaches us to think about it in two ways—depending on its object.

First, God's will toward **himself** is necessary. He cannot help but love and delight in himself because he is perfectly good and fully blessed. This is not bondage, but the highest kind of freedom: a freedom that is always aligned with what is best—God himself.

Second, God's will toward **his creatures** is entirely free. He does what he pleases, owes no one anything, and answers to no one. Creation itself, human history, the rise and fall of nations, the gifts of the Spirit, salvation, and judgment—all flow from God's free and sovereign will. No creature can demand anything from him or claim a right over him.

Theologians have consistently upheld this view: God created the world because he wanted to. There's no deeper reason behind it. His will is the final cause of all things. While God always acts in wisdom and goodness, he was not bound to do everything exactly as he did. He could have made more creatures, or different ones, or none at all. He could have structured the moral law differently. He could have chosen to redeem sinners in another way—or not at all.

In this, we see the true freedom of God. He acts, not out of need, but out of love and sovereign pleasure. Even when it comes to salvation—his choosing some and not others—this too rests on his free and sovereign will, not on anything we have done. We cannot earn or demand anything from God. All is of grace.

Some went so far as to say God could, if he willed, punish the innocent, though Scripture assures us that he never would, because he always acts in harmony with his justice, goodness, and truth.

Nominalism and the Absolute Freedom of God

Many theologians, building on the idea of God's absolute freedom, followed a path similar to that of medieval nominalism, particularly the views of Duns Scotus. Scotus emphasized the freedom of God's will as being completely independent—God chooses freely without needing any deeper reason than his own will. Just as heat naturally gives off warmth, God's will simply wills what it wills.

According to this view, everything in the world exists only because God chose it to be so. There is nothing in creation that God *had* to create. His choice wasn't compelled by logic, goodness, or necessity—it was entirely free. Even though God knows all possibilities, it is his will alone that determines which of those possibilities become reality.

Scotus even extended this view to human freedom. He believed our will is completely free, not determined by the goodness of what we choose. We can just as easily choose a lesser good over a greater one, because the will itself—not the intellect—is the ultimate cause of action. In fact, he said the will is what directs the intellect, not the other way around.

This way of thinking led Scotus to some striking conclusions. He believed that many of God's moral commands (especially those in the second half of the Ten Commandments) could have been different. Even the incarnation of Christ, he claimed, was not strictly necessary. If God had wanted, he could have saved sinners another way, or the Son of God could have taken on a different form—not even necessarily human.

Scotus even said that the work of Christ was accepted by God not because it had an inherent sufficiency, but because God chose to

count it as sufficient. In theory, God could have allowed sinners to atone for themselves if he had been pleased to accept it.

This approach treats the will of God as the sole explanation for everything. God's will doesn't flow necessarily from his nature, goodness, or wisdom, but is viewed as sheer power and freedom.

Duns Scotus argued that God's will is completely free—so free that nothing other than God's own will explains why the world is the way it is. God could have created a different world or ordered things in another way, and he didn't need any reason other than his own choice. Later thinkers like William of Ockham took this even further, suggesting that God could save without regeneration, forgive without atonement, or even make different moral laws. In this view, everything—truth, morality, salvation—is the result of God's arbitrary decision, disconnected from his nature.

This approach, called **nominalism**, eventually influenced various groups, including the Jesuits, Socinians, and rationalists. The danger in this thinking is that it separates God's will from his character. If God's will is purely arbitrary, then even good and evil could have been reversed. Nothing is grounded in God's nature—everything becomes a matter of sheer will.

Christian theology, however, carefully avoided this extreme. While affirming that God is free and sovereign, it also taught that God's will is never disconnected from his nature. God always acts in line with his wisdom, love, and justice. His will is not random or aimless—it flows from who he is.

Theologians made an important distinction: God has a “necessary will” toward himself—he must love and delight in himself because he is the highest good. But he has a “free will” toward creation—he was

not obligated to create, and yet he chose to do so out of his goodness. Still, this free will is guided by his own character. God's wisdom, not whim, shaped his creation. His will is purposeful, not arbitrary.

Even though we cannot always understand why God acts as he does, Christian theology affirms that his actions are wise, just, and fitting. He always chooses what is best to glorify his name and accomplish his purposes. This means we can trust that his commands, judgments, and acts of grace are never random, but deeply rooted in his perfect being.

In summary, Christian theology holds tightly to both truths: **God is absolutely free** and **God is never arbitrary**. His will is the expression of his perfect nature. And while he is not bound by anything outside himself, he is always faithful to who he is.

Theology must remain grounded in what God has revealed through creation and Scripture. It does not have the freedom to invent answers but must faithfully reflect the facts God has made known. When theology reaches its limits and cannot explain something, it must humbly admit its ignorance. Ultimately, the revealed will of God is the final word.

Augustine once said, "The will of God is the foundation of every creature." This remains true. God is not like the pantheist idea of a force that had to create, nor like the Deist view of a distant God who made the world by accident. Instead, God freely and wisely created the world out of his own sovereign will and for his own good purposes.

That means we believe something is good because God wills it—not because we can always explain why he chose it. From our perspective, it may appear that God could have chosen something

else. But in God, there is no uncertainty or hesitation. His will is not like human choice, which often involves doubt or deliberation. God knows exactly what he wills—eternally and immutably. There is no randomness in him.

Creatures, by contrast, are contingent—they could have not existed at all. Only God exists necessarily. So when God creates, he does so by free choice, not because anything outside of him compelled him. We must not look for some reason *above* God's will to explain his actions. That would turn creation into something necessary, like God himself, instead of a free act of his will.

Still, God's freedom is not separated from his other perfections. His will is never arbitrary or irrational. In God, freedom is the perfect harmony of wisdom, justice, holiness, love, and power. So when theologians like Augustine or Calvin said God's will has no "cause," they meant nothing lies behind it or above it. But they never meant that God's will is without reason or wisdom.

Because God's will flows from his whole being—from his goodness and grace—we can fully trust it. His rule is not like blind fate or chaotic power. God reigns as both sovereign King and loving Father. His will is firm, wise, and good. And in that will, our hearts find peace.

The Will of God and the Reality of Evil

In creation, God reveals the richness of his will by relating to his creatures in many different ways. He doesn't will everything in the same way or with the same purpose. If he did, the world would be lifeless and uniform. Instead, God's will is as diverse and abundant as the creation itself.

Though all things are made for God's glory, some are more directly used for that purpose than others. God cares for all his creatures, but he especially loves his children, and most of all, he delights in Christ, his beloved Son. In providence and in his will, God acts with variety and richness. His will is not a cold or mechanical force—it is the living power of a wise and loving God, overflowing into all of creation.

Yet one of the most difficult questions is how to understand **evil** in light of God's will. Evil exists as both guilt (moral wrongdoing) and as punishment (suffering and consequences), both ethically and physically. Scripture makes clear that evil is under God's control, but not in the same way as the good. God's relationship to evil is very different than his relationship to righteousness.

