

The
MYSTERY
of the
TRINITY

*A Trinitarian Approach
to the Attributes of God*

VERN S. POYTHRESS

“The Mystery of the Trinity is unique among treatments of the doctrine of God because of the way that Vern Poythress approaches God’s attributes through the Trinity, Christ’s resurrection, and philosophical analysis of other theological approaches. Poythress does not have all the answers to the controversy between classic Christian orthodoxy and modern modifications of the view of God (and does not claim to), but his book will certainly stir up edifying reflection and conversation, and he is a model of theological contemplation and gentleness.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“The divine attributes are an understudied and confused area of modern systematic theology. Dr. Poythress guides us through them and helps us to see how they relate to one another and to us as believers. He takes the Trinity as his point of departure and demonstrates how our relationship with, and experience of, the three persons in God deepens our understanding of his nature and of its relevance to us. A great achievement.”

—**Gerald Bray**, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“At one level, this book is a valiant and thought-provoking attempt to approach the attributes of God through the doctrine of the Trinity. Other theologians have placed the Trinity at the center of their thought; this work is epistemologically braver and more comprehensive than that. But at another level, Poythress is calling for a revolutionary change in how we engage in theological reflection. While broadly endorsing the classical doctrine of God, he is suspicious of our reliance on well-defined technical terms that are required to do our work for us. He wants us to abandon our implicit reliance on Aristotelian metaphysics in favor of the shaping power of the mystery of the Trinity. Above all, he wants us to turn aside from our unquestioning reliance on ‘tight, abstract logic’ as our primary resource for ‘affirming and maintaining’ the orthodox doctrine of God. In the hands of a lesser thinker, this appeal could pave the way toward subjectivism and uncontrolled, speculative dialectics; in the hands of Poythress, this becomes an appeal to become more robustly biblical, not less. Readers may preserve their quibbles here and there, but this book is truly

transforming—a capstone to all that Vern Poythress has taught us over the last two or three decades. Read it slowly and carefully.”

—**D. A. Carson**, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The study of God should be the central preoccupation of our lives. Thus, how it is conducted is all-important. The present work is a monumental achievement. It is not certain that anyone else could have put together such marvelous material in quite the same way as Vern Poythress. He unites doctrine with praise, content with personal knowledge, theory with pastoral practicality. Above all, the reflections are thoroughly and richly scriptural. Even when examining language and meaning, Poythress’s wheelhouse, we are steeped in divine revelation and drawn into worship. While pride of place rightly goes to the consideration of God’s nature, the author is not afraid to explore the contributions and pitfalls found in some of the established theologians. When he is critical, he is nevertheless charitable. Nor does he shy away from tackling some of the besetting issues facing the church, such as God’s immutability and his covenant relation to the creature. I believe that if given the right kind of regard, this book will be life-changing.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“The history of theology has been full of controversy over some of the most important teachings of the faith, such as the person of Christ, his atonement, our justification, and the Lord’s return. But for most of this history, at least since the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of God has been an area of agreement among Christians of all traditions. Different schools of thought have differed in detail, but there has been a consensus. On this matter, polemics have been muted. Recently, however, that unanimity has been shattered, first by the ‘open theist’ movement, and then by various philosophical attempts to deal with problems in the traditional consensus: Why does Scripture speak of God’s ‘repenting’? How can God act in history when he is unchangeable? How can God be ‘simple’ when the church confesses him in three persons? The intellectual and spiritual quality of these debates has

