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## Table of Contents

Letter from the Editors .....	3
Ancient Paths .....	4
Articles .....	7
The Attributes of God .....	7
The Patience of God .....	13
Welcome to God's House .....	19
Cultivating Communion with God .....	24
Catechism Corner .....	29
Book Reviews .....	31

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# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

It is a pleasure once again to present to you the second issue of *The Heritage Journal* for 2021. This issue's theme continues to follow the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. The doctrine in focus is the doctrine of God, often called "theology proper."

Some articles in this issue are strictly theological. Some are more practical in their focus. We hope that, through all of it, you will grow closer to the God of heaven, and grow deeper in your knowledge of him.

We are pleased for this edition to welcome to our contributing staff Rev. Lowell Ivey. He is pastor of Reformation Presbyterian Church in Norfolk, VA, a member church of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Taylor Sexton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Taylor Sexton, MDiv**  
*Co-Editor and Member of Heritage Presbyterian Church*  
May 2021 – Royston, GA

# Ancient Paths

*“Stand by the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls.”*

— Jeremiah 6:16



*“Ancient Paths” stands at the beginning of every issue of The Heritage Journal. It contains an excerpt from an old writer that either has been notably impactful for the editors or is relevant to the theme of that particular journal issue.*

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In order to be properly engaged in this contemplation of God, and thereby to increase in the knowledge and love of God, the following directions are to be observed.

First, maintain a lively impression that you are but an insignificant creature, and seek to persevere in such a spiritual frame. Realize that your soul’s ability for comprehension is very limited and that a matter may readily exceed your understanding. Furthermore, our understanding having been darkened through sin, we are very unfit to comprehend anything about God who is an infinite Spirit. Can a small bottle contain an entire ocean? How then can a finite being comprehend an infinite Being? Can someone look directly into the sun without being blinded? How then will anyone view God who is an infinite light dwelling in the light unto which no man can approach (1 Tim. 6:16) and is clothed with the garment of light? Everyone therefore, when viewing himself from this perspective, must recognize himself to be but a great and foolish beast, not having a right human understanding because he has been so blinded by sin. Truly, to perceive that God is incomprehensible and to acquiesce in and lose one’s self in this; to pause and reflect in holy amazement; to believe that the Lord infinitely transcends the capacity of our mind; to rejoice in the fact that God unveils to man that He exists and reveals something of Himself; and to be satisfied

with that revelation—that constitutes knowledge of God and is the best frame to increase in this knowledge.

Secondly, be more passive in your contemplation of God and allow yourself to be more illuminated with divine light. Quietly follow that light with your thoughts and permit yourself to be influenced by it rather than wearying your soul with rational deductions, so the soul may move beyond the illumination granted at that moment. The reality and intensity of such mental activity will cause our thoughts to be more carnal than godly and will bring darkness upon the soul.

Thirdly, in doing so it is essential that the soul in all simplicity approves of God's revelation of Himself to her and refrains from hankering to comprehend this revelation. If one seeks to penetrate the manner of God's existence intellectually—that is, His eternity, infinity, omniscience, omnipotence, and internal motions—it will of necessity bring the soul in darkness and various temptations will emerge as a result, for the mind then contemplates things which V 1, are beyond its reach. Therefore, one should quickly resist any inclination to ponder about the “why” and the “how” of God's existence, nipping any temptations in the bud. Flee them by readily focusing upon your insignificance and darkness of understanding, and in all humility start again from the beginning.

Fourthly, in order for the soul to contemplate upon God in a manner which is becoming of Him, he must seek to be in a godly frame of mind and be emptied of sinful desires and world conformity, for “the secret of the LORD is with them that fear Him” (Psa. 25:14). “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Mat. 5:8); “he that loveth me shall be loved of My Father, and I will ... manifest Myself to Him. And we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:21, 23).

Fifthly, in doing so historical faith must be very active. This means that as we come to the Word, we will read what God says about Himself, without contradiction accept it as the truth, and conclude and confess that God is such as He reveals Himself to be. Our thinking will remain within the context of God's Word without agonizingly seeking to move beyond the Word. We will then in all

simplicity follow the Lord, until it pleases Him to lead us to a higher level of understanding.

Sixthly, it is essential that one considers God to be His God in Christ. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God is to be found in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Outside of Christ God is a terror, and can only be viewed as a consuming fire. In Christ, however, one may have liberty; and God reveals Himself to such who approach unto Him in that way. Then one will be able to better endure the light of God's countenance, rejoice in it, and therein glorify God. One ought to be cautious, however, of becoming too free and irreverent when considering God as Father in Christ and in the contemplation upon His perfections which are unveiled by means of the covenant of grace. The proper frame for contemplation upon God is to be humble, reverent, and to tremble with awe before the majesty of the Lord. ♦

Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 1:137-138.

# Articles



## The Attributes of God

### A Primer on the Nature of Our God

*Taylor Sexton*

What is God? This is a question that, especially for those outside of the Westminsterian Presbyterian tradition, bewilders and often even exasperates us. What is God? Who is God? What is he like? How do we describe him? What is he like in his very nature? It is easy to describe our parents, friends, children, houses, vehicles, and favorite foods, but how do we describe God? This is not a purely theoretical question, either. It is of vital importance to a proper understanding and living of the Christian life. If we do not know what and who God is, how can we worship and serve him rightly? Knowing who God is gives us “the whole framework within which one’s theology is constructed, life is lived, and ministry is conducted” (Erickson, 234).