To explain this, the Bible shows us that God's will has different aspects. On the one hand, there's what God commands us to do—his **moral will** (e.g., "Do not murder"). On the other hand, there's what God allows or determines to happen in history—his **sovereign will** (e.g., Joseph's betrayal or Christ's crucifixion). We see this distinction in Jesus' prayer: "Your will be done" (in obedience), and again, "Your will be done" (in surrender).

Scripture shows that God sometimes ordains things he hates, for purposes he loves. For instance:

- God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, yet provides a substitute.
- God tells Pharaoh to let Israel go, yet hardens his heart so he won't.

- God declares that Hezekiah will die, but adds 15 more years to his life.
- God forbids the condemnation of the innocent, yet Jesus is condemned to fulfill his redemptive plan.

God never delights in sin. He forbids it and judges it—but still, it exists within his sovereign plan. Nothing escapes his control. He uses even sinful choices for his purposes, while never being the author of sin.

God desires that none should perish and that all would come to repentance. Yet he also sovereignly chooses to show mercy to some and withhold it from others. These truths are not contradictions but mysteries. They show us that God's will is both higher than ours and deeply personal.

God's Revealed and Hidden Will

From early on, Christians have recognized that God's will has two aspects. On one side, there is God's **hidden will**—his eternal purpose, known only to him. On the other side is God's **revealed will**—his commandments and promises, made known to us through Scripture.

These two aspects have been described in various ways:

- God's *secret will* (also called his decretive will or will of good pleasure) refers to what God has ordained will happen.
- God's *revealed will* (also called his preceptive will or expressed will) refers to what God tells us to do—his moral commands, warnings, and invitations.

We learn the revealed will through what God has made clear: his commands, prohibitions, counsel, permissions, and actions. This is the will we are responsible to obey.

Throughout history, theologians have tried to understand how these two aspects relate. Some traditions (especially Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Arminian) emphasize God's revealed will as primary. They teach that God desires the salvation of all, offers grace to everyone, and only afterward responds to human choices by determining who is saved or lost. In that view, God's will is shaped by how people respond to his offer.

Reformed theology, however, teaches that **God's will of good pleasure**—his eternal decree—is ultimate. This hidden will is never frustrated. What God has purposed will surely come to pass. His revealed will, by contrast, is how God calls us to live. It is our duty, our guide, our responsibility. But it does not override or reshape God's eternal purpose.

This means we must distinguish between:

- What God commands (his revealed will), and
- What God ordains to happen (his hidden will).

For example, God commands us not to sin, yet he allows sin to occur for his own wise purposes. He desires all to repent and be saved, yet he chooses, according to his perfect will, to show mercy to some.

These distinctions are not contradictions, but ways of recognizing that God is both **sovereign over all things** and **truly righteous in all he commands**. We live by his revealed will, trusting his hidden will to be wise, just, and good.

Scripture teaches that God's will is eternal, unchanging, sovereign, and always effective. This is not just stated occasionally but is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. Because God's will flows from his perfect nature, it cannot fail or be frustrated. What God intends, he accomplishes.

Theologians have long distinguished between two aspects of God's will:

- **The secret (or decretive) will:** This is God's eternal plan, hidden from us, which he always accomplishes.
- **The revealed (or preceptive) will:** This is God's moral law—his commandments and instructions—revealed to us in Scripture as our guide for living.

The revealed will tells us what we *ought* to do; the secret will tells us what *actually happens*. God may, for wise and holy reasons, permit things he forbids—like sin—without delighting in them. He is never the author of sin, but he sovereignly uses even human disobedience to fulfill his purposes. For example, God forbade murder, yet Christ's crucifixion was according to God's predetermined plan.

It is important to understand that God's revealed will is truly his will, but in a different sense than his decretive will. It shows his moral desire for his creatures, not his hidden purposes. This doesn't mean the two wills contradict each other. In fact, God accomplishes his hidden will through the commands, warnings, and promises of his revealed will. When people disobey God, they do not frustrate his plan—they unwittingly become instruments in its fulfillment.

Critics often accuse this view of making God inconsistent, as if he both wants and doesn't want the same thing. But in reality, it reflects

the mystery of how a holy, sovereign God works through human freedom and sin without compromising his righteousness.

We must preserve both aspects of God's will:

- If we ignore his revealed will, we undermine God's holiness and moral demands.
- If we ignore his secret will, we deny God's power and wisdom in governing history.

The Christian faith doesn't resolve this tension by denying one side. Instead, it embraces both as true. History is full of examples where God shows his greatness through human weakness, his justice through sin, and his grace through judgment.

Ultimately, God's sovereignty is not cold or arbitrary. It is the wise, good, and holy rule of a sovereign King who is also a loving Father. He is working all things together—not randomly, but purposefully—for the glory of his name and the good of his people.

God's Omnipotence

God's sovereignty is most clearly seen in his omnipotence—his unlimited power. The Bible never places limits on God's power. In fact, many of God's names in Scripture reflect his strength and rule. He is called the Mighty One, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the Almighty. He is not only powerful over all creation but especially exercises his rule in caring for and saving his people.

God's omnipotence is seen in all his works. He created the heavens and the earth by his word and continues to sustain them. The laws of nature, the history of Israel, the deliverance from Egypt, the miracles of the prophets, and the coming of Christ—all proclaim his power. He

commands the seas, forms the rain, gives and takes life, opens mouths to speak, and closes them in silence. Nothing is too hard for him. Nothing can resist his will.

He does whatever he pleases. No one can stop him or question him. He rules over all powers, great and small. His strength is not limited or challenged. He performs wonders beyond our understanding, from the smallest detail to the grandest miracle.

Above all, God's power is revealed in our salvation. He raised Christ from the dead, gives new life through faith, strengthens his people in grace, and will raise the dead on the last day. His power is the source of every good thing we receive and every strength we possess. Governments, nations, and individuals all receive their power from him.

In everything—from creation to redemption, from natural order to spiritual renewal—God shows that all power belongs to him. For this reason, he alone is worthy of all glory, honor, and praise.

God's omnipotence means he has all power and can do all that he wills. Scripture clearly shows this truth through God's names, titles, and works—he is the Almighty, the King of kings, the Creator, and the Ruler over all things in heaven and on earth. Nothing can resist him, and no one can question his authority.

But Christian theology has always taken care to explain what this means. God's power is not like raw force or blind ability to do anything at all—not even things that go against his own character. He cannot lie, change, sin, or contradict himself. These are not limits to his power, but rather affirmations of his perfection. True power is not the ability to do evil, but the strength to remain good, true, and just without wavering.

In the Middle Ages, some thinkers (especially the *nominalists*) misunderstood omnipotence by claiming that God could do anything—even absurd or contradictory things—because his will was seen as completely separate from his character. According to this view, God could have made evil good, falsehood truth, or even become a stone or break the laws of logic. Others went the opposite direction and claimed that God could only do what he has actually done, so his power was already fully spent in the world as it is.

