

Doctrine of God

Part 5 – God’s Aseity

Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning God...”

- The creation account assumes God’s independence and freedom from all things outside himself. God created all things out of nothing (‘ex nihilo’) because he alone is the only necessary Being.



Exodus 3:13-15 – “...I Am Who I Am...”

- As discussed in a previous lesson, the name God gave to Moses – Yahweh – is the Hebrew “to be” verb. It captures God’s self-existence.

Acts 17:16-34 – “...The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything...” (vv. 24-25).

- In introducing the pagan philosophers of Athens to the one true God Paul begins with the doctrine of God’s aseity – his self-existence and autonomy.

Aseity comes from a Latin term *a se* which means “of” or “from himself.”

“Aseity refers to God’s independence in his existence, decrees, will, and acts. In other words, God and only God determines who God is, what God does, and what God wills.”

The great Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof wrote that God “has the ground of his existence in himself” such that “he is not only independent in himself, but also causes everything to depend on him.”

Aseity means that God is the full and final explanation of all things, including himself. One of the things that makes God so essentially different from his human creatures is that he is necessary while humanity is contingent.

- For God to be necessary means that he is the basic requirement. His existence and being are necessary – a basic fact which cannot be changed or altered in any way. God is the most perfect and basic existence. There is nothing more basic or necessary than God himself. There is nothing before him. There is nothing over him. There is nothing supporting him. There is nothing that goes into making him who he is. This is aseity – Complete and perfect self-existence.
- On the other hand, we – and everything else – are contingent. To be contingent means to exist only if certain conditions are met. It also means that we change depending upon any number of things at work around us. “We’ll go hiking, contingent upon the weather.” “I’ll be there at noon contingent upon the traffic.” “We’ll have another child contingent upon a whole host of factors.”
- So, there is nothing “necessary” about us. We are in every respect contingent. And this is one of the most fundamental ways in which God is different from us. He is underived from and unconditioned by that which is finite, contingent, limited, and changeable. That much is evident

in how he created the world. He did not depend upon some preexisting matter to create the universe, but he created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. So, there is no sense in which God is contingent. There is no sense in which God is caused. There is no sense in which God is altered or changed – More on that when we talk about the doctrine of God's *immutability*.



- Furthermore, only one who has no beginning or cause to his own existence can bring the world into existence out of nothing (an unmoved mover). Because he is uncaused, God's existence is grounded in himself alone. God's aseity does not mean that he created himself or caused himself to be but that he alone, as Anselm says, "has of himself all that he has, while other things have nothing of themselves. And other things, having nothing of themselves, have their only reality from him." God's aseity means that for all eternity he has always been necessary. So this rules out even self-creation as though God had a beginning of some sort.

- Within the created order we routinely appeal to secondary causes in what we observe. For instance, I wrote these notes on a laptop. The whole process requires means outside of myself in order to accomplish. I need the computer itself which requires untold numbers of engineers, designers, builders, etc. I need a place to

work. I need various reference materials. I need caffeine to keep me awake. All of these things come from sources outside myself.

- However, God is the only explanation for God. For this reason, some theologians in the past derived God's *immutability* and *impassibility* from God's aseity. A God who explains his own nature and existence will neither change nor suffer, for these would require a created explanation for God's condition.
- Does this help you get a better sense of the Creator / Creature distinction? Augustine observed that if you place all created things next to God, "they are deficient in beauty and goodness and being." But there is no such deficiency in God's being. Aseity defines God as a perfect being.

Aseity and the rest of God's attributes

Now that we're clear on just how dependent we are and just how independent God is, it is critical to understand how aseity relates to the other attributes of God. Since God is life and existence in and of himself, what other great-making attributes must follow?

- God is self-divine – God's divinity is not derived from or added to by anything outside of himself.
- God is self-wise -
- If God learns or gains wisdom from any source outside himself then he would be less than perfect in his wisdom, growing in the wisdom he receives from others.
- God is self-virtuous – God is perfectly moral, being his own autonomous source of virtue. He has no need to grow or increase in virtue. God alone is the one ultimate standard of morality.
- God is self-attesting – God is the one ultimate standard of truth. God does not merely possess the truth, know the truth, and speak the truth; he *is* the truth.
- God is self-justifying – God is the sole perfect standard for justice.
- God is self-empowering – God's derives no power from outside himself. His power is complete and perfect. He wields his power in freedom for he cannot be manipulated or used.

- God is self-knowing – God does not depend on any creature to know what has happened or what will happen. This of course – just the like the doctrine of aseity itself – is in direct conflict with the error of Open Theism advocated by Greg Boyd and others.
- God is self-excellent – There is nothing more excellent, glorious, or majestic than God. All of the beauty and majesty seen in the created order is derived from God. Anselm reminds us, “For anything that is great through something else is less than that through which it is great.”

Apart from aseity, God cannot be the *supreme* being.

Too much philosophy?

Some contemporary theologians dismiss or alter the doctrine of God’s aseity because they believe the classical formulation is too dependent upon Greek philosophy. They believe that the Bible describes God as being in some ways voluntarily dependent upon his creation or changed by his involvement with creation. They reason that in responding to creation – in responding to us, his people – by entering into relationship with us – God is voluntarily taking on certain “changes.” And they point to certain passages of Scripture to back this up. Passages of Scripture that depict God’s emotions in responding to creation – these passages are seen as proving that God allows himself to be changed by – impacted by – his creation.