In this article, we are going to explore God’s *attributes*. Discussion of God’s attributes is perhaps the most common way of approaching the study of his nature. In order to do this, we will first define what an attribute is. We will then explore how the Christian (and especially the Reformed) tradition has tended to classify God’s attributes. Finally, we will deal with the attributes themselves, being sure to make profitable application of many of them.

What is an “attribute” of God? Robert Letham defines the attributes of God as “particular aspects of what he is like. They describe his character as he has revealed it” (Letham, 155). When you *attribute* something to someone, you are describing them. If I say, “My wife is beautiful” (and she most certainly is), I am *attributing* beauty to her. In the same way, when we say things by way of

describing what God is like—good, just, holy, etc.—we are *attributing* something to God.

As Presbyterians, we have a good and quite thorough confessional statement of the attributes of God. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 4) answers the question “What is God” in this way: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” This is as far as the Catechism goes toward describing God. It does this primarily through listing his attributes. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* goes into much greater detail and is very much worth exploring.

As it was said before, however, we are not speaking here of the attributes of a bird, or a fish, or some other creature. We are discussing the attributes of the absolutely unique God of heaven. This fact bids us to proceed with caution. We are discussing someone who is ultimately incomprehensible. “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” the Apostle Paul asks (Rom. 11:34). The implied answer is, “No one.” We should not enter into this exploration flippantly or even boldly. While God is certainly immanently knowable, he is transcendently incomprehensible. Since God is a unique and the ultimate Being, “we cannot give a definition of God but only a description” (Vos, 1). Let us approach with humility and fear.

This more general caution leads to a more specific one. The *attributes* of God are not *parts* of God. It is not as though we can throw love, goodness, immutability, and holiness into a blender, and the result would be God. God is not the conglomerate result of his attributes. Rather, *God is his attributes*. As we will see when we look briefly at God’s simplicity, God is not composed of parts. So, when we discuss God’s attributes, we are not discussing *parts* of God in any way. *God is his attributes*.

How do we begin talking about God’s attributes? Historically, Christian theologians have begun talking about this great topic by first seeking to classify God’s attributes. Why classify them? In general, God’s attributes do seem to have a bipartite quality to them. On the one hand, there are those attributes that make him

absolute—such as infinity, simplicity, immutability, etc. On the other hand, there are other attributes that seem to be more relative—such as goodness, holiness, truthfulness, etc. Theologians in the past have tried to make sense of this by categorizes God’s attributes as absolute and relative, natural and moral, immanent and emanant, or communicable and incommunicable (just to name a few; there are more). The most common of these among evangelicals is to divide God’s attributes into *incommunicable* attributes and *communicable* attributes—“those attributes which are exclusively God’s, and those that are reflected in the creation,” respectively (Smith, 129).

Many attributes can be put into both of these categories. For the sake of space, however, we will limit ourselves to just a few. (This is a mere primer, after all!) God’s incommunicable attributes which we will discuss are self-existence (aseity), immutability, infinity, and unity. These are the attributes which only God possesses, and are those attributes which make him uniquely God. God’s communicable attributes are spirituality, knowledge, goodness, holiness, and righteousness. These are the attributes of God that are reflected, albeit to a *much* lesser degree, in creation. For example, God is self-existent; we are dependent. Yet God is good, and we, though nowhere close to touching God’s goodness, are still “good” according to our original creation (see Gen. 1:31; Eccl. 7:29).

We come now to our discussion of God’s attributes individually. We begin with his incommunicable attributes. We begin with God’s self-existence. This is sometimes termed God’s *aseity*, a compound word from the Latin phrase *a se*, which means “of himself.” A clever way of summarizing this doctrine is to say that God is his own cause. God needs nothing. Nothing precedes him in any sense. He simply *is*. The proof of this doctrine is God’s own name—Yahweh—which means “I am that I am.” In this way, we are totally *unlike* God. We are wholly dependent upon things outside of us. We were dependent on our mothers for our birth, just as they were. We all are dependent upon God for our very being.

Next is God's immutability. This is to say that God is unchangeable. "Immutable" shares the same root with "mutate," but with the negating prefix "im-." "I am the Lord, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6). In God "there is no variation or shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17). God has always been, is, and will always be the same, not only in his character, but in his very being. A subset of God's immutability is his impassability. Unfortunately, this doctrine has been questioned in the last century. Impassability means, literally, "freedom from suffering." The *Westminster Confession* (2.1) says that God is "without passions." These two doctrines spring logically from God's self-existence. If he is dependent on nothing, then he can be affected by nothing. When the people of Lystra attempted to worship Paul and Barnabas, they tore their clothes and said to them, "Why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you" (Acts 14:15 kjv). The difficulty comes when we read in Scripture of God "repenting," being "grieved," etc. Just as when Scripture speaks of God's "hand" or "arm," these descriptions of God are anthropomorphic and anthropopathic—ascribing to God human bodily features and emotions, respectively.

God's infiniteness means that he is not finite. (Have you noticed how many of God's incommunicable attributes are stated in negative terms—he is *not* changeable, *not* able to suffer, *not* finite?) God is not bound by time or space. He transcends both. It is not as though God is just a greater degree of being than we are. Rather, he is *altogether* different from us. God is not just one step higher on the food chain. He is in a category all his own. "Who is a God like You?" (Micah 7:18). "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You" (1 King. 8:27).