But Scripture and sound theology reject both views. God's will and power are one with his being. He can do anything that is consistent with who he is as the wise, good, holy, and truthful God. He is not bound by the world he made, nor by anything outside himself—but neither does he act contrary to his own nature. He always acts freely, wisely, and perfectly.

Therefore, while God could have created a different world, or done things another way, everything he has done is in complete harmony with his wisdom and righteousness. He is not bound by necessity or fate, but neither is he governed by random will. His power is always purposeful and glorious.

So, we affirm that God's omnipotence is infinite and beyond all human imagination, but it is never arbitrary. It is always holy, wise, and consistent with who he is. For that reason, we can trust him completely. His power is not terrifying chaos—it is the solid ground of our faith, the power of a sovereign Father who rules in love and truth.

God's Perfection, Blessedness, and Glory

God is perfect in every way. He is not just morally perfect—holy and good—but is the fullness of all perfections. There is no being greater,

higher, or more excellent than God. He is exactly what God must be: infinite, complete, and lacking nothing.

When we speak of God's perfection, we do not mean he measures up to some idea above him. God is the standard of perfection. He knows himself perfectly and is exactly as he knows himself to be. In this way, his being and self-knowledge are in perfect harmony. Though our understanding of God is limited and affected by sin, Scripture renews our knowledge and helps us to see God more clearly as he truly is.

Every attribute of God is essential and precious. Believers love all of who God is—not only his love and mercy, but also his holiness, justice, and power. His incommunicable attributes (those not shared with us, like infinity or immutability) and his communicable ones (like wisdom and goodness) together show the richness of his glory.

Some attributes belong to God alone—like eternity or simplicity. Others are seen in a higher form in God than in us, such as intellect and will. Still others are spoken of figuratively, like God's "eyes" or "hand." But however we describe them, all God's perfections exist in him to the highest degree. He is infinitely above all weakness, deficiency, or limitation.

Because God is perfect, he is also **blessed**. Scripture calls him "the blessed God"—a term that expresses his full and undisturbed happiness. God's blessedness means he is whole and complete in himself. He has life in himself, without pain, struggle, or lack. He delights in his own perfection and rests fully in who he is.

God is not like the pantheistic "divine" of some philosophies, who needs the world to complete himself. God does not strive or change or evolve. He is eternally at rest, filled with peace and joy in himself.

His joy in his creation is part of his greater joy in himself. He loves what he has made because it reflects his glory. But his happiness is not dependent on us. God is his own joy, his own delight, and his own reward.

In the end, this truth brings great comfort. The God we worship is not lacking, needy, or restless. He is full, satisfied, and unchanging. His perfection guarantees that he is worthy of our trust, and his blessedness ensures that his love is never driven by need but by abundant, overflowing grace.

The Glory of God

God's perfection, which is the source of his blessedness, shines outwardly as his **glory**. In Scripture, the word *glory* means weight, worth, splendor, and honor. It refers both to God's inner greatness and to the outward display of his majesty.

The **glory of the Lord** is the radiant beauty of all his attributes on display—his holiness, power, wisdom, and grace. This glory is seen in creation, where the heavens declare his glory and the earth is full of it. Yet, it shines most clearly in the work of redemption—especially in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the radiance of God's glory.

God's glory was revealed visibly in Israel's history: in the cloud and fire that led them, in the tabernacle and temple, and in the great acts of deliverance. But the fullest display of his glory came in Christ, "the Word made flesh." Through him, the church beholds the glory of God and reflects it to the world.

Scripture often associates God's glory with **light**—a fitting image, since light brings truth, purity, and joy. God is described as pure light, in whom there is no darkness at all. His Word brings light, his

presence shines light, and his Son is the Light of the world. Those who believe in Christ are themselves called “children of light,” awaiting the day when God’s glory will fill all things and there will be no more night.

Some later traditions tried to describe this glory as a visible, spiritual light or even a heavenly “substance.” But Scripture does not require us to think of God’s glory as some kind of physical or mystical light. Rather, it is the perfect and awe-inspiring radiance of who God is—his holiness made visible, his love made real, and his greatness revealed in everything he does.

Ultimately, God’s glory is not just something to behold—it is something in which his people are called to share. Through Christ, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another, as we reflect the image of our Savior and prepare for the day when we will see him as he is.

We must be careful not to misunderstand God’s glory. Scripture teaches that God is spirit, invisible, and without form or body. So when the Bible speaks of God’s face, glory, or majesty, it is using human language—figurative descriptions meant to help us understand truths that go beyond human comprehension.

While God’s glory is revealed in creation and reflected in his creatures, this is only a faint echo of the true glory that belongs to him alone. The beauty we see in the world points us toward God, but it is not identical with him. Just as creation displays God’s wisdom, power, and goodness, so it also reflects his glory. But what we see is an analogy, not the full reality.

Scripture uses the word *glory*—not merely *beauty*—to describe this divine radiance. Some theologians, especially in the early church and

medieval times, described God as the ultimate beauty, drawing from the idea that all being, to the extent that it exists, is also true, good, and beautiful. All created things have their own beauty, but it is temporary and dependent on something greater. That greater, unchanging source of all beauty is God himself.

In this view, everything in creation testifies to God's beauty—not in isolation, but in pointing back to the one who made it. Yet Protestant theologians have wisely emphasized not simply God's beauty, but his *glory*—his overwhelming greatness, majesty, and splendor.

God's glory is the sum of his perfections made visible. It evokes awe, worship, and submission. It is called *greatness* because it stirs us to wonder. It is called *glory* because it invites our praise. It is called *majesty* because it commands our reverence and obedience.

This glory is not something added to God. It is the outward expression of who he is. And in Christ, the radiance of God's glory has shone into our world, drawing us into the praise and joy of his presence forever.

Chapter 6

The Holy Trinity

In both God and his creatures, we can speak of a shared nature and of individual persons. Just as human beings—like Paul, John, and Peter—share a common human nature but are distinct individuals, so too, in God, there is one divine nature shared fully by three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But we must be cautious. If we treat “essence” (or being) as just a name for a category, we may fall into *tritheism*—the idea that there are three separate gods. On the other hand, if we treat “essence” as something apart from the persons, as if there were a divine substance behind them, we risk *Sabellianism* or *tetratheism*—denying the personal distinctions or adding a fourth “thing” to the Godhead.

There is a similarity between divine and human nature, but there is also a great difference. In humans, each person has a distinct and finite share of human nature. This makes us not only different, but separate. But in God, the divine nature is not divided or shared in parts. Each divine person fully possesses the entire, undivided essence. They are distinct, but not separate. There is no division in time, space, or essence. The divine nature is completely and equally present in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

So, we do not speak of three gods, but of *one God*—eternal, omnipotent, omniscient—who is one in being, will, and power. This upholds the unity of God clearly taught throughout Scripture. The oneness of God is not merely a cooperation or moral unity, as in human relationships, but is essential to who God is. He is perfect unity—without parts or division.