been largely disappointing, and the exegetical proposals unpersuasive. Theological factions have developed around various ideas, challenging the orthodoxy of one another. But now Vern Poythress has written a book that could be a big step forward for us, even a way back to unity. *The Mystery of the Trinity* presents the content and spirit of the authentic biblical teaching. The author presents what the Bible says: no more and no less, with caution and reverence. Here we learn what the Bible says about God. We learn also the method and attitudes in which we should ask our questions. I enthusiastically recommend *The Mystery of the Trinity* as by far the best account of these issues. And it is a book that will turn your heart from questioning to adoration.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“It has been said, rightly, that every theological assertion is surrounded with mystery. That holds true especially for the attributes of God—both for what Scripture itself teaches infallibly and, all the more, for our own fallible and limited understanding of that teaching. The challenge for our speaking about who God is—as here decidedly ‘we see in a mirror dimly’—is to speak of the sublimely majestic mysteries involved in a biblically bounded way—a way that does not go beyond yet is also intent on honoring fully what Scripture enables and entitles us to say. In this volume, Dr. Poythress meets this challenge in an exemplary and most helpful way. I commend it for its sound in-depth instruction but also, importantly, for its tone—edifying throughout and with a view to current controversies, appropriately and constructively balanced and irenic.”

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic
Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I confess that I am fairly new to the Poythress household (expansive as it is), and I find *The Mystery of the Trinity* quite outstanding. The work is premised on (and argues throughout) the idea that the Holy Trinity is the ontological center and absolute to which all revelation testifies. What God does in creation reflects what Father, Son, and Spirit are in eternity. Poythress charts a course between two fatal whirlpools in Christian theology—the first that of philosophically defined

transcendence, the second that of overly literalistic immanence. The author's particular concern is that classical Christian theism has too often pushed beyond biblical testimony to reinterpret the divine attributes in Aristotelian or other alien categories. Rather, Poythress humbly and incisively invites us to reappraise the mystery of the triune God and how this mystery infuses every aspect of Christian thought and life. What an engaging, supremely edifying read."

—**J. Scott Horrell**, Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas
Theological Seminary

"This is a stimulating and fascinating book. While I have some reservations about his discussion of Aquinas and its resulting implications, nevertheless Poythress raises important questions that need addressing and offers many incisive and challenging insights."

—**Robert Letham**, Professor of Systematic and Historical
Theology, Union School of Theology

"This is a work of formidable scholarship, allied to a remarkable simplicity of language and humble submission to the guidance of Scripture. It never allows us to forget that we can know God only 'in part,' that the discussion of his attributes must always stay close to the doctrine of the Trinity, and that the supreme revelation of God in action is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While offering new light on the traditional concepts of classical theism, it also offers sure-footed guidance through the mazes of innovation, good and bad. Unfailingly reverent, it is a fine example of the principle that a solid work of theology can often be the best sort of devotional literature. Who should read it? Any Christian who can read, whether novice or genius."

—**Donald Macleod**, Edinburgh Theological Seminary

"My experience in Vern Poythress's hermeneutics course at the start of my time in seminary was life-shaping—I have never read or taught the Bible quite the same way since. With the publication of his new book *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Dr. Poythress applies his deep knowledge of Scripture, his well-informed knowledge of historical theology, and his brilliant mind to some of the most difficult controversies in the theology of the divine attributes. By grounding his approach in

what the Bible tells us about intra-Trinitarian relationships within the Godhead, he brings fresh understanding to ancient mysteries and contemporary issues in our knowledge of God.”

—**Philip Graham Ryken**, President, Wheaton College

“We need a fresh vision of God as he has revealed himself—perfect in his transcendent love and intimate relationality. Theological terms are needed to shape our vision of God aright. All too often, books about these important concepts—*simplicity* in particular—are overly complex or fail to take due account of God’s Trinitarian nature. This volume is of great value because of its accessibility and sensitivity to God’s revelation of himself as Trinity. I encourage you to read it and expand your vision of God.”

—**Peter Sanlon**, Rector, Emmanuel Anglican Church, Tunbridge Wells, UK

“In this unique study, Vern Poythress considers the person and attributes of the triune God—who he is, how he communicates, and how we might communicate about God more clearly. Professor Poythress offers a book that is at once thoughtful, pastoral, and meticulously exegetical. There is no topic more important than the doctrine of God. Those who want to know him better will be richly rewarded by reading this book.”

