

I. Introduction

A. The Value of Theology Proper

(Jeremiah 9:23-24 NKJV) Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.

Some of us can become wrapped up and put our confidence in our wisdom and intellect. We put our trust in how smart we are. Others find themselves captivated with physical fitness. We spend our energy working out, eating right, and taking care of our bodies. Maybe we find ourselves dwelling on finances. We work that extra job or make sure we have overtime just so we can have extra dollars.

But the Lord tells us not to glory in our wisdom, our might or our riches. Instead we should glory in our knowledge of God. We should boast that we understand the character of God. We should be basing our self-worth on the knowledge and understanding of we have about God; namely that we know that He is a God who delights in lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness.

Theology Proper is the branch of Systematic Theology which looks into the nature and character of God himself. It is our attempt to determine what God is like; to look into what defines the divine. Theology Proper is getting to know our God so that we might boast not in our greatness, but so we can boast that we understand and know who the Lord is.

Chuck Swindoll states, there can be no greater pursuit in life than that of "theology proper."

I am more convinced than ever that life's major pursuit is not knowing self...but knowing God.

As a matter of fact, unless God is the major pursuit of our lives, all other pursuits are dead-end streets, including trying to know ourselves. They won't work. They won't satisfy. They won't result in fulfillment. They won't do for us what we think they're going to do.

You never really begin the process of coming to know yourself until you begin the process of coming to know God. The by-product of such a process is discovering the peace you long for so desperately.¹

The Christian life should be a continual pursuit of the study of the nature of God. The more we understand and experience who God is, the more we will respond in a manner that pleases Him. Christianity is not developing habits or following rules. It is gaining a deeper understanding of God. In the process, we find ourselves, and we find the abundant Christian life.

¹ Charles Swindoll. *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*. (Zondervan, 1995), 89.

B. Classifications of God's Attributes

As theologians have studied the scriptures to determine the attributes of God, there have been countless attempts to classify His nature. Some theologians suggest the character of God cannot be properly categorized, because God himself defies categorization. Nonetheless, there seem to be four primary classifications of the attributes of God put forth by theologians:

- **Communicable and incommunicable.** Put forth by the reformers, communicable attributes are those attributes in which humans can participate (e.g. love, holiness) while incommunicable are those attributes uniquely belonging to God (e.g. omniscience, omnipotence, etc.)
- **Intransitive and Transitive.** Intransitive are those qualities which remain in God's nature (e.g. spirituality) while transitive are those qualities which operate on objects outside of God (e.g. grace).
- **Absolute and Relative.** Absolute are qualities that he has in himself (e.g. infinite), relative are qualities that are manifest in his relationship with others (e.g. eternal and omnipresent, being the relative qualities of his absolute infiniteness).
- **Natural and Moral.** Moral qualities are those related to the concept of rightness (e.g. holiness, love, faithfulness), while natural qualities are not connected to any moral idea (e.g. knowledge and power).

II. God is Holy

A. Scripture

Twice in scripture we are given a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. In both these cases God shows us the singularly most encompassing part of his character. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Christ, is given a vision of what the throne room of God looks like.

(Isaiah 6:1-4, NKJV) In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

This is a truly awe-inspiring scene with God, high and exalted sitting on a throne, his robe filling the temple. Angels are shouting the character of God in a loud rumble that shakes the throne room of heaven. And the singular attribute attributed to the Lord is his holiness. The same is true in Revelation 4:8 when the apostle John has a vision while exiled on the island of Patmos:

(Revelation 4:8 NASB) And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

In both these cases, the attribute of God proclaimed in the throne room is God's holiness. Holiness is the attribute with which God wants to be primarily identified. That being the case, we should take God's holiness very seriously.

The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of His glory.²

B. Definition

Holiness is one of those religious terms we hear all the time but sometimes struggle to define. We can use synonyms such as sacred, consecrated, and hallowed. But these terms have the same stuffy old feeling as holy. Holiness, as amplified in scripture, seems to encompass three things:

1. To be set apart

God is unique. He has not rivals or competition³. He is unsearchable, incomprehensible, incomparable, great, wonderful, and exalted⁴.