The beauty of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God's unity is not lifeless or abstract, but rich and full of life. God's being is not a bland oneness, but an infinite, living fullness—a unity that *includes* diversity, not one that excludes it. This diversity is revealed in Scripture through the names *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*.

To describe this diversity, theology has used the word *persons*. Early on, Greek theologians used the term *prosopon*, which originally meant “face” or “appearance.” However, this term led to confusion,

because some like Sabellius taught that these “persons” were just roles or masks God wore—not truly distinct persons.

In response, the church clarified that these distinctions in God are not mere appearances, but real, eternal, and personal. To express this more clearly, they switched to the term *hypostasis*, meaning something that truly exists in itself—not just a quality or appearance.

In the Western church, the Latin word *persona* was used. While it originally meant something like a mask or a legal standing, it eventually came to mean a true, individual subject—someone who exists in a distinct and rational way. This term was kept, even though it didn’t perfectly match the Greek terminology, and the difference in language sometimes caused confusion between Eastern and Western Christians. Still, both sides agreed on the core truth: the three persons of the Trinity are not three gods, nor mere modes or appearances, but true and distinct persons within the one divine essence.

Over time, especially in discussions about Christ’s divine and human natures, theologians refined what they meant by the word *person*. It came to mean a distinct individual who exists in a rational, self-aware way. This understanding was affirmed by both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alike.

In sum, the church confesses one God in three persons—each fully sharing the divine nature, yet personally distinct. This is the mystery and glory of the Trinity: perfect unity in divine being, and true distinction in divine persons.

The Personality of God

Modern philosophy has often denied that God can be “personal” in the same way humans are. Some say personality belongs only to finite beings, while God—if he exists—is just an impersonal force that pervades everything. Others have argued that even human personality is not a real, stable identity but just a fleeting collection of thoughts and feelings.

From this, it’s been claimed that “personhood” is the highest achievement for humans, a goal to strive for. People who attain this are often admired, even revered, and some have believed such individuals might become immortal through their greatness.

But these modern ideas don't fully explain human personality, let alone divine personality. Even in humans, the self (or “I”) is more than just a bundle of thoughts. It is a real, unified identity. And when we speak of God's personality, especially in the doctrine of the Trinity, we are talking about something even deeper.

In Trinitarian theology, the word *person* has a unique meaning. It doesn't simply mean a conscious, rational individual, like in psychology or philosophy. In God, the term *person* refers to a real, eternal distinction within the one divine being. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not just roles God plays—they are truly distinct, yet fully united in one divine essence.

Earlier theologians recognized that defining “person” when speaking of God is difficult. They often said we use the word not to explain fully, but simply so we can speak meaningfully without falling into silence. In the Trinity, the term *person* affirms that God’s unity includes a threefold existence—not divided or separated, but internally differentiated.

In humans, personality involves self-awareness—a subject knowing itself as an object. This process happens over time and is always limited. But in God, who is outside of time and not made of parts, this “self-knowing” is not a process but a complete, eternal reality. What are mere stages in our experience exist fully and perfectly in him as distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In humanity, the richness of human nature is expressed across many individuals and only reaches fullness in the whole human race. But in God, all the fullness of divine life is revealed in the three persons together. They are not separate beings, but one divine being who fully expresses himself in this threefold way.

Thus, the Trinity is not a contradiction to God's unity, but the highest and most glorious expression of it. The one God is not impersonal. His unity is alive, personal, and eternally triune.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God is one in being (or essence) but exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are not separate gods, but one God. They are not different parts of God, either—each person fully shares in the whole divine essence.

This unity and diversity within God have been carefully expressed by theologians throughout history. Tertullian, one of the earliest to describe the Trinity, said the three persons are of one substance and power, united in nature but distinct in their relationships. There is no contradiction or division—only distinction.

Later theologians like Athanasius and the Cappadocians described the persons of the Trinity as existing in unique ways. What distinguishes them is not their essence (which is one and the same),

but their relationships: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds.

Augustine developed this further by emphasizing that the Trinity is not just something God chooses to be—it is who he is. Being triune is essential to God's nature. In God, to “be” and to “be a person” are the same. So the Father is not part of God—he is fully God. The same is true for the Son and the Spirit. Each person is the whole God, not one-third of God.

This is different from how human persons relate to human nature. Among us, one person is not equal to three persons. But in God, all three persons are fully equal, and together they are no more or less than each one is individually.

What makes the Father, Son, and Spirit distinct is not their being but their relationships to one another. These distinctions are real—not imaginary or just labels—but they are not about substance. They are about how each person exists within the one divine essence. For example, theologians have compared it to how an open hand differs from a closed fist—both are the same hand but in different forms.

So, in the Trinity:

- **God's essence** is one and shared fully by each person.
- **The persons** are distinct not by being or power, but by their relations—Father, Son, and Spirit.
- This distinction is revealed by God, grounded in truth, and essential to understanding who God truly is.

Distinctions Among the Persons of the Trinity

While God is one in essence, Scripture clearly teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons who fully share that same divine essence. They are not just different names for God, but real, eternal distinctions within the one divine being.

The distinction among the persons arises from their unique **relations** to one another:

- The **Father** is unbegotten and actively generates and sends.
- The **Son** is begotten of the Father and also sends the Spirit.
- The **Spirit** proceeds from the Father (and the Son).

These distinctions do not divide God or add anything new to his essence. Just as a human becomes a father without changing his humanity, so the divine relations do not alter the divine nature. What differentiates the persons is how they relate to one another—**Father**, **Son**, and **Spirit**—not what they are in essence.

In human experience, relationships like fatherhood are temporary and secondary to our nature. But in God, the relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit are **essential and eternal**. They are not added to God's being but are the very way God's one being exists. God's being and his personhood are completely united.

The way God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit is the **original pattern** of all creaturely life and relationships. In humanity, our nature unfolds over time—into individuals, families, and society. But

in God, this unfolding is eternal, simple, and unified. The distinctions in God do not compromise his oneness or simplicity.

Therefore, while the three persons are truly distinct, they are not three gods. Each person is fully God, and together they are **one God**—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The differences lie not in their essence but in their **relationships**: the Father is eternally Father, the Son eternally Son, and the Spirit eternally Spirit. This is the mystery and glory of the Holy Trinity.

To this triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—be all praise forever.

God the Father: The Unbegotten One

Having explored the Trinity in general, we now consider each person individually, beginning with the **Father**. What defines the Father in the Trinity is his unique **fatherhood**—specifically, that he is **unbegotten**. This means he was not brought into existence or generated by anyone else. He has no origin; he simply is.