The final incommunicable attribute is God's unity. God's unity means that he is not divided into parts. This is sometimes called God's "simplicity." At once we can see why this is an *incommunicable* attribute. Everything in creation is composed of parts and is thus divisible and corruptible. When we die, we will decompose. When a car breaks down and is left alone in a junkyard, it will rust and fall apart. God, however, is not composed of any parts whatsoever. God is not, as we said earlier, a mixture of love, wrath, holiness, and

aseity. God *is* all of his attributes. This means that none of God's attributes are more or less important, or more or less central. God is not, as liberals claim, mainly love. He is also not, as some heavy-handed legalists argue, primarily wrath. Every attribute flows from, is necessitated by, and feeds into all the others.<sup>1</sup>

The communicable attributes are a little easier to apprehend since we share in their qualities. God is a spirit—spiritual. He does not have a physical body, is not confined to space, is immaterial. God has knowledge. Of course, God's knowledge is not like ours. God's knowledge is infinite and immediate. He does not learn things or use reasoning. He knows everything without any mediating factors. God is good. Indeed, he is goodness itself. He defines that is good. He does not do something because it is good, but something is good because God does it. Whatever we have that is good within us comes from him. He is also holy—set apart, wholly other, having no fellowship with anything that does not mirror his own goodness. Lastly, he is righteous. Everything he does is righteous. Nothing he does is stained with even the slightest taint of evil—by definition.

What practical benefit does studying the attributes of God have? Why learn all these big words and abstract concepts? There are many good reasons for studying these matters, but here are three very simple ones. First, *the Bible teaches these things to us*. Paul tells Timothy that “*all Scripture...is profitable*” (2 Tim. 3:16; emphasis added). Therefore, if Scripture teaches something, we ought to be diligent to learn it and learn it deeply. We cannot become like so many in the Church today who behave as though nothing is worth studying if it does not have immediate practical benefit to our marriages, our budgets, or our emotional well-being. (It could argued, of course, that the study of God positively affects *all* of these and more!)

Second, *we must know the God we worship*. How do we know we are telling the truth when we say we do not worship the same God as Muslims? Why can we be confident when we say we can have no fellowship with Mormons? Furthermore, how insulting would it be to the Lord if we claim to know him yet have no interest in who he is?

Finally, *the attributes of God are of immense comfort to us in this world*. How unbearable would our daily lives be if God were one who changes from day to day? What if one day he were pleased with our feeble prayers, and the next he were enraged at our spiritual speech impediments? What if God were one of whose promises we could not be sure are constant? Praise be to God, he is nothing like this. People are like this, but not God. In fact, these attributes serve in part to tell us precisely what God is *not*: human—sinful, hating, fickle, backstabbing, unstable human.

The God we serve, the God who reveals himself to us in the Bible, is the self-existent, unchanging, infinitely holy, righteous, wise God. He is worthy of our worship because of these things alone, even if he redeemed no one ever. How astounding it is, then, that *this* God has deemed to save and redeem to himself a people! ♦

#### NOTES

1. This brings up for many the question of how God's attributes relate to his simplicity. If God is not composed of parts, are his attributes real, or do they exist in name only? This has been a long ongoing debate between realists (those who say the attributes are real distinctions) and nominalists (those who say God's attributes exist in name only). There simply is not enough space to deal with this issue here. For more information on this debate, refer to the relevant sections on God's unity/simplicity in the "Works Cited" below.

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# The Patience of God

Rev. Michael Myers

When the Lord proclaimed his name to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he spoke these words: “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod. 34:6). When our God spoke these words, he was not merely heaping up terms and titles to help us when we address him. Rather, this wonderful declaration was a revelation of the character of the covenant God of Israel. It highlighted the attributes of his mercy, grace, longsuffering, covenantal goodness, forgiveness, and most perfect justice. Among the many jewels of truth embedded in this text, I direct your attention to that strange third word, longsuffering. I have two purposes in this article: first, to set before you the riches of the attribute of God’s patience; and second, to introduce you to the wisdom and ability of Stephen Charnock and his masterful treatise *The Existence and Attributes of God*.

In a brief biographical introduction, William Symington wrote that Charnock “was a pre-eminently holy man, distinguished at once by personal purity, social equity, and habitual devotion” (Charnock, 1:12). Born in 1628 in London, Charnock was a diligent student, eminent theologian, and faithful pastor. In fact, he co-pastored along with Thomas Watson in the 1670s. Some readers may find the style and content of *The Existence and Attributes of God* difficult, but it is important to note that Charnock wrote this work in order to instruct and catechize his parishioners. Any time studying his expositions of Scripture and divine truth will be well worth it.

Charnock’s treatment of divine patience begins by examining the words of Nahum 1:3, “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power.” The phrase rendered *slow to anger* is literally *long of nose*. Charnock observes, “He is not so impotent as to be at the command

of his passions as men are...his power over himself is the cause of his slowness to wrath” (Charnock, 2:474). From these words, we learn an important lesson: do not confuse God’s patience for inaction or weakness. Neither should his people consider his apparent slowness to exercise vengeance as injustice. God has not forgotten the iniquity that constantly rises up before him. He will come in judgment in due time (2 Pet. 3:9-10). Charnock’s point is that God is slow to anger—he is longsuffering—precisely *because* he is great in power. This gives us a wonderful insight into the merciful character of our God. “It signifies a willingness to defer, and an unwillingness to pour forth his wrath upon sinful creatures; he moderates his provoked justice and forbears to revenge the injuries he daily meets with in the world” (Charnock, 2:477). With introductory comments completed, Charnock divided the body his treatment of God’s patience into four sections, which we will consider briefly below.