—**Chad Van Dixhoorn**, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary; Director, Craig Center for the Study of the Westminster Standards

“Christian theologians *must* speak in personal terms of the God who created us in his image. Christian theologians *must not* speak in worldly terms of the God who created and is over the world. Beginning with this oldest of all theological tensions, Poythress sets forth a middle, more biblical way between classical theism and views that introduce change or temporality into God. The emphasis on Jesus Christ as the mediation of divine transcendence and immanence is particularly welcome.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The doctrine of the attributes of God constitutes one of the most important, albeit difficult, topics of Christian theology. In contemporary theology, considerable debate has focused on the compatibility between classical theism’s view of God’s attributes and the biblical revelation of the triune God who reveals himself in creation and redemption. Poythress’s study aims to address this contemporary debate by offering what he calls an ‘enhancement,’ not a mere ‘reiteration,’ of classical theism. On the one hand, he offers a defense of several features of classical theism in the face of unbiblical alternatives such as open theism. On the other hand, he expresses a willingness to modify features of classical theism that fail to account for the significance of God’s Trinitarian being and life, especially as these are revealed in God’s actions toward his creatures. Throughout his study, Poythress emphasizes the importance of the Trinity for our formulation of God’s attributes, including the way in which these attributes are reflected in the respective works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For readers looking for a treatment of God’s attributes that is remarkably clear, biblically grounded, and historically informed—this is the book for you.”

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President, Professor of Doctrinal Studies,
Mid-America Reformed Seminary

“It is a delight to see Vern Poythress tackle the central doctrine of the divine attributes. He expertly and clearly leads the reader through the perplexities of the doctrine, deftly identifying the underlying principles and rules of speech, biblical foundations, and philosophical difficulties. Poythress balances a classical approach, which anchors the attributes in the divine essence, with a personalist framing of the attributes in the light of the Trinity.”

—**Adonis Vidu**, Professor of Theology, Gordon-Conwell
Theological Seminary

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To my wife, Diane

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Foreword

ANYONE GLANCING AT the titles of the books that Vern Sheridan Poythress has written is bound to be impressed by the sheer variety of topics—from language to hermeneutics, from the reliability of Scripture to its relationship to science, from the book of Revelation to the doctrine of the Trinity (and much else). One might be forgiven for thinking that the good professor is simply a polymath with a perpetually inquiring mind interested in a wide variety of subjects. Dr. Poythress is indeed a polymath, but in fact the diverse topics on which he has written belong to a single tapestry with one great underlying theme. And this comes into sharp focus in this magnum opus, for it is the theme of all themes—God himself.

In *The Mystery of the Trinity*, we find ourselves climbing theology's Mount Everest. The ascent is exhilarating, but it can also be daunting. Such are the intellectual challenges that it is easy to lose one's footing—and many have. Dr. Poythress does not pretend that the way is easy; but in these pages he carefully leads us in the ascent step by step, sometimes indeed with almost baby steps. That he can do this is an indication of the quality of his intellect; that he wants to do it for as many readers as will climb with him as far as they can is an expression of that intellect's pastoral instinct.

All of Vern Poythress's work is marked by a concern to penetrate to the inner logic of things. He is, after all, mathematician turned theologian. Valedictorian in his class at California Institute of Technology (having graduated at breakneck speed), he earned his PhD in

mathematics from Harvard and then taught briefly before shifting gears from the logic sought by the mathematician to the inner logic and coherence expressed in God, Trinity, Bible, and gospel.

To this task he has brought a mind well disciplined by his earlier calling—patiently working through each logical stage in his exposition. But now there is the added incentive—not only the aspiration to glorify God (for surely mathematicians may also do that!), but also the desire to serve the church of Christ directly by helping us to clarify our thinking and bring it into conformity with all that God has revealed.