In church history, especially during debates with heretics like the Arians, it became important to clarify the difference between the **Father**, who is unbegotten, and the **Son**, who is **eternally begotten**—not created or made, but brought forth from the Father's own being in eternity. The same divine essence is shared fully by both, but they are distinct in their relationships: the Father begets, and the Son is begotten.

This difference is not about time or change. God the Father did not *become* a Father. He **is** eternally Father, just as the Son is eternally Son. If the Son were not eternal, then the Father would not be

eternally Father either. The Father has never existed without the Son or without the Spirit.

Importantly, the name “**Father**” is not a mere metaphor borrowed from human experience. In fact, earthly fathers are dim reflections of the true and eternal fatherhood of God. Human fatherhood begins and ends, is shared with a mother, and exists in time. But God’s fatherhood is eternal, perfect, and essential to his being.

The early church often described the Father with terms like “**source**,” “**origin**,” “**beginning**,” and “**fountain**”—not to imply he is more divine than the Son or Spirit, but to express that he is the one who eternally begets the Son and from whom the Spirit proceeds. Yet this does not mean the Son or Spirit are inferior or separate. All three persons fully share in the one divine being, equally God, equally eternal, equally glorious.

So when we call God “Father,” we are not merely giving him a title. We are recognizing his unique identity within the Trinity: the eternal Father of the eternal Son, and the sender of the Spirit. His fatherhood is foundational to our understanding of God—not just as the Creator, but as the One who is love and life within himself.

God the Son: Eternally Begotten

The second person of the Trinity is the **Son**, whose unique identity is expressed through the concept of **filiation**—that is, **being begotten** of the Father. Scripture describes the Son with names that point to his relationship with the Father: **Word**, **Wisdom**, **Image**, **Only-Begotten**, and **Firstborn**. These terms point to a mystery Christians have long called the **eternal generation** of the Son.

This doesn't mean the Son was created. Rather, the **Father eternally begets the Son**—not in a physical or human sense, but in a divine, spiritual way. We use human language to speak of this reality because God has revealed himself to us using these terms. Still, we must be careful to remove any idea of limitation, passion, or time-bound change. Unlike human fathers, God's fatherhood is eternal. He didn't become a Father; he always has been. Therefore, the Son also has always existed with the Father.

Divine generation means that the Father gives the Son life from his own being—not by creation, but by a perfect and eternal act. The Son is not made from nothing, like creatures, but is begotten from the very essence of the Father. This generation is not something external or done in time; it is an eternal act that is essential to who God is. Just as the sun shines by its very nature, so the Father begets the Son by his very being.

This generation is also **spiritual and indivisible**. It does not divide God's nature or cause separation. It reflects the fullness of God's life and love. One helpful analogy is how a thought proceeds from the mind or a word from speech—fully expressive of the speaker, yet distinct in form. So too, the Son is called the **Word** because he is the full and perfect expression of the Father.

To deny this eternal generation, as the ancient Arians did, is not only to deny the Son's full divinity but also to misunderstand the Father. If the Son is not eternal, then the Father has not always been the Father. But Scripture reveals that God has always been Father, and therefore the Son has always been with him. **God's fatherhood and the Son's sonship are eternal and essential to who God is.**

Therefore, the church confesses that the Son is:

- **Eternally begotten**, not made,
- **Of the same divine essence** as the Father,
- **Fully God**, worthy of all worship.

The Father, Son, and Spirit share one undivided divine being, and yet the Son's relationship to the Father is unique: he is the eternal Word, the radiance of God's glory, the image of the invisible God, and the eternal Son of the Father.

God the Holy Spirit: Proceeding from the Father and the Son

The third person of the Trinity is the **Holy Spirit**, whose unique personal attribute is called **procession**—meaning that he proceeds from the Father and the Son. While much of church history focused on defending the **deity of the Son**, debates over the Holy Spirit often centered on whether the Spirit is truly a **person**.

Some critics argued the Holy Spirit isn't really a person because Scripture often describes him as a power or gift. Others said he's never explicitly called "God" or worshiped in the same way as the Father or the Son. These views downplay the clear biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit is **fully divine** and **personally distinct**.

The early church eventually recognized that the Spirit, just like the Son, shares the same divine nature as the Father. While the Spirit's role—applying redemption, sanctifying believers, and indwelling the church—might not seem as visible or dramatic as the Father's creation or the Son's incarnation, it is no less essential. In fact, the Spirit works **within us**, and it is **through him** that we experience communion with the Father and the Son.

The church's confession that the Holy Spirit is true God does not come from philosophical speculation but from the heart of the Christian faith. If the Spirit were only a creature, he could not give us fellowship with God. He could not be the source of regeneration, faith, repentance, or sanctification. But Scripture teaches that all these blessings come **through the Spirit**, who brings the presence of God into the hearts of believers and into the life of the church.

Just as the **Son is eternally begotten of the Father**, the **Spirit eternally proceeds** from the Father and the Son. This eternal procession doesn't mean he is less than the Father or the Son—rather, it marks the way he relates to them. The Spirit is inseparably united to the Son, just as the Son is united to the Father. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of power and holiness. Through the Spirit, Christ dwells in his people, and in him the fullness of salvation is made real to us.

Therefore, the **Holy Spirit is not a force or a symbol**, but a **divine person**, fully equal with the Father and the Son, and the one through whom God applies salvation and makes his home in us.

The Procession of the Holy Spirit

The third person of the Trinity is the **Holy Spirit**, and his unique personal attribute is called **procession** or **spiration**—the way he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

While the Son's **deity** was the major concern in early theological debates, the **personhood** of the Spirit was often questioned. Some denied he was a person or God, seeing him as just a force, a gift, or a power. But the early church came to understand that if the Spirit is not God, then the unity between the Father and the Son collapses.

The doctrine of the Trinity would fall apart without the full divinity and personhood of the Spirit.

The church came to confess that the Holy Spirit is **fully divine**, the “Lord and Giver of Life,” who **proceeds from the Father and the Son**. He is worshiped and glorified together with them. Without the Spirit, there can be no **communion with God**, no **regeneration**, no **sanctification**, and no **true union** with Christ. The Holy Spirit is not created—he is God.

Scripture often speaks of the Spirit being **given**, **sent**, **poured out**, or **coming**—language that points to a deep and eternal relationship with the Father and the Son. The term “procession” helps describe that relationship. It is rooted in biblical imagery of the **Spirit as breath or wind**, and reflects how the Spirit comes from God, just as breath proceeds from a person.

Theologians have always recognized that **procession**, like **generation**, refers to the eternal sharing of the one divine essence—but not in the same way. The **Son is begotten**, but the **Spirit proceeds**. Explaining exactly how these differ is difficult. Even Augustine admitted that he could not fully articulate the difference, though he affirmed both realities based on Scripture.

Some have suggested distinctions to help us understand:

- The **Son is begotten only of the Father**, while the **Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son**.
- The **Son is "born"**, while the **Spirit is "given"**—not born, but still fully divine.