Systematic theologians John Frame and Scott Oliphint read the passages of Scripture which depict God’s emotions in such a way that they describe real change in God – just like our emotions are the results of our being impacted and changed in some ways by forces outside ourselves. They believe that the classical doctrine of God’s aseity is more a product of Greek philosophy than careful biblical interpretation. But this was not the feeling of the early church fathers and the best theologians of the early church.

Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), for example, appealed to aseity as the basis of his argument that God is Creator and all things are dependent on him. Likewise, Athenagoras (c. AD 133-190) rejected the need to offer sacrifices to God, for “he lacks nothing and has need of nothing.” From there, Athenagoras argued that Christians must not offer sacrifices on the basis that God is the gracious Creator of all that exists and cannot be served as though he needed anything (Acts 17).

Here, aseity is the philosophical expression of a biblical theme. Unlike many ancient near eastern parallels, Genesis 1 and 2 never depicts God creating in order to fill something that is lacking within himself. God needs nothing and therefore creates as a sheer act of grace just as after the fall he graciously offers salvation through his Son’s life, death, and resurrection. The prophet Isaiah ridiculed the worship of idols precisely because they depend on human hands for their existence (i.e., Is. 44:9–20, 46:4–7). Job emphasized the fact that God needs nothing and only creates and answers humans out of pure grace (Job 22:2, 35:6–7, 36:23, 38:1–40:2). And the early Christian apologists speak of God’s aseity as a clear departure from the pagan gods who were directly impacted and changed by forces outside themselves. So, far from being a

philosophical corruption of pure Christianity, the doctrine of God's aseity is a theological safeguard for the self-sufficiency of God and the gratuitous nature of creation.

Changed by us? Reading the Bible well

The Bible was composed in various literary genre – Historical narrative, Gospel narrative, law, proverb, sermon, poetry, epistle, apocalyptic. This is important because how we go about interpreting and applying a text of Scripture depends in part on our understanding how a particular genre functions in the Bible.

For instance, we do not read a Proverb in the exact same way as we read a Pauline epistle like Philippians. We do not read the Gospel of John in the exact same way as we read the apocalyptic visions of Daniel.

In addition to taking genre into account, we need to remember the rules about how we speak about God. In describing God, the Bible uses language analogically rather than univocally. To use a word univocally means that we use it in the same way in different contexts. For instance – apple pie is good, autumn is good, and a reliable car is good. All three of those contexts use the word good in basically the same way. That's univocal – "one voice"

But there are times when our language needs to function analogically. For instance, when we speak of the a particular day last week and the day of Caesar Augustus we are using the word "day" analogically. It is the same word and there are similarities in both uses. But there are clear differences as well.

The word day is used analogically – one use describes a specific day last week. The other use describes a period of time about 2,000 years ago. In both cases the word day describes a period of time but in quite different ways. When it comes to how we think about and talk about God we must think and speak analogically.

For example "My friend Dave is good. God is good," or "I am a father. God is a Father," or "My teacher is wise. God is wise." Do you see how differently these words must be used in relation to God than to anything else?

When the Bible applies words and descriptions to God it does so with language that we can understand. But that means that the words used and the ideas that come to our mind through those words must be thought of as analogical rather than univocal.

This true when the Bible depicts God responding in ways that, for us, would mean some sort of change. There are times when the Bible depicts God as responding emotionally. God possesses emotions in the same way he possesses power and goodness and virtue and wisdom. In whatever way that God possesses emotions it is in a way that cannot be adequately compared to our emotions.

Many of the key proof texts that describe God's emotions or his will changing in response to human affairs (Gen. 6:6, Ex. 32:9-14, Num. 14:11-25, 1 Sam. 15:11, etc.) are found in narrative passages of Scripture. And narrative passages of Scripture are typically interpreted in ways which differ from how we interpret more didactic passages of Scripture.

We need to see those narrative passages which depict God's emotions in light of the more didactic passages which tell us that God does not change; that he does not repent precisely because he is not man.

Narrative passages of Scripture are those texts most likely to appeal to anthropomorphism when discussing God, an accommodation for human finitude to enable the plot to unfold. So, in narrative God lets Moses see his back (Ex. 33:18-20). God walks with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). God brings plagues by his finger (Ex. 8:19). In each instance, God is described in human fashion, but most Christians would understand these as examples of God revealing a truth too complex for our understanding in a human way that we may understand. So anthropomorphic language is used. Analogical language is used precisely so we may have some understanding of truth which on its own would escape our finite minds.

In contrast, many of the passages that speak of God not having needs (Acts 17:25), not changing (1 Cor. 15:25, James 1:17), and ordering all creation for his purposes (Rom. 11:36) occur in didactic or teaching oriented components of the Bible, where we can expect more precision and clarity. This suggests that modern evangelicals who deviate from classical versions of the doctrine of God may be guilty of neglecting genre in treating various passages in the Bible as equally literal and equally applicable, thereby softening aseity.