*(Exodus 15:11 NIV) "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?
Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working
wonders?"*

God cannot really be defined. He is holy, different, unique, and foundationally beyond our ability to put a definition on Him.

2. To be morally pure

Holy things are pure and clean. There is no evil or wickedness.

*(Habakkuk 1:13 NKJV) You are of purer eyes than to behold
evil, and cannot look on wickedness.*

To say that God is pure and perfect means does not merely mean that God doesn't have any imperfections. In the same way that being healthy is not merely the absence of illness, God's purity is not just the absence of imperfection. Holiness means that God is absolutely perfect.

God's holiness encompasses righteousness. But righteousness does not mean that God does what is right. Rather, whatever God does is right. Righteousness itself is defined by God's character. He is the standard of all that is good and right. Any less and God would be subject to a standard outside himself. This is outside the boundaries of the definition of holiness.

As such, God's righteousness and purity is a transcendent purity.

*When things are made holy, when they are consecrated, they are
set apart unto purity. They are to be used in a pure way. They are to
reflect purity as well as simple apartness. Purity is not excluded
from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it. But the point we
must remember is that the idea of the holy is never exhausted by the
idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is
purity and transcendence. It is a transcendent purity.⁵*

²R. C. Sproul. *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985), 40.

³Bob Deffinbaugh. "The Holiness of God." [article on-line]. (Dallas TX: Bible Studies Foundation, 1997), accessed April 19, 2006; available from http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=252; Internet.

⁴John D. W. Watts, "Holy," *Holman Bible Dictionary for Windows*, 1994.

⁵Sproul.

When God's moral purity separates him from His creation it is called holiness. When his moral purity is applied to his relationship to creation, it is called his righteousness. When God's moral purity is required of others in creation, it is called justice.

3. Holiness amplifies all of the other attributes of God

Holiness is not merely just another attribute in a long list of attributes. It is the attribute proclaimed by the Seraphim in heaven. It is the attribute by which all His other attributes are qualified.

The word is used as a synonym for his deity. That is, the word holy calls attention to all that God is. It reminds us that His love is holy love, his justice is holy justice, his mercy is holy mercy, his knowledge is holy knowledge, his spirit is Holy Spirit."⁶

C. Our Response

When we contemplate God's holiness, what should our response be? Isaiah's response is a good picture of what our response will be if we truly understand his holiness.

(Isaiah 6:5 NKJV) So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts."

Isaiah became aware of His own sinfulness, especially related to his speech. When confronted with the transcendent purity of God, his impurity was readily apparent. Furthermore, he became aware of His people's sinfulness. But mostly, he became aware of his fate. He understood that his lack of holiness doomed him ("Woe is me, for I am undone!").

John's response in Revelation reveals this same awareness of his fate:

(Revelation 1:17 NASB) And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man.

When confronted with God's holiness, our response is humility. Humility is seeing God for who He is. But it is also seeing myself for who I am not. To truly understand God, and therefore understand ourselves and our meaning and purpose, it must begin with humility.

Isaiah's response is far from what we hear today from many who claim to teach biblical truth. He was not impressed with his "significance." His "self-esteem" was not enhanced. Just the opposite took place. His vision of the holiness of God caused Isaiah to lament his utter sinfulness. If God was holy, Isaiah saw he was not. Isaiah confessed his own unholiness and that of his people."⁷

In a culture that tells us that the way to find meaning is to look inside yourself, to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, humility seems like a foolish, weak, un-empowered character trait. But God tells us that the way up is down, that when we humble ourselves, we will be lifted up (James 4:10). It is only when we humble ourselves that we will truly understand who God is.

⁶Deffinbaugh.

⁷Deffinbaugh

III. God is Transcendent

A. Scripture

The same prophet Isaiah who sees a glimpse of God, goes on in his prophecies to condemn the arrogance of the nations. When we get to chapter 40, Isaiah lays out for us the folly of our pride in the light of a transcendent God.

(Isaiah 40:21-23) Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless.

God is outside his creation. He sits above the earth, outside of the heavens. The arrogant nations, which threaten God's people, are nothing compared to a God who exists beyond the universe.