- The **Son is associated with the intellect** (as the Word), while the **Spirit is associated with the will** (as love).

These insights aim to help us understand the eternal relationships within the Trinity. But many theologians, especially in the Reformed tradition, have advised caution, warning against going beyond what Scripture reveals. The mystery of the Trinity is profound, and we should speak with reverence and humility.

What matters most is that the Spirit is not a lesser being. He **completes the Trinity**, perfectly and eternally. There are **no more persons** in God than the three who eternally exist: **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**—one God in three persons, equal in glory, united in being, and distinct in personal relations.

East and West on the Holy Spirit

Over time, a key difference emerged between the **Eastern and Western** churches regarding the doctrine of the **Holy Spirit**. While both agreed that the **Son is eternally begotten** of the Father, the question arose: **How is the Holy Spirit related to the Father and the Son?**

The early church taught that the **Holy Spirit could not simply be added** beside the Father and Son without any inner connection. His relationship to the other two persons needed clarification. **Athanasius**, a major voice in the early church, taught that the Spirit is both the **Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son**, sharing in the same divine nature. The Spirit is said to **proceed from the Father**, but he is also closely united to the Son, given and sustained by him.

Though Scripture does not explain *why* the Spirit is called “Spirit” and the Son is called “Son,” it clearly connects them. If someone has the Spirit, they also have the Son—and vice versa. So, the Spirit is not separate from the Son, but deeply united with him.

The Cappadocian Fathers

The great Eastern theologians—**Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus**—also affirmed that the Spirit comes from the Father, but they often described this as happening through the Son. They taught that the Spirit follows the Son in order, gives us access to the Son and the Father, and receives all things **from the Father through the Son**. In their writings, the Spirit is not said to proceed from the Son directly, but they never denied it either.

Some early Christian writers did describe the Spirit as coming from or through the Son, calling him the image, breath, or voice of the Son. They described a deep connection: the Spirit receives everything from the Son and proceeds from the Father **by way of** the Son. These teachings laid the groundwork for later theological developments.

While the early church agreed on the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, a key difference gradually developed between the East and the West concerning how the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son. The Eastern church taught that the Spirit **proceeds from the Father through the Son**, not directly **from the Son**. This view was upheld by important theologians like Cyril and John of Damascus, who said the Spirit is revealed and given by the Son but does not have his origin in the Son. According to the Eastern tradition, both the Son and the Spirit come from the Father, who is the single source of the divine life.

In contrast, the Western church—especially through Augustine—developed the teaching that the **Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son**. Augustine described the Spirit as the eternal bond of love between the Father and the Son. Though the Father and Son are distinct persons, they are united as one source (not two) from which the Spirit proceeds. This doctrine was expressed in the phrase *filioque* (“and from the Son”), which was later added to the Nicene Creed in the West.

This led to lasting disagreement. The East feared that saying the Spirit also proceeds from the Son would make the Son a second origin of the Spirit and undermine the Father's unique role as the source of the Trinity. The West clarified that this is not a double origin but a shared one: the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, not from two separate sources.

Despite attempts to reconcile the two views, no full agreement was reached. The real divide reflects deeper differences in how each tradition understands the Trinity. The East views the **Father as the personal source of both the Son and the Spirit**, emphasizing a kind of relational hierarchy. The West views the **divine essence itself as the unity**, from which the three persons eternally exist in mutual relation and equality.

In Eastern theology, this leads to a dual emphasis: the Son reveals the Father intellectually, and the Spirit brings a separate experience of divine life through mystical communion. These two—doctrine and experience—stand somewhat apart, rather than being unified through Christ. Thus, the Eastern approach tends toward a division between mind and heart, orthodoxy and mysticism, while the Western tradition, shaped by Augustine, seeks a deeper integration of truth and life in the unity of the triune God.

The Trinitarian Economy

The inner relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not only true within God himself—they are also reflected in how God works in the world. All of God’s works in creation and redemption are done by the one true God. Yet within that unity, the distinct roles of each person of the Trinity are preserved. This outward working of the Trinity (often called the “economic Trinity”) corresponds to the eternal inner life of God (the “ontological Trinity”).

Although all three persons are active in all divine works, Scripture often shows a special pattern: the Father is the source, the Son the revealer, and the Spirit the one who applies and completes the work. For example, God the Father created the world through the Son, and the Spirit gives life to what was made. In redemption, the Father sends the Son, the Son accomplishes salvation, and the Spirit applies it to believers.

This order reflects how the Father is the origin without being originated, the Son is the image of the Father who reveals him, and the Spirit is the gift through whom we experience fellowship with God.

Some theologians, like Augustine, described the roles in other ways. He said the Father shows unity, the Son equality, and the Spirit harmony. Others described the Father as power, the Son as wisdom, and the Spirit as love. These aren’t strict divisions, because all three persons are fully and equally God. But they help us understand how the Trinity works in creation and redemption, each person acting in perfect unity and harmony, yet with a distinct role.

The way the three persons of the Trinity relate within God himself is also reflected in how God works outwardly in creation and

redemption. All of God's works—creation, providence, salvation, and sanctification—are done by the one God. Yet in those works, each person of the Trinity acts according to his distinct role. The Father works through the Son and in the Spirit.

Scripture itself makes these distinctions clear, often using specific prepositions to mark the order: “from” the Father, “through” the Son, and “in” the Spirit. This doesn't mean that each person acts separately, but that they work together in a unified order. The Father is the source, the Son the one who carries out the work, and the Spirit the one who brings it to completion.

While the three persons are equal in divinity and honor, their roles are distinct. For example, the Father is never said to be sent; the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son. The early church recognized these distinctions in Scripture and taught that all God's works are shared by the three persons, but each person is uniquely involved in a fitting way.

Over time, some thinkers wrongly treated the Trinity as if the persons represented three different stages in history—Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament, and Spirit in the church age. This view turns the eternal Trinity into a kind of unfolding process, which is unbiblical. The church fathers firmly rejected this. God's being doesn't change or evolve. The Trinity is eternal, not a product of history.

Still, God revealed himself gradually. The full understanding of the Trinity wasn't made known all at once, but unfolded over time. The Old Testament emphasized the Father. The Son was revealed in the incarnation. The Spirit came in fullness at Pentecost. Yet all along, the three persons were working together, each in his proper role: the Father creating, the Son redeeming, and the Spirit sanctifying.

When Scripture speaks of the Son and the Spirit being "sent," it is not just describing events in time—like the incarnation or Pentecost—but reflecting something eternal within God himself. The sending of the Son is grounded in his eternal generation from the Father, and the sending of the Spirit reflects his eternal procession. These outward acts in history flow from the inner, eternal relationships between the persons of the Trinity.