No doubt in the ascent of the theological mountain some readers may feel that they are running out of oxygen and reaching the limit of their ability to keep climbing. Even so, they will have gained much and probably been helped to climb higher than they have ever done before. Meanwhile, seasoned theological mountaineers will find the patient and careful reasoning here to be of significant value in helping them find a safe path through some of the deepest questions in the theological encyclopedia. So there is help and encouragement here for us all.

I for one am grateful that now, in *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Dr. Poythress has turned his attention directly to issues on the doctrine of God. Among the book's virtues, several are perhaps worth highlighting by way of introduction.

First and foremost, the exposition is anchored in biblical theology. Everything is drawn back into this center and read through Scripture's carefully crafted spectacle lenses.

Second, Dr. Poythress is careful to safeguard the doctrine of God from a false subordination to any alien philosophy. While by no means indifferent to serious intellectual exploration, or the legitimacy of transposing biblical teaching into categories that are not specifically employed in Scripture, he recognizes the native tendency of non-Christian thinking to begin with man, rather than with God, to make God in man's image, and therefore never attain to the true knowledge of God himself. This stands in sharp contrast to a truly Christian way of thinking that recognizes God as the archetype, the original, and man as the ectype, the miniature image, which alone can justify our use of terrestrial categories and language to speak of God.

Third, Dr. Poythress recognizes that while we can truly come to know God, our conceptual powers can never fully comprehend him,

nor can our vocabulary close down, as it were, over him as though we could understand him exhaustively; *finitum non capax infiniti*. True, the use of terrestrial language to speak of the celestial Lord is theologically justifiable, but when we speak of him, we realize that our words must be allowed to open out into God himself and be redefined by his own infinite being. We thus may come to speak of him and to know him while recognizing that we never know him as he knows himself. Our knowledge of him is, and indeed always will be, creaturely.

Then, fourth, these pages, marked as they are by intellectual rigor, also display an intellectual humility. We usually think of humility as a moral quality, but at root it is a matter of having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Humility, “true lowliness of heart” (as Bianco da Siena put it), affects our epistemology as well as our lifestyle. This helps explain why the atmosphere in these pages is intellectually rigorous but also pastorally irenic. That is true of the way that Dr. Poythress respectfully handles (and at times disagrees with) the views of great figures in the Christian church (Augustine, Aquinas, Charnock, Owen, and Turretin all pass before our eyes in these pages). It also marks his approach to issues debated in our own day. And because he is concerned for the church’s welfare, we readers should allow him, physicianlike, to poke and probe our own “body of divinity” to expose any weakness or even sickness with a view to the recovery of health.

Dr. Poythress’s books get longer and longer! This one is no exception. It is indeed a *magnum opus*. But then, it is written about the greatest subject of all. And if it is true that, if all Jesus did were to be written down, the whole world could not contain the books (John 21:25), then even the longest work of theology will still leave room for further growth in the knowledge of God. So *The Mystery of the Trinity* does not pretend to be the last word, but it does contain many words that will encourage all fellow climbers of theology’s Everest to continue toward the summit.

Here, then, is a work to challenge us to think more clearly about God—and a means by which we may know him, love him, trust him, and serve him more fully and indeed even to “rejoice in God” himself (Rom. 5:11). For this, I have no doubt, is its author’s chief desire. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Sinclair B. Ferguson

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Introduction:

God's Attributes and the Trinity

WE ARE SEEKING in this book to deepen our knowledge of God in his majesty. Knowing God involves deep challenges because God is infinite; it is impossible for human beings to understand him completely.

Some Challenges

We will focus on some challenges concerning God's attributes. All the challenges have to do in some way with God's relation to the world and things in the world. Here are a number of the challenges:

(1) How can God be independent and yet have relations to the world and things in the world? (See fig. i.1.)