### **The Nature of this Patience**

God’s longsuffering is closely related to his goodness and mercy but also contains important distinctions from them. Goodness (as in general benevolence) has as its object every creature in the universe in general. There is no question that everything in this world experiences at least some aspect of the benevolent generosity of God. He sustains the earth (Psa. 104:13-15), sends rain on the just and unjust (Matt. 5:45), and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17). Mercy, however, views creatures as miserable. When the Lord Jesus Christ looked upon the desperately unclean leper, he acted not merely in goodness, but in deep pity, mercy, and compassion (Mark 1:40-45). Patience bears a unique quality, regarding the creature as criminal, for in God’s longsuffering, He bears long with man’s sin. Charnock summarizes these comparisons by pointing out that mercy is the result of patience, this being founded upon the goodness of his character.

Why does the thrice holy, Triune God of glory demonstrate such marvelous patience? He is not insensible or unaware of what happens on earth. He is not ignorant of this world’s rebellion and

blasphemy. Weakness and faint-heartedness often inhibit us from carrying out hard but necessary responsibilities. Not so with the Lord. God's patience is due to the fullness of power that he has over himself. Consider Romans 9:22, where Paul writes that God makes his power known specifically by enduring "with much longsuffering the vessels prepared for destruction." In response to this, Charnock reflects that "the power of God is more manifest in his patience to a multitude of sinners than it would be in creating millions of worlds out of nothing" (Charnock, 2:482). As it related to redemption, Charnock notes that divine patience is founded squarely in the death of Christ. "The promised and designed coming of Christ was the cause of that patience God exercised before in the world; and in gathering the elect together, is the reason of His patience since His death" (2.\:483). This is very practical for us today. Why is God waiting to send the Lord Jesus Christ back to earth in glory? He is giving time for people to repent and for the elect to be born and come to saving faith.

### **Wherein Patience is Manifested**

God clearly displays patience toward his creation every single day. More particularly, the Scriptures focus upon his beloved people Israel as recipients of his kindness toward man. To his people the Lord sent warnings to keep them from destruction, guidance to direct their way, and ever undeserved blessings to encourage obedience. Despite this, disobedience and rebellion all too often characterized that wayward nation (is the church today much different?). Despite Israel's numerous provocations, God did not destroy them (Num. 14:12-20). His often manifested his patience by delaying the execution of his promised judgments. In Noah's day, God waited 120 years after decreeing that the flood would come; but when the time came, he did not spare any outside of Noah and his family.

When the time does come for God to execute his judgments, the Scriptures even show that there is a degree of unwillingness in the Lord. Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations 3:33, "For He does not afflict

willingly, nor grieve the children of men.” The literal rendering of the Hebrew here reads “*for he does not afflict from his heart.*” Of course, this language is anthropomorphic, but Calvin says that “though he afflicts us with sorrow as he pleases, yet true it is that he delights not in the miseries of men” (Calvin, 5:422). We need to be careful on these finer points of theology. On the one hand, there is no conflict within the will of God. For instance, when God exercises judgment, he does not do so against his will. On the other hand, he does not reveal in his Word that he delights in pouring out judgment. In fact, read alongside Lamentations 3:33, Micah 7:18 displays the grace of God: “He delights in mercy.” Charnock further elaborates that God’s patience is manifested in the fact that when his judgments do come, they are often far less severe than the guilty party deserved (Ezra 9:13, Psa. 78:38). Finally, God often continues to grant mercy even *after* aggravations, which ought to make his patience even more marvelous to us. How remarkable that even after the rebellion in Numbers 13 and the nation’s refusal to enter the Promised Land, the Lord still provided them with daily manna for decades.

### **Why God Exercises So Much Patience**

In this section, Charnock expounds upon six different reasons God maintains his patience toward man. First, he does so to show himself appeasable. “Man’s very existence is a testimony of the goodness of God and his readiness to be reconciled to sinners, or rather receive sinners in reconciliation” (Charnock, 2:501). Second, he is patient in order to wait for repentance (Rom. 2:4). Consider this the next time you sin grievously against God and he does not strike you down on the spot. The time you have, the breaths you are breathing, are given to you so that you might repent. Third, God continues to wait for the propagation of mankind. As mentioned above, there are still people yet unborn to whom we must teach the wondrous work of the Lord (Psa. 102:18). Fourth, for the good and continuance of the church. Under this fourth reason, Charnock observes that if God were to destroy men quickly, from what stock

would unbelievers be converted? Remember that Abraham was an idol worshiper before God called him; Tamar played the harlot; Rahab and Ruth were both foreigners to the covenant; Ahaz was converted later in life and was the father of the great king Hezekiah; Paul (then Saul) sought to destroy the church. God bears long with men with an eye of building up his church. Fifth, he is patient toward the wicked even *within* his church for her sake. Consider Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30. The reason the master told the servants not to dig up the tares was because doing so would uproot the good wheat. Both will grow alongside one another, but all will be sorted out in the end. Finally, God allows men to continue in their wickedness that his justice may be all the more clear (Rom. 2:5). Those who have lived long lives of rebellion in the face of such a God will be all the more unable to answer the sentence pronounced against them in that final day.