Augustine explained it this way: the Son was not sent because he became flesh; rather, he became flesh because he was sent. That decision was part of God's eternal wisdom. The time when the Word became flesh was already held within the eternal Word. So when the Son was born in time, it was the visible expression of an eternal truth. The same is true of the Spirit. His coming at Pentecost was not the beginning of his existence or work, but a visible expression of his eternal role in the Godhead.

This outward sending serves to help us grasp with our senses something of what is always true spiritually and eternally. The Spirit, for example, was always the gift of God, even before he was poured out on the church. Just as a gift exists before it is actually given, the Spirit is eternally "giveable," even before being received by believers.

So, the visible missions of the Son and the Spirit—Christ's incarnation and the Spirit's outpouring—point us back to their eternal origins in the Father. Their true mission is fulfilled not merely in historical events, but in their invisible, ongoing presence in the hearts of believers and in the church. This is how God, through the Son and the Spirit, comes to dwell with his people—until he is "all in all."

Trinitarian Analogies and Arguments

Because the doctrine of the Trinity is so far beyond human understanding, Christians have long tried to illustrate it using analogies and to support it with arguments. One interesting observation is how often the number three appears in Scripture in meaningful ways. We see it in creation (heaven, earth, and sea), in the history of redemption (three phases of the covenant), in Israel's worship (three main festivals, three parts of the tabernacle), and in the life of Christ (three offices, three days in the tomb, three crosses at Calvary, three close disciples). Even the Christian life is marked by the three great virtues: faith, hope, and love. The repetition of "three" in Scripture has often been seen as a sign pointing toward the mystery of the Trinity.

People have also noticed that many cultures and religions feature triads of gods or principles, such as the Indian Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), or the Norse gods Odin, Thor, and Loki. Philosophers, too, have spoken of threefold realities, like mind, idea, and matter. Some have thought of these as hints or reflections of the Trinity.

But these non-Christian triads are not the same as the Trinity revealed in Scripture. They often reflect polytheism—three separate gods—whereas the Christian Trinity is one God in three persons, equal in essence, united in will, and perfectly harmonious. So while such analogies may offer a faint shadow, they cannot truly capture the unique beauty and mystery of the triune God.

More helpful than pagan religious triads are the analogies found within creation itself. Early Christian thinkers tried to illustrate the Trinity using natural examples. They spoke of a flame that lights another without being diminished, or a spring that flows into a river while remaining a single source. Others described the relationship

using images like root, tree, and fruit; or the sun, its light, and its warmth—three distinct expressions, yet one source.

Over time, people noticed that the natural world often reflects threeness. Space has three dimensions. Time consists of past, present, and future. Matter exists in solid, liquid, and gas. Human beings are made of mind, emotions, and will. Society involves relationships like parent, child, and family. Even beauty, truth, and goodness—the highest ideals—form a triad. Many aspects of life, nature, and human experience seem to reflect a threefold pattern.

These examples do not prove the Trinity, nor do they explain it completely. But they do offer a glimpse into how the Triune God has left traces of his being in his creation. Just as a painter reveals something of himself in his work, so the order and patterns in the world reflect the God who made it.

Thought and Love

Beyond images from nature, some of the most profound illustrations of the Trinity come from the structure of human thought and love.

Augustine and others noted that everything that exists must have three aspects: it must simply *be*, it must have a *particular form* that defines what it is, and it must have *order or harmony* within itself. In this way, existence reflects a kind of trinity: being, form, and harmony.

Medieval theologians explored this idea further and found triads in nearly every area of life—language, philosophy, grammar, reason, mysticism, and even art. They often observed that human knowledge and activity seem to unfold in threes, which they believed reflected the imprint of the Triune God on creation.

In modern philosophy, especially with thinkers like Kant and Hegel, this pattern of “threeness” became even more pronounced. They described all human thinking as moving through a process of beginning (thesis), contradiction (antithesis), and resolution (synthesis). Though these philosophical systems were not always biblically grounded, they still recognized that truth often unfolds in a triadic structure.

Others went a step further, not just using analogies but trying to show how the doctrine of the Trinity arises from the very nature of thought and love. For example, the idea of God as *Word* (Logos) helped early theologians see a picture of the Trinity in human speech and reason. The Father knows himself perfectly and expresses this knowledge in the eternal Word, who is the Son.

Augustine developed this further. He saw the Trinity reflected in the human soul: in memory, understanding, and will—or in being, knowledge, and love. The mind remembers itself, knows itself, and loves itself. This process, though still human and limited, gives a faint glimpse into the inner life of God.

For Augustine, these are not mere metaphors. Because humans are made in God’s image, the structure of our souls points to the reality of the Triune God. In all things—especially in our thinking and loving—we see shadows of the eternal Trinity: three who are one, equal in being, and completely united.

Augustine acknowledges that all analogies for the Trinity—whether drawn from nature, human reason, or love—are just that: analogies. They help us grasp something of the truth, but they also fall short in significant ways.

For example, when we speak of memory, understanding, and love in the human mind, we are referring to aspects or capacities within one person. But in God, the Trinity refers not to aspects but to three distinct persons who are each fully God. In us, these faculties often differ in strength and function. In God, there is no division or inequality. The three persons are perfectly united and equal in essence.

Augustine never intended these illustrations to *prove* the Trinity by reason alone. He believed the doctrine because it is revealed in Scripture. On that foundation of faith, he explored how traces of the Trinity can be seen throughout creation, especially in the human soul. The first part of his *On the Trinity* is devoted to showing the biblical basis of the doctrine; only later does he explore these reflections in nature and the human mind.

Even so, Augustine recognized that sin has clouded our understanding. The image of the Trinity is still present in humanity, but it has been distorted. Only through God's renewing grace can we again rightly remember, know, and love him—and be restored more fully in his image. One day, when we see God face to face, our being will be whole, our knowledge clear, and our love perfect.

Alongside these reflections on the mind, Augustine also draws an analogy from love. Scripture tells us, "God is love," and love always includes three elements: someone who loves, someone who is loved, and the love shared between them. In this way, love itself reveals a kind of trinity. Other theologians followed this line of thought, especially Richard of St. Victor, who emphasized that true love requires not only a lover and beloved, but also a third person who shares in and completes that love.

This idea shows why the fullness of divine love, like divine joy and glory, must exist within a communion of persons. Love by its very nature seeks relationship—and in God, that relationship is perfect and eternal between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Theosophy

Throughout history, some thinkers have tried to explain the Trinity not by Scripture but through philosophical systems—most notably in the tradition of theosophy. This approach, influenced by Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Jewish mysticism, was revived before the Reformation and found its clearest form in the writings of Jakob Böhme and later in modern thinkers like Schelling.

Schelling rejected both Deism and pantheism. He believed that true being must include a dynamic unity: not a static God, but a living, personal Spirit who contains within himself three "potencies" or dimensions. These are: (1) a will or subject, (2) an idea or object, and (3) their union in self-consciousness. These aspects are not parts added to God, but essential to who God is as Spirit.