(Isaiah 40:25) "To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One.

There is no one like God. He is incomparable.

B. Definition

Isaiah is describing a God who is transcendent. To be transcendent means to exist beyond and outside the ordinary range of human experience or understanding. Transcendence can be amplified into several attributes:

1. To Be Independent of Creation ("Freedom")

God is independent of creation. He is free to choose anything He wants. He is only restricted by His perfection. Yet perfection is not a restriction, so He is truly free to do whatever He wants.

This often begs the question of the existence of evil. How can a free God co-exist with evil? God has allowed evil because without it there can be no recognition of God's perfect holiness and God's perfect love. He allows it to show more of His character.

2. To be Outside Space and Time ("Eternal, Omnipresent")

God is eternal. To say God is eternal is more than just God has always existed and will live forever. God is not just without beginning and end. To be eternal means that God exists outside of time itself. All of time is equally present to God. That means God, right now, is aware and living in the past just as much as he is aware and living in the present, just as much as he is aware and living in the future. He exists outside of time.

Likewise, God's omnipresent nature means more than just that he exists everywhere. God exists outside of space itself. He is equally present in all aspects of space because he transcends space and time.

In the classic book, *Flatland*, Edwin Abbott describes a world of 2 dimensions and how an entity in that world might see a three dimensional object. To such a two dimensional creature, a sphere walking through his universe would look like it exists in more than one place at a time. God has the same appearance to us. He exists in all time and space because he is at least one-dimension above the known universe. He is eternal and omnipresent.

3. To have all Knowledge ("Omniscient")

God knows everything. He is omniscient. Everything He knows is important to Him. God did not learn anything. His omniscience is a state of His being. What He knows He has always known. Therefore, God cannot be surprised, let down, or disappointed.

4. To Have All Power ("Omnipotent")

There is nothing God cannot do. He has the capacity to do absolutely anything except something outside of his perfect character. But to accomplish something beyond perfection is not truly a limitation, so he is absolutely powerful.

C. The Relationship of Transcendence and Immanence

When we consider the transcendence of God, we often get the picture of a God who is distant and removed from His creation. This is the God of the Deist, who sees God as transcendent, but uninvolved in the day-to-day affairs of humanity. But when we speak of God's infinite nature, we must remember that God is both infinitely large and infinitely small.

In mathematics, infinity divided by any number other than infinity itself, is infinity. Therefore, if you sub-divide God, each component division remains infinite. That means God has the capacity to give His attention to each individual member of the human race and retain all of His infinite characteristics while giving attention to that individual.

It is God's infinite, transcendent character that gives God the ability to also be immanent. That is to say, because God is infinitely large, He has the capacity to be near each individual. For this reason, the Psalmist can say:

(Psalms 145:18 NASB) The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth.

Isaiah addresses the Immanence of God back in chapter 40:

(Isaiah 40:27-28) Why do you say, O Jacob, And speak, O Israel: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my just claim is passed over by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

God's transcendence and His Immanence go hand-in-hand. One begets the other. To think of these two aspects of God's infinite nature is to lead us to a wrong understanding of God.

An overemphasis on transcendence causes us to lose the idea of an active God. We look for God only in miracles and in the sacred, missing his activity in the mundane, natural and secular realms. Overemphasis on transcendence tends towards deism.

An overemphasis on immanence makes it difficult to distinguish between the work of God and any other natural or human activity. God becomes less and less personal, and no longer is an objective standard of morality. God merely becomes a label for the highest human values, ideals, and aspirations. Overemphasis on immanence tends towards pantheism.

Immanence can, in excess, lean towards pantheism. Pantheism equates the natural order with God, stating that God is nature, and nature is God. Immanence teaches not that God is the same as creation, but that God is independent of nature. Immanence teaches that without God, nature ceases to exist, but God can exist without nature. Pantheism teaches that not only would nature not exist without God, but that without nature, God would cease to exist.

D. Our Response

The transcendence of God can be a little disconcerting to us. If God can see everything I do, if he knows everything about me, and can do absolutely anything, then I cannot escape from Him. God's transcendence without his benevolence is a scary thing.