### Uses of Patience

In typical Puritan fashion, Charnock concluded this wonderful section with some practical points derived from the Lord's patience. Firstly, it ought to instruct the Christian. He means this primarily as a means of negative instruction—we must refrain from misrepresenting God because of his patience (Psa. 50:21) and continuing, repeating, or grievously sinning under it. Secondly, it is a comfort for the church. God's longsuffering nature is a manifestation of grace to His people, a ground for trust in His promises, and a comfort in infirmities. This is a beautiful trait of our loving heavenly Father, for he waits patiently for the maturity of his children. "The patientest angels would hardly be able to bear with the follies of good men in acts of worship" (Charnock, 2:516). It ought to exhort us to meditate upon his patience, admire it, bless him for it, all while not presuming upon it. Lastly, we ought to imitate it. Bear in mind, that patience is part of the fruit of the Spirit which adorns all those who walk in union with Christ.

Charnock concluded his exposition with the following passage: "As patience is God's perfection, so it is the accomplishment of the

soul: and as his ‘slowness to anger’ argues the greatness of his power over himself, so an unwillingness to revenge is a sign of a power over ourselves which is more noble than to be a monarch over others” (Charnock, 2:524). These words echo what Solomon wrote long ago in Proverbs 16:32, “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” As you reflect upon this precious attribute, I leave you with two things for your consideration. First, you continually give God “opportunities” to show you patience. We are so fast to be angry at others, to criticize or complain, but often so slow to remember how much grace the Lord has shown to us. Second, you owe a debt of patience to others. If God has shown patience to you, surely you are called to do so for others. Remembering this will enable you worship God more fully and love others more faithfully. “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ” (2 Thess. 3:5). ♦

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# Welcome to God's House

Rev. Michael Myers

*“Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Do not be rash with your mouth, and let you're your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few.”*

— Ecclesiastes 5:1-2

Nadab and Abihu did not write Ecclesiastes 5:1-2, but given the chance, they would certainly have added their hearty approval to the words. These infamous brothers were struck down by the consuming, holy presence of God for offering up profane (unauthorized) fire before the Lord. You can read about it in Leviticus 10. As bizarre as it may seem, this text has instructed the Church for millennia about how to think about approaching God's house in worship. If you think we can consign this truth to the dusty annals of the Old Testament, think again. Even though no one (except maybe Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5) in the New Covenant came to an end like Nadab and Abihu, the holy God remains a consuming fire to this day (Heb. 12:29).

Have you ever thought about this when hurrying into church on Sunday, hopefully before the service begins? The Teacher of Ecclesiastes reminds us that we need watch our steps when we come to God's house. We do this by thinking carefully and humbly about the God we have come to meet. By way of the following three questions, I would like to present some basic principles that inform what I believe is a biblical approach to worshipping in God's house: what are we doing in worship; why do we worship; and how should we engage in worship?

The last year has sparked a new kind of worship war in our nation. Is worship essential or non-essential? Is “livestream” a suitable substitute for being in person?<sup>1</sup> Some governors have even

had the audacity to tell their citizens how to worship, one in particular saying “You don’t have to sit in the church pew for God to hear your prayers.”<sup>2</sup> So which is it? What are God’s people actually doing in worship? The Word of God answers this question with a simple but profound phrase: in worship, God’s people *draw near*.

The most devastating consequence of man’s Fall was God’s driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden and away from his holy, life-giving presence (Gen. 3:23-24, cf Psalm 16:11). Mankind has been wandering in spiritual exile ever since. But bless God! He has provided a way for the redeemed to draw near to him through the blood of Christ in corporate worship on the Lord’s Day! In these times he uniquely provides refreshment for thirsty souls (Psa. 36:8), strength for weary pilgrims (Psa. 84:7), and most notably a foretaste of heavenly glory (Heb. 12:22-24). It is ultimately irrelevant whether they draw near together in catacombs or cathedrals, shabby buildings or breath-taking structures, fields or prisons. The physical structure is secondary, but drawing near together in physical proximity is absolutely necessary.

The Psalms pulse with desire to draw near to God. Those who dwell *in* his house are blessed (Psa. 84:4), for they find their deepest desires satisfied (Psa. 27:4). No earthly privilege is worth comparing to approaching this God (Psa. 65:4), and no spiritual judgment is more fearful than being forced to depart from him (Psa. 139:19, cf. Matt. 25:41). In fact, we can identify the fullness of New Covenant blessing by the bold and bloodless entry the Father grants to believers through his Son (Heb. 10:19-22, cf. Eph. 2:18). Many would count you blessed if you were given an invitation to dine with a governor, or enjoy a private tour of a professional sports facility, or given backstage passes at a great concert; how much greater is the blessing to *draw near* Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day to the Triune God of glory!

Having drawn near to God, what should we do? Refer back to our words from Ecclesiastes: Solomon teaches us clearly that in God’s house, we draw near to *hear*. This is one of the great purposes of God’s worship. The great 17th century English preacher Jeremiah

Burroughs wrote that *to hear* God's Word is to worship Him in two essential ways. First, those who draw near to hear His Word are declaring their dependence upon him for knowing his mind and the way to eternal life. Sinful man would have never discovered these truths unless God revealed them in his Word and by his Spirit (Psa. 14:2-3; 1 Cor. 2:14-16). Second, those who draw near to hear must wait for God to bless the Word according to his promise. To hear in this way first requires listening with both the ear and the heart. It also requires listening with patient faith, humbly expecting Him to give us precisely what we need for our growth in spiritual strength and maturity (Burroughs, 147).