In Schelling's view, these three inner realities are also the basis for everything that exists outside of God. As history unfolds, the divine potencies become more distinct—eventually becoming the Father, Son, and Spirit. However, he does not see the Trinity as existing eternally in God's being. Instead, it gradually emerges in time as God realizes himself more fully through creation and revelation. The Son, for example, does not exist eternally as Son, but becomes Son through the unfolding of divine history.

In this framework, creation is not just the work of God—it's also how God becomes fully who he is. God becomes Trinity through the process of revealing himself to the world. While this system tries to

preserve unity and explain the persons of the Trinity, it redefines them not as eternal, distinct persons, but as stages in God's development. This is fundamentally different from the Christian doctrine, which holds that the Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally distinct and fully God.

Some philosophers tried to argue that the Trinity could be demonstrated through human reason, especially by reflecting on self-consciousness or the structure of thought. They claimed the doctrine was not just a matter of faith but a rational truth. Others—like Böhme or modern idealists—sought to find the Trinity through the nature of spirit or personality.

But the historic Christian church, and especially Reformed theology, remained cautious toward these philosophical attempts. While it's helpful to see reflections or traces of the Trinity in creation or in the human soul, we must not treat those reflections as proof of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, revealed only in Scripture. Even great theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, while acknowledging analogies in nature, insisted that reason cannot uncover the Trinity on its own. It must be received by faith.

Trying to prove this mystery by reason diminishes the dignity of faith, which deals with unseen realities, and risks confusing people by suggesting that faith is based on weak arguments. As Calvin said, the human mind is better suited to humbly receive God's Word than to speculate about what cannot be fully grasped. And most faithful theologians—especially in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions—have agreed.

The Importance of Trinitarian Dogma

We must firmly hold that our knowledge of the Trinity comes only from God's special revelation. Scripture alone is the sure foundation for this doctrine. Human reason can help us understand it more clearly, but it cannot discover or prove it on its own.

That said, the use of analogies and arguments to illustrate the Trinity isn't without value. Scripture itself tells us that all of creation—especially humanity—reflects the work of the triune God. While God's external works are shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, and often emphasize his oneness, there are still traces of his triune nature throughout creation. These “imprints” become clearer when our minds are renewed by God's Word.

Even though reason cannot prove the Trinity or be the basis of our faith, these reflections from nature and human life can help answer objections. They show that what Scripture teaches is not irrational or absurd, and they expose the weakness of opposing views. The mystery of the Trinity is not a contradiction, as some claim. Reason itself, when used humbly, recognizes its profound beauty and truth.

Moreover, these reflections help us see how the doctrine of the Trinity connects nature and grace, creation and salvation. The same God who made us is also the one who redeems us. Grace doesn't destroy nature but restores and fulfills it. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that the whole of life belongs to God—it's not an isolated truth but the foundation of all reality. It speaks to every part of creation, every human longing, and every area of thought.

For that reason, the task of theology is not only to teach the truth of the Trinity but to show how it touches every aspect of our lives. The Christian mind longs to see everything—nature, humanity, history—brought into harmony under the triune God. And the confession of

the Trinity must stand not on the edge, but at the very center of our worship, our thinking, and our living.

In the end, these reflections and analogies do not arise from idle speculation, but from a deep spiritual hunger to know God truly. And if God is triune, then nothing could matter more—for from him, through him, and to him are all things (Romans 11:36).

The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that God is truly alive—fully personal, eternal, and overflowing with life. Unlike false views of God, this doctrine avoids the errors of both *Deism* and *Pantheism*. Deism separates God from his creation, making him distant and impersonal. Pantheism brings God too close, identifying him with creation and erasing the difference between Creator and creature. Both destroy true religion. But the Trinity preserves God's complete distinction from the world while showing that he is full of life in himself—eternal, self-giving, and always active.

Philosophers have tried to explain the Trinity using God's knowledge, will, or love, but these efforts fall short. Such explanations can't fully account for the personal relationships within the Godhead—especially the Spirit's procession. In reality, it is the Trinity that makes God's attributes truly meaningful. Without it, ideas like love or holiness become abstract and empty. But with it, we see God as he really is: the God who knows, loves, and gives within himself—Father, Son, and Spirit—before the world ever existed.

In the Trinity, we find perfect unity and perfect diversity. Among creatures, we see only a dim reflection of this. Our unity is fragile, often based on will or emotion. Our diversity often leads to separation. But in God, unity and diversity exist together in complete harmony. One divine being exists in three persons, equal in essence, yet truly distinct.

Because of this, each of the three persons must be fully God—of the same essence. If Father, Son, or Spirit were something less than God, they would be creatures. But Scripture teaches us that they are one in being and fully divine. This rules out the error of Arianism, which denies the full divinity of the Son and Spirit. It also refutes Sabellianism, which claims the three persons are just different modes or roles of God.

The reality of God's work in creation, redemption, and sanctification shows us that these persons act distinctly yet together. The outward works of God flow from the inward relationships of the Trinity. There could be no true distinction in what God does if there were no real distinction in who God is.

The Trinity and the Living God

The doctrine of the Trinity is essential because it shows us that God is truly alive—not distant and detached like in Deism, and not merged with the world like in Pantheism. God is distinct from creation, yet fully involved with it. He doesn't need the world to be who he is. He is perfect in himself: full of life, love, and fellowship within his own being—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creation did not come from some inner necessity in God but out of the overflow of his life. The Father eternally begets the Son, and the Spirit proceeds from both. These eternal relationships show us that God can also reveal himself to us. He is not silent or unknowable. He makes himself known, because he already communicates perfectly within himself.

The Trinity and Creation

The doctrine of creation only makes sense if God is triune. It explains how God can be fully distinct from creation and yet present in it. In Scripture, we see that the Father creates through the Son, by the

power of the Holy Spirit. The names “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” don’t just describe God in himself—they also reveal how God relates to the world. All things come from the Father, are shaped by the wisdom of the Son, and sustained by the life of the Spirit. This is why creation bears signs of the Trinity, especially in human beings, who are made in God’s image. In our longing for truth, beauty, and unity, we reflect something of God’s triune nature.

The Trinity and Salvation

Above all, the Trinity is at the heart of the Christian faith. All of Scripture, and the entire gospel, depend on this truth. The Christian faith is not based on abstract ideas, but on the living God who reveals himself as one in essence and three in persons. The Father sends the Son; the Son accomplishes redemption; the Spirit applies that redemption to our hearts. We know God not as a distant ruler, but as our Father through Christ, and as the Spirit who dwells within us.

The entire work of salvation is the work of the triune God: we are loved by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and indwelt by the Spirit. Our baptism bears his name. Our worship rises to him. Every spiritual blessing we receive comes from the triune God. He is above us, before us, and within us. In this truth, we find rest and peace.

Though we may not fully understand this mystery, we know enough to trust it, believe it, and rest our faith in it. The Trinity is not a theory to be solved, but a truth to be worshiped.

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