This difficulty is especially acute in Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the names of God:

Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is *no real relation to creatures*, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.¹

1. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.166, [1a] pt. I, Q. 13, art. 7, "I

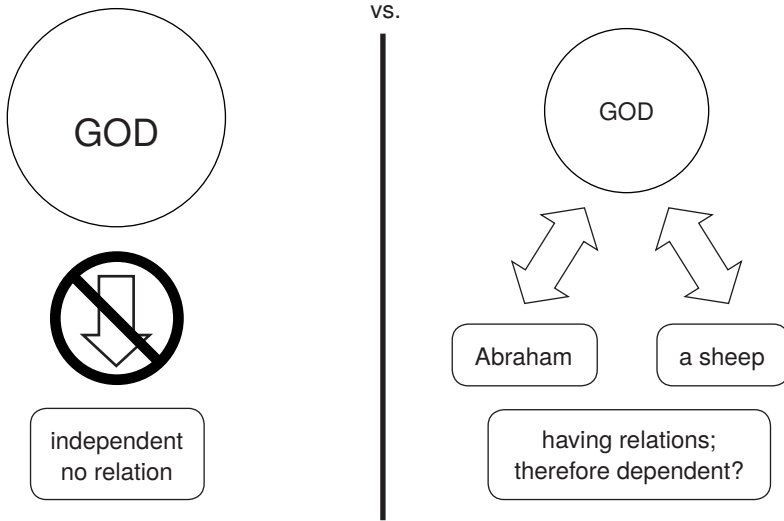


Fig. i.1. God's Independence versus Having Relations

If God's relation to the world has difficulties, it produces difficulties concerning other issues that touch on that relation.

(2) How can God be immutable (not able to change) and act toward the world?

Acting toward the world may seem to imply a change in God as he acts. So how are God's actions—actions such as speaking and ruling the world—consistent with his immutability?

(3) How can God be eternal and act in a differentiated way at different points in time?

God sends each of the Egyptian plagues at a distinct point in time. Moreover, God is angry with some people at some times and not with those same people at other times. One crucial example is

answer.⁷ Another English translation is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The latter translation supplies parallel columns in Latin and English, and much supplemental material. The 1920 translation is also found in its 1947 edition online, with parallel columns in Latin and English: <https://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-index>, accessed March 16, 2020. All quotations are from the 1920 edition, unless otherwise noted, because on the average it is more literal. In footnotes, for the benefit of nonspecialists, we have decided to also provide physical volume and page numbers from the 1920 English translation. All citations refer to part 1 (1a in standard notation).

that God had wrath toward us before we were in Christ, and now is gracious toward us and pleased with us for the sake of Christ. Different descriptions appropriately describe God at different times. How can these differentiated acts be consistent with God's being eternal?

(4) How can descriptions that some people see as "unworthy of God" be used by Scripture to describe him? God is angry, regrets, and is grieved (Deut. 4:21; 1 Sam. 15:11; Eph. 4:30).

These descriptions obviously compare God to human beings who have anger, or regret, or are grieved. Hence, they involve in some way relations between descriptions of God and analogous descriptions of human beings.

(5) How can finite man truly know the infinite God?

How can human beings know God when they can never know him completely (comprehensively)?

(6) How can God's attributes be identical with God and also be distinguished from one another?

This question 6 arises because of the doctrine of God's *simplicity*. The word *simplicity* here has a special, technical meaning. It means that God is not composed of parts. According to some interpretations of divine simplicity, simplicity implies that all of God's attributes are identical to him. Otherwise, each attribute would function like a "part" of God, which might conceivably be detached. If each attribute is identical to God, it seems that the different attributes must also be identical to one another. And then how do we any longer know what they mean?

Addressing the Challenges

We propose to address all six challenges by using the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity contains unfathomable mysteries because God is infinite, and we who are human cannot comprehend him. That is, we cannot understand him completely. So appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity does not dissolve any of the six challenges. It does not result in a transparent answer with no remaining mystery. Nevertheless, it may be useful to see the relation of the six challenges to the Trinity, in order that we may more deeply appreciate the mystery that lies in each one of them.