This may seem counterintuitive or boring for many in our self-centered age, where self-expression has become the new form of revelation. Yet for those who know the depth of their own need and the glory of their God, it is nothing short of exhilarating. People will pay good money to hear what may happen next in the economy, to get the inside scoop for sports' commentary, or to stay connected with the latest device to hit the market. What comparison do these fading things have with the Words of eternal life, which flow freely and graciously from the mouth of Jesus Christ (John 6:68; Psa. 45:2)? None at all. This is why faithful Reformed churches throughout history have placed the sound preaching of God's Word as central in worship. It is not to exalt the preacher. Far from it: it is to exalt the One who works through preaching powerfully for his glory (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

Why do you worship? Do you go to God's house for the music? For the fellowship? Do you go to direct your mind away from the burdens of the world? There is a blessed place for these things, but they are all secondary. When you come to God's house, "Take heed how you hear" (Luke 8:18). How do you do this? In his commentary on this passage, J.C. Ryle gives us three directions. First, hear with faith, believing that God's Word is absolutely and undeniably true. Remember that faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Second, hear with prayer. Ryle wrote, "Here lies the grand defect of the hearing of many. They ask no blessing, and so they have none. The sermon passes through their minds like water

through a leaky vessel, and leaves nothing behind” (Ryle, 258). Finally, listen with reverence. The God of glory looks with unique regard upon those humble souls who tremble at his Word (Isa. 66:1-2). This brings us to our final principle.

We have considered what we are doing in worship (drawing near) and why we worship (to hear). How then should we engage in worship? The great motivator for avoiding the sacrifice of fools and speaking rashly with our mouths is remembering that “God is in heaven, and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few.” This, dear reader, describes the fear of God. Of course, the word *fear* is not in our text above, but the concept is clearly present here and throughout Ecclesiastes (5:7, 8:12-13, 12:13). Since many are confused with this term, I would like to discuss briefly what godly fear is and why this ought to fill our worship.

Godly fear is not a slavish terror of God. That kind of fear fills the hearts of His enemies (Exod. 15:16, cf. 1 John 4:18) but not his children (Rom. 8:15). “A true, godly fear, however, consists of two basic components: love for God’s righteousness and reverence for his majesty” (Calvin, 9). God’s people love his righteousness revealed in his Law. The Gospel frees us to do so, since Jesus Christ silenced the condemning thunders of the Law through his death and raised us to newness of life through his resurrection. In union with him, Christians learn to present themselves to God as being alive from the dead, and their members as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:13). The righteousness which they once hated, they now love, because they recognize by grace it is the very character of their Heavenly Father. The second component is reverence for His majesty. God-fearers will think the highest thoughts of God’s glory, assign the greatest weight to His Words, and affix the highest value upon his expressions of kindness to them.

These two currents draw the Christian heart into a true offering up of our worship to the God of heaven. How could it be otherwise? Without the fear of God, worship would become just another optional gathering, rather than the blessed obligation for the believer each week (Heb. 10:25). A careless, cavalier approach to

worship not only robs the worshipper of the blessings he could have otherwise enjoyed, but it dishonors God tremendously. The Lord makes it clear that he does not look first upon appearances, nor the outward actions, but rather the heart. Remember what He says in Isaiah 66:1-2, “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool...But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.” This is the approach to worship that God loves! “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” (Deut. 5:29).

As the next day of worship approaches and you head to God’s house, I urge you to consider: what are you doing? Are you seeking to draw near to the God of all glory, who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16)? Why are you worshipping? Is it to express yourself or is it to fall on your face before this God, crying out, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9)? Consider the state of your heart. Is it full of the fear of God or the cares of this world? Come with a heart redeemed by the blood of Christ and sanctified by the Spirit of grace, longing to fellowship with the Father of love. This is what life and worship is like in God’s house. ♦

#### NOTES

1. <https://www.theaquilareport.com/how-to-livestream-your-communion-service/>
2. <https://dailycaller.com/2020/12/11/northam-virginia-church-worship-god-stay-home/>

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# Cultivating Communion with God

*Rev. Lowell Ivey*

Communion with God is the birthright of every heir of the redemption purchased by Christ. There is no greater blessing that creatures made in the image of God can possess or conceive of than communion with God. This was the very first lesson that God taught man in the day that he was created. In the beginning, God created man with the capacity to glorify and enjoy him—to commune with him in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Gen. 1:26-27). God further revealed his purpose for man by setting apart a *day* for communion (2:1-3), a place for communion (2:4-17), and a *relationship* in which to enjoy communion with him (2:18-25). The whole Bible is the story of how that wonderful communion Adam and Eve had with God in the Garden of Eden was lost through sin, but how God himself has graciously brought us into an even better and more blessed communion with him in Christ.

Our *Westminster Shorter Catechism* teaches that “all mankind, by their fall in Adam, lost communion with God” (WSC 19). By eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam cut himself (and all those descending from him in the ordinary way of procreation) off from the Tree of Life. The way back into the Garden of Eden was shut (Gen. 3:24). This could have been the end of the Bible. However, the fall of man was not the end of man’s communion with God. Instead, even as God was pronouncing his curse upon all creation because of man’s sin, he was revealing his plan to bring sinners into an even better communion than Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall. That plan, first announced in the Protoevangelion (Gen. 3:15), was that the Seed of the woman, though his heel would be bruised, would nevertheless crush the head of the serpent. Here, in a single verse of God’s Word, is the whole message of the gospel.