But Isaiah begins this whole passage with his intent in discussing God's transcendence.

(Isaiah 40:1) "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.

To those who trust in his goodness as well as his transcendence there is comfort and strength for the week.

(Isaiah 40:29-31) He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.

If we understand our place from God's perspective, God will comfort us and give us strength. It is the weak that shall have strength, and the humble that will be lifted up by God.

IV. God Is Absolute

A. Scripture

The Israelites are ready to enter the Promised Land. For forty years the nation has wandered in the wilderness waiting for the last of a generation to die before they could enter the land promised to them by God. As this new generation gathers, their leader Moses stands and presents them with the law, the covenant, between them and God. At the heart of this covenant is a statement of faith regarding the character and nature of God.

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

This statement has become the core of Judaism. It is the foundational creed of the Jewish faith. Jesus affirmed this statement of faith as having preeminence:

(Mark 12:28-29 NASB) One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" (29) Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD;"

B. Definition

1. To Be Unified ("Sovereignty")

God's oneness does not merely mean that there is only one God. It declares that God has unity in His character. All His characteristics work in complete harmony with each other. This complete unity of his character places Him in absolute control of absolutely all things. Nothing, therefore, can have any measure of control over Him.⁸

⁸ Patrick Taylor, from a lecture given to the Grace Institute, February 1, 1996.

Another term for this is sovereignty. Sovereignty is not just authority and power. Sovereignty is God's absoluteness, God's unity all wrapped up as oneness.

Another way to think of this is to put Moses proclamation in the cultural context of the wandering Hebrews. Monotheism was the anomaly in that day. Each culture had a pantheon of gods that were defined as the god of this or the god of that. But Yahweh, the God of Abraham is one. He is not the god of this or that. He is the God of all things. He is one. He is sovereign.

2. To be unchanging ("immutable")

God's oneness means he does not change. He does not grow or develop. God is as He is, as He was, and as He always will be. Change becomes impossible for someone who exists outside of time. But even beyond that, there is nothing in God's character *to* change. If He is holy, He can't become *more* holy. If He could become more perfect, that would mean He was less than perfect. God must be, by nature then, immutable.

3. To be Consistent with Himself ("truth")

God's oneness means He is consistent with himself. He is always true to His character and always communicates consistently with His character. He is the ultimate reality. Therefore, all that He is, does and says is true. Truth, in fact, is defined as that which is consistent with God's ultimate reality.

C. Open Theism Debate

There are certain scriptures that seem to indicate that God does indeed change, particularly in reference to His reaction to human repentance. In Genesis 6:6-7, God states that he regrets having made humanity. In 1 Samuel 15:35, God regrets having made Saul the King of Israel. As people decide to follow or not follow after God, it appears that God himself changes. After the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, the scriptures say:

(Exodus 32:14 NASB) So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

For some theologians, this is not merely a figure of speech or an anthropomorphism. They believe that indeed God does change, that God is not immutable. In fact, in order for humanity to truly have free will, God must be open to respond to the free will choices of people.

This viewpoint is known as *Open Theism*, and has been promoted by such evangelical theologians as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders and Gregory Boyd. There has been much debate in the last decade amongst evangelical theologians on this issue, with most evangelical scholars have rejected this teaching. However, there has been a tremendous amount of discussion regarding this new idea.

Open theism states that God does not necessarily know how humans will respond to His revelation. God experiences the events of His world and specifically the responses of people as they happen. God is said to still be omniscient, in that He knows all the possible responses. Furthermore, God remains all-powerful and could control those responses. However, in respect for human free will He chooses to let things unfold.

This teaching challenges not only the immutable nature of God, but also his transcendence. If the open theist is correct, then God does not exist outside of time, but is subject to time itself. This would make God part of and subject to the material world. In so being, God ceases to be God as classically defined by Christian theology.

The passages declaring God's repentance can simply be explained as an accommodation to our understanding so that we can understand God's justice and His mercy. Using these passages to challenge the unified, unchanging nature of God is to pull it out of context and to ignore the stronger biblical evidence affirming the unchanging, omniscient and eternal nature of God.