We will also consider other responses to the six challenges, involving appeal to analogies and multiple perspectives.

Answering the Challenges

Responding to the challenges will take some time. But to indicate the direction that we are going, it may be useful at the beginning to summarize the responses to each of the six challenges in turn.

(1) How can God be independent and yet have relations to the world and things in the world?

The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is one God and also is three persons. The three persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Moreover, each person has relations to the other two. “The Father loves the Son” (John 3:35; 5:20). The Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father (Matt. 11:27). The “Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10).

The relations between persons are the foundation for God’s establishing relations outside himself with created things.

(2) How can God be immutable and act toward the world?

God’s immutability is not a static immobility. God is eternally active, in that the Father loves the Son, in the Spirit, and eternally speaks the eternal Word (John 1:1). This eternal activity includes activity involving (analogically speaking) a relation of an actor to a recipient. This relational activity is the foundation for God’s acts outside himself. God’s activity within himself is a kind of archetype, the original pattern. This pattern is reflected in an ectype, that is, a derivative from the pattern, when he acts toward the world. He creates the world; he sustains it; and he rules over it. In particular, the eternal begetting of the Son is the archetype for the incarnation. The eternal speaking of the Word is the archetype for God’s speaking to create the world: “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3; see Ps. 33:6).

(3) How can God be eternal and act in a differentiated way at different points in time?

God’s eternity is not a mere negativity, according to which he would be isolated from time. Rather, God is eternally active. Moreover, his acts fit within *contexts*. The Father loves the Son in the context of the giving of the Holy Spirit (John 3:34–35). This “context,”

of course, is a permanent, eternal reality. The Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, in the eternal context of the searching activity of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:10).

After God has created the world, his activity toward the world is a reflection of his wisdom in Christ (Col. 2:3). He acts toward the world in a wise way. In his wisdom, he takes into account the contexts in which he acts. He acts in a way that is differentiated according to the context of the world. For example, he punishes those who at the time deserve punishment. He blesses those to whom he is favorable because of Christ (a context).

(4) How can descriptions that some people see as “unworthy of God” be used by Scripture to describe him? God is angry, regrets, and is grieved (Deut. 4:21; 1 Sam. 15:11; Eph. 4:30).

Language of being angry, regretting, and being grieved is analogical² language. It is not language that has precisely the *same* meaning when used for God as it does when used for mankind. God does not regret in the same way that man regrets (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). An analogy is not an identity. The meaning of the term *regret* can vary with context. And in the context of describing God, its meaning must be in harmony with everything else that we know about God from the rest of the Bible.

The foundation for such analogical language lies in the creation of man in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). A considerable amount of language describing human activities can also describe divine activities, by virtue of the analogy established when God created man in his image. In every case, there is no pure identity of meaning, but analogy. The archetype for creating man in the image of God is the divine Son, who is the eternal Image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

(5) How can finite man truly know the infinite God?

Man's knowledge is analogical to God's knowledge, based on the foundation of the image of God. The image of God belongs to two levels, as indicated in point 4 above. The divine Son is the eternal Image of God, and man is the created image.

2. The words *analogous*, *analogical*, and *analogy* in this book have their ordinary meanings; they are not directly related to technical discussions about *analogy of being*.

(6) How can God's attributes be identical with God and also be distinguished from one another?

God is one God. But there are distinctions in God, namely, the distinctions between distinct persons of the Trinity. These distinctions are the foundation for distinctions when God displays himself and his attributes in the world, and when distinct terms are used to designate distinct attributes.

The Plan of Exploration

Because we are confronting mysteries, it is not so easy to fully appreciate the answers right away. We plan to arrive at these answers by a number of gradual steps. The steps include some attention to Aristotle's metaphysics because it is not based on the Trinity and has had an adverse effect on the Christian discussion of the attributes of God.

