

Doctrine of God

Part 1 – Approaching God with our Minds

No one can love a thing that is quite unknown.
- Augustine

We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it.

- J.I. Packer (Knowing God, 14)

The most important thing about you is what you believe about God.

You may reason that “knowing God personally,” or “having a personal relationship with Jesus,” or “believing the gospel,” rank higher in priority than does “what” we believe about God.



But if we believe the wrong things about God then we will certainly get Jesus and the gospel wrong. If we believe the wrong things about God we won't know what it really means to believe in him. We will not know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus if we do not know what God is like. Our worship will be misdirected and our hope diminished if we do not know what God is like.

The reason there are atheists and Hindus and Mormons and Muslims and Oneness Pentecostals and innumerable little cultists is because so many people believe the wrong things about God. Of course, all of these false beliefs stem ultimately not from lack of information but from the sinful human heart (Romans 1:18ff). And the stakes are sky high because sin seizes upon the mind, blinds to the truth, and bears the bitter fruit of gospel-denying death.

Doctrine

Doctrine is a word you will hear a lot in this course. So, what does it mean? The English word doctrine comes from a Latin word which means “teaching” or “instruction.” While the word is not always used, the *idea* of doctrine is applied far beyond religious contexts. Every discipline has an established doctrine or agreed upon set of beliefs and practices which must be followed. Lawyers, brain surgeons, stone masons, and plumbers all affirm particular doctrines which protect the integrity of their work.

Christian doctrine is the “Christian system of belief or the common core of Christian teaching that determines Christian self-understanding – that is, what it means to be a Christian. This represents what Christians believe in common and what they communicate to others.”¹ The doctrine of God consists of those teachings about who God is in himself affirmed by the church throughout the ages.

¹ Ronald Heine, *Classical Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), p. 5.

This course is a meager attempt to introduce the spiritual riches of the doctrine of God inherited from the Scriptures, defended by the church fathers, and reaffirmed by the Protestant Reformers. As you might expect from a course on the doctrine of God, we will be examining such doctrines as God's love, power, holiness, and justice. But we will also place special emphasis on those doctrines that lie at the heart of the very being of God; doctrines which have been largely neglected by contemporary evangelicals. These doctrines which teach us about who God is in himself include his tri-unity, aseity, simplicity, immutability, impassibility, and eternity.

This complex of biblical and historically affirmed doctrines is traditionally referred to as *Classical Theism* or the Christian doctrine of God. These doctrines have been handed down to us from the church fathers of the first five centuries as they faithfully mined the depths of Scripture.

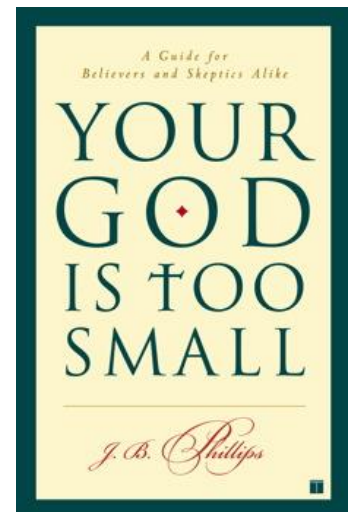
The hope is that we will understand and rejoice in those doctrines that past generations of Christians treasured and believed were essential for a proper understanding of and devotion to God.

J.I. Packer observes that the "world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul."²

A God Unlike Us

In his classic little book Your God is Too Small (1961) J.B. Phillips observed that "the greatest and most pressing problem facing the world is that people think God is less glorious, loving, magnificent and impressive than he is."³

The world inevitably holds wrong beliefs about God. In Romans 1 The Apostle Paul tells us that the natural inclination of the human heart apart from Christ is to reject the knowledge of God in favor of lies, the end result of which is the worship of created things rather than the worship of the Creator (Romans 1:18ff). "It is the joyful responsibility of the church to proclaim the one true God. That nobody else can fulfill that duty means that the church has a solemn responsibility to do all it can to ensure it understands and preaches the God who is there, and not some miniaturized replica."⁴



Perhaps the most common tendency, even among Christians, is to think of God in terms of ourselves. In other words, we tend to project upon God characteristics belonging to us. Perhaps it is a misapplication of the fact that we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27) and therefore possess – although imperfectly – certain attributes of God. We reason that since we are made in God's image, God must be like us in some ways. But we must remember that the image of God is mono-directional. That is, it operates in one direction only. While in some sense we do bear the image of God, it does not follow that God bears our image. God made humanity to be like him in

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1973) pp. 14-15.

³ Peter Sanlon, *Simply God* (Nottingham, UK: Inter Varsity Press, 2014) p. 24.

⁴ Ibid

some respects. But God is not like us in any respects. It would be like confusing a picture of the Grand Canyon with the Grand Canyon itself.

We call this massive difference between God and his creation (including us) the Creator / Creature Distinction. The error we often make in our thoughts about God is that he is simply a better version of us; a more powerful and more loving version of his human creatures. We reason that since God is loving and we are loving (though imperfectly) the difference between us is a matter only of degree.

But it is not simply that God has greater power or greater love than us. God's power and love – along with everything else about him – are infinite and perfect. There is nothing about us that is infinite and perfect. We are neither of those things, nor will we ever be. “The very act of reasoning from my strength and experience of power to God's power obscures something essential about him. It elides the fact that at the most fundamental level possible God is different from me...Attempting to move from thoughts drawn from creation to conceptions of God implies that his greatness and power exist on a spectrum with ours...The difference between God and his creation is not one of scale; it is a different order.”⁵

The Scriptures are filled with affirmations of and doxologies to the uniqueness of God.

Deuteronomy 4:35:

To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.

Isaiah 46:8-9

*Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,*

Jeremiah 10:6

*There is none like you, O Lord;
You are great, and your name is great in might.*

Romans 11:33-36

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”*

*“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”*

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

There is no other like or beside God because he stands apart from everything he has made, not in cold aloofness but in awesome wonder. The Lord alone is God and there is no other like him. “Only a Creator not to be confused with the creature is capable of stooping down to redeem those who have marred his image. Our ‘situation would surely have been hopeless,’ exclaims John Calvin, ‘had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him.’”⁶

⁵ Sanlon, 25

⁶ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), p. xvi.