D. Our Response

After Moses declares the statement of faith, He dictates the response to God's oneness. If God is one, being sovereign, unchanging, and true, then our response should be wholehearted devotion to Him.

(Deuteronomy 6:5-6) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.

Put yourself back in the mindset of the people hearing this from Moses. These people are being told that there is one God, not a number of gods. You don't need to have divided loyalties. You don't need to please Yahweh and another god. You don't need to sacrifice to the god of rain to get good crops, and then sacrifice to the god of war to ensure victory over your enemies. There is only one sovereign God. You can wholeheartedly follow him.

While we may outwardly subscribe to monotheism in our culture today, the call to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength remains. If God is sovereign, I don't have to be divided about my pursuit. I need not worry about money, status, influence, or even mere survival. God is one. He is sovereign. He never changes. He is in control. My response can be to trust Him with all aspects of life.

V. God Is Benevolent

A. Scripture

(Jeremiah 9:23-24) Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.

A century after Isaiah showed the folly of pride and arrogance in light of the attributes of God, Jeremiah reiterates the message. We shouldn't be proud of our wisdom, our might, or our wealth. The only thing in which we can legitimately take pride is in how well we know God.

But, in knowing God, notice the attributes by which he defines himself: lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness. God delights in his benevolent character and wants us to also.

B. Definition

1. To be just

We have already discussed how God's righteousness, or moral purity, is a part of His holiness. But his justice and righteousness are also a part of his benevolence. It might seem strange to think of God's judgment along with his lovingkindness.

Think, however, of an unjust and unrighteous god. Pagan cultures are full of gods who are vindictive and cruel. A god who treats people unfairly and with arbitrary judgment would not be seen as benevolent.

Yet Yahweh delights in judgment and righteousness. He will deal with us with justly. His judgments are never arbitrary or cruel. He is not vindictive. He is benevolent.

2. To be relenting

God's benevolence does not stop at treating us justly. He also treats us with mercy, giving us chance after chance to repent of our evil. God is a relenting God, not wanting any to perish.

The Old Testament is replete with examples of God providing warnings to people to respond to Him. He withholds punishment again and again. Our just punishment is delayed and delayed in hopes that we will change.

3. To be love

(1 John 4:16-18) God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

Ultimately, God's benevolence is wrapped up in love. God is love. He not only is just and longsuffering. He also loves us to the point of providing a mechanism by which we can be forgiven of our wrongs.

C. The Relationship of Holiness and Love

Some have contended that there is tension between God's moral purity and his love. The solution to the supposed contradiction between God's moral purity and his love is found in the saving work of Christ. God demonstrates His love towards us in that Christ died for us. But Christ only had to die to satisfy God's justice. If God were not just, Christ would not be needed, for God's love would have just tolerated our sin. If God did not love, Christ would not have been sent, for God's justice would have been satisfied by our own death. But because God is both loving and just, Christ was sent to die, appeasing not only God's wrath, but also his benevolence simultaneously. Outside of the cross, however, these two attributes remain in conflict.

D. Our Response

How do we respond to God's love? John continues the passage by showing how God's love eliminates fear from our life.

(1 John 4:16-18) There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

We are not afraid that God will unjustly or arbitrarily condemn us. But more than that, we are not afraid that God will justly condemn us for the things we deserve, because he is longsuffering and relenting. Ultimately we do not have to fear any punishment from God if we accept the mechanism of reconciliation accomplished by Jesus.

We are free to make mistakes. We are free to be bold in Him. We can be confident as we approach life for we are not afraid of God. God's love can bring confidence that nothing else can. We are free from fear.

Bibliography

- Deffinbaugh, Bob. "The Holiness of God." [article on-line]. Dallas TX: Bible Studies Foundation, 1997, accessed April 19, 2006; available from http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=252; Internet
- Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1989.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2002.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Victor Books, 1987.
- Sproul, R. C. *The Holiness of God*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.,
- Swindoll, Charles. *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*. Zondervan, 1995.
- Taylor, Patrick. from a lecture given to the Grace Institute, February 1, 1996.
- Watts, John D. W. "Holy." *Holman Bible Dictionary*.