The gospel, at its heart, is the story, contained in whole counsel of God’s Word, both in the Old and New Testaments, that God’s great purpose in history is to bring man back into communion with

himself through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. Cornelis Venema puts it well when he writes:

Before and underneath the grand symphony recounted in Scripture, lies God's surprising, undeserved, and invincible purpose to initiate and ultimately consummate a relationship of mutual love and commitment between Himself and those who belong to Him through the work of His Son Jesus Christ. At every note, the Scriptures represent the Triune God as the sovereign Lord of history, who graciously condescends to enjoy fellowship with us. Despite the disruption and loss of the original fellowship with God that the human race once enjoyed in Adam before the fall into sin, God intends to grant the fullness of unbreakable fellowship with His people through the work of the 'last' Adam, Jesus Christ (Venema, n.p.).

It is through the work of Christ as our Redeemer that all the blessings of salvation have been purchased for us and are now being applied to us by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-11). That work, though accomplished by Christ, is really the work of all three Persons of the Trinity. It is a work rooted in the eternal decree of God the Father to set his predestinating love upon his children. It is a work carried out in time and space by Christ. And it is a work that continues as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in our effectual calling, justifying, adopting, sanctifying, and eventually glorifying us in order to bring us step by gracious step into closer communion with our God. The good news of the Gospel is that he has purchased communion with God for us and us for communion with God!

Just what is this communion that Christ has purchased for us? Communion with God is receiving, delighting in, and benefiting from all that can be enjoyed of God as he communicates himself to us through our union with Jesus Christ, and as we respond to him in faith, thanksgiving, and love. In other words, communion with God is God communicating himself to us.<sup>1</sup> As God communicates himself to us by his Son, we commune with one another in holiness, fellowship, truth, and love. But if communion with God is God's communication of himself to us through his Son, how are we brought into this communion? The answer is through our union with Jesus Christ. Union with Christ is the bond of life and love between

us and God. When we are united to Christ, by the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are called, irresistibly drawn, savingly transformed, and enfolded into the intensity and immensity and wonder and drama of the love that flows eternally between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in holy communion of the Persons in the blessed Trinity. To be united to Christ is to be made a partaker of the very life of God, and thus to be made spiritually fruitful (John 15:1-8).

But the wonder of communion with God is that it brings us into fellowship with the God who has revealed himself as Triune. This is why John Owen was fond of saying that the glory of the revelation we have as Christians in the New Covenant is that we enjoy distinct communion with all three Persons of the Godhead. We not only know Jesus as Lord, but we know God as our Father. This is why Jesus teaches his disciples in the Lord's Prayer to address God as "Our Father." The incarnation, sinless life, glorious ministry, atoning death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus are, simply put, the revelation in our humanity of the everlasting and inexhaustible love of God the Father. The Father reveals his love not only in the work of His Son, but also in the work of the Spirit. If Jesus is the incarnation of the Father's love, the Spirit is the Applier of God's love. This is why, according to Owen, our communion with God consists in large measure of becoming acquainted with our privileges as God's children:

How few of the saints are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love. With what anxious, doubtful thoughts do they look upon Him! What fears, what questionings are there, of His good-will and kindness! At the best, many think there is no sweetness at all in Him towards us, but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus. It is true, that alone is the way of communication; but the free fountain and spring of all is in the bosom of the Father (Owen, 32).

What is this love of the Father that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ? It is a love that sought us and purchased all the blessings of our redemption when we were yet in our sins (Rom. 5:8). It is a love that will never let go of us, that nothing can separate us

from (Rom. 8:38). It is a love that is from before the beginning (John 1:1-3). It is a love that came to us “in the fullness of time” in our humanity, in our weakness, in our need, and in our mortality to redeem us and to make us the children of God (Gal. 4:4-5). It is a love that satisfied the requirements of the law for us, that endured the agony and the shame of the cross (Rom. 8:4; Heb. 12:2). It is a love that did not leave Jesus in the grave but raised him up on the third day for our justification (Rom. 4:25). But even more than that—it is a love that abides in us and comforts us with the comfort and assurance that we are the children of God, by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:15-16).

How then, do you and I cultivate this communion with God? First, cultivate communion with God by abiding in Christ and in his Word through your union with him as the one Mediator between God and men. Apart from him we can do nothing, our lives will be spiritually unfruitful (Jn. 15:5). Second, cultivate communion with God by maintaining the communion of the saints. We tend to think first of our private communion with God as the mountaintop of the Christian life. The truth is that communion with God is communion with God in the body of Christ, the church, the fellowship of the saints. There, and only there, will you experience communion with God in all its fullness, and in all its fruitfulness. To be in communion with God means to be in communion with one another (1 John 1:7). Finally, cultivate communion with God by “making diligent use of the means of grace.” The means of grace are all those simple, ordinary ways that God has given us to know and grow and enjoy him. The most important of these are the Scriptures, public worship, and prayer. Commune with God by saturating your heart and life with his Word. Commune with God by resting yourself in him on the Lord’s Day. And commune with God by devoting yourself to him in private adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and praise.

May you know the sweetness of communion with God as you grow in your apprehension of the greatness of the Father’s love for you in Christ, by the comfort and assurance of the Spirit’s witness in your heart that you are a child of God. ♦

## NOTES

1. I am borrowing this definition, with some slight modification, from John Owen, *Of Communion with God*.

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# Catechism Corner

*“Hold fast to the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”*

— 2 Timothy 1:13



*The “Catechism Corner” is a small section containing a short commentary on a portion of the Westminster Standards or some other such work.*

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## **Thomas Boston on God’s Glory and His Promises**

The glory and honour of [God’s] name may give us full assurance of his faithfulness in making good his promises. He doth all things for his own glory; and therefore, wherever you find a promise, the honour of God is given as security for the performance of it. Hence his people plead this as a mighty argument to work for them. So Joshua, chap. 7:9. ‘What wilt thou do unto thy great name?’ *q. d.* ‘O Lord, thy honour is a thousand times more valuable than our lives. It is of little importance what become of us. But, O! it is of infinite importance that the glory of thy name be secured, and thy faithfulness kept pure and unspotted in the world.’ We find Moses pleading to the same purpose, Exod. 32:11, 12. ‘Lord why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt, with great power, and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people;’ *q. d.* ‘It will be sad enough for the hands of the Egyptians to fall upon thy people; but infinitely worse for the tongues of the Egyptians to fall upon thy name.’ In a word, the glory of all God’s attributes is engaged for the performance of his promises, especially his faithfulness and power. Now, these are strong pillars upon which God’s truth and faithfulness in keeping

promise is built. He can as soon cease to be omniscient, unchangeable, omnipotent, infinitely just and holy, as he can cease to be true and faithful. He can as soon divest himself of his glory, and draw an eternal veil over all the shining perfections and excellencies of his nature, as cease to be faithful and true. ♦

Thomas Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion (The Doctrines of the Christian Religion; Comprising a Complete Body of Divinity)*, ed. Samuel McMillan, vol. 1, 12 vols., *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980), 128-129.

# Book Reviews

“Of making many books there is no end.”  
— Ecclesiastes 12:12



**Baucham, Voddie. *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe*. Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021.**

*Fault Lines* is a winsome and withering analysis and refutation of Critical Theory and its related ideologies—particularly, but not exclusively, critical race theory, intersectionality, and antiracism. Voddie T. Baucham draws from lessons he learned from his own upbringing and experience (chs. 1-2) and from decades of study of the Scriptures and sociology. In so doing, he clearly demonstrates that these godless and anti-biblical categories of thought are worldviews, not merely analytical tools, that have pervaded the social air that we breathe every day.

Chapter three discusses the requirement all image bearers have before God to seek true justice and the lamentable mischaracterizations of justice that plague the current “cultural moment” (42). Through careful documentation and measured explanation, Baucham explains the need for truth and the widespread danger of false narratives. While always upholding and affirming the worth and dignity of human life, Baucham reviews the cases of well-known officer involved killings, including Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, and George Floyd. His goal in doing so is neither to condemn nor justify the police; rather, he highlights the vast disparities (and thus *injustice*) in the narratives woven about these names, while other names remain largely unknown for lack of publicity (47). In the following chapters, he identifies the underlying worldview assumptions driving the widespread acceptance and propagation of dangerous false narratives (63).

The reader will find the theological backbone of this book in chapters 4-6. In Machen-esque fashion, Rev. Baucham outlines how the 'Cult of Antiracism' is a new religion, entirely distinct from biblical Christianity. According to the author, "this new body of divinity" includes its own erroneous versions of original sin, law, gospel, martyrs, means of atonement, new birth (wokeness), liturgy, canon, theologians, and catechism (67). He enlarges upon and carefully documents all these topics, citing widely from proponents and adherents of this new religion. Baucham also introduces a term unique to him, *Ethnic Gnosticism*, providing the following definition: "the idea that people have special knowledge based solely on their ethnicity" (92). This is similar to the notion of standpoint epistemology, which holds to the unbiblical idea that one's experience of oppression becomes the gateway to possessing special knowledge not available to more "privileged" persons.

In the remainder of this excellent work, Baucham continues to utilize the imagery of a fault line and the earthquakes that occur near them. In so doing, he explains the damage that these fundamentally un-Christian ideologies have caused and will continue to cause if Christians continue to accept them. His discussion of abortion in chapter 9 and critique of the Black Lives Matter in chapter 10 are exceedingly helpful. The final chapter is one of the most powerful, Christ-exalting, truth proclaiming statements this reviewer has read related to these serious matters. The right way to deal with racial enmity—the existence of which none can deny—is through the gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ. The framework through which Christians need to interpret even the most heinous actions of the past is the unsearchable providence of God (Acts 2:22-24). Through forgiveness, love, biblical repentance, and pursuit of true justice, the Christian Church can lead the way in dealing with the heart of these issues, if she stands fast.

Voddie Baucham's *Fault Lines* is full of solid principle, godly directions for practice, and desperately needed polemics. Concerning the latter, the reader will perhaps be surprised at just how many names Rev. Baucham names, and whose names they are. But this is legitimate. While naming names, he does not call names.

Rather, he sets their words forth clearly, in many cases affirms his love for those within the Church with whom he disagrees, but then lets the weight of truth do its vital work. No Christian, and no American, can afford to remain unschooled concerning these demonic ideologies that the author address in his book (230). It is in fact one of the most serious and far-reaching issues of our day.

During a conference address on January 3, 2019, in which he discussed cultural Marxism, Voddie Baucham read from 1 Chronicles 12. There we are told that among those coming to pledge their fealty to King David were “sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chron. 12:32). I thank God that he has called and equipped Rev. Baucham with unique understanding of our times and insightful knowledge about what Christ’s new Israel needs to do in the face of widespread deceit, racial tensions, and looming divisions. I bless God for Baucham’s courageous willingness in writing this timely and excellent book and warmly commend it to all.

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