First, we discuss briefly the resources that we are going to use, and what it means to know God (chaps. 1–2).

Second, we confirm that Scripture teaches that God has certain attributes (chaps. 3–9). We deal with only a few: absoluteness, infinity, omnipresence, eternity, immutability, the knowledge of God, and simplicity. The list could be greatly expanded. We deal with a sample in order to illustrate how people might proceed with other attributes.

Third, we briefly show that the Bible teaches the mystery of the Trinity (chaps. 10–12).

Fourth, we show how God communicates in language. This communication has Trinitarian differentiation (chaps. 13–18).

Fifth, we show some problems in Aristotle's philosophical system (chaps. 19–24). His reasoning does not start with the Trinity. It introduces terms and ways of thinking that are subtly at odds with the Trinity.

Sixth, we show by a short selection of thinkers how Aristotle's system has subtly influenced the history of treatment of the doctrine of God (chaps. 25–34).

Seventh, we show how the doctrine of the Trinity can be used positively to address issues concerning the relation of God to the world (chaps. 35–43).

Eighth, we provide explicitly Trinitarian reflections on a number of attributes of God (chaps. 44–48).

In the appendices, we consider a current controversy over the attributes of God, with suggestions for how people might move forward. We also consider two special issues: the question of knowing the essence of God (app. D) and the question of the meaning of accommodation (app. E).

Key Terms

accommodation³

analogy

angry

archetype

Aristotle

attributes (of God)

context

derivative

differentiated acts

distinction

ectype

essence

eternal

eternal begetting

finite

identity

image of God

immutable

incarnation

independent

infinite

knowing God

mystery

simplicity

Trinity

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the basic questions that arise about God's relation to us and to the world?
2. What are some of the attributes of God that may seem to be in tension with God's acting toward the world and being related to the world?
3. In what way is the distinction between archetype and ectype important?
4. What are the challenges in understanding how human beings can know God?
5. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important in addressing questions about God's relation to the world?

For Further Reading

- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 1, chap. 8.
- Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 6.

PART 1

BEGINNING TO CONSIDER GOD

We discuss the resources we will use and the reality and limitations of our knowledge of God.

1

Resources

WE PLAN TO reach our goal by going to the Bible and seeing what it teaches. The Bible is the infallible Word of God, while other writings are fallible.¹ But under the direction of the Bible, we are also going to try to learn from three strands of thinking in the history of the church. All three strands attempt to base their thinking on what is in the Bible.

The first strand, which we will call *classical Christian theism*, consists in centuries of meditations on the attributes of God, such as his eternity, his power, his knowledge, and his holiness. There is mystery here. In describing God in this book, we use the terms *attributes* and *characteristics* in roughly the same way, in line with the traditional term *perfections*. Omniscience, love, righteousness, omnipotence, and eternity are attributes or perfections of God. We also use the term *character*: God's character includes all his attributes. We do not include among the attributes any and every state of affairs involving God, such as the fact that God appointed David the son of Jesse to succeed Saul as king of Israel. Later on, we will consider the challenge of dealing with complex language about God

1. It would take a long detour to try to defend the divine authority of the Bible in the face of the multitude of objections, philosophical, historical, scientific, sociological, ethical, and religious, not to mention the wider atmospheric resistance subtly but forcefully working in Western cultures. We must be content to refer readers to books that address the nature of the Bible directly: John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), and many others.

that shows who he is partly through describing what he does (such as creating the world).

The second strand is the teaching on the Trinity. We will use this second strand to help enrich our understanding of the first strand. In the process, we will also try to criticize defects in the framework for the doctrine of God that have been carried over from Greek philosophy, primarily Aristotle.

The third strand consists in the development of *biblical theology*, or the appreciation of the history of special revelation, in a way set forth by Geerhardus Vos.² Building on this strand, we use the theme of the resurrection of Christ as a center point in considering the attributes of God.³ (See fig. 1.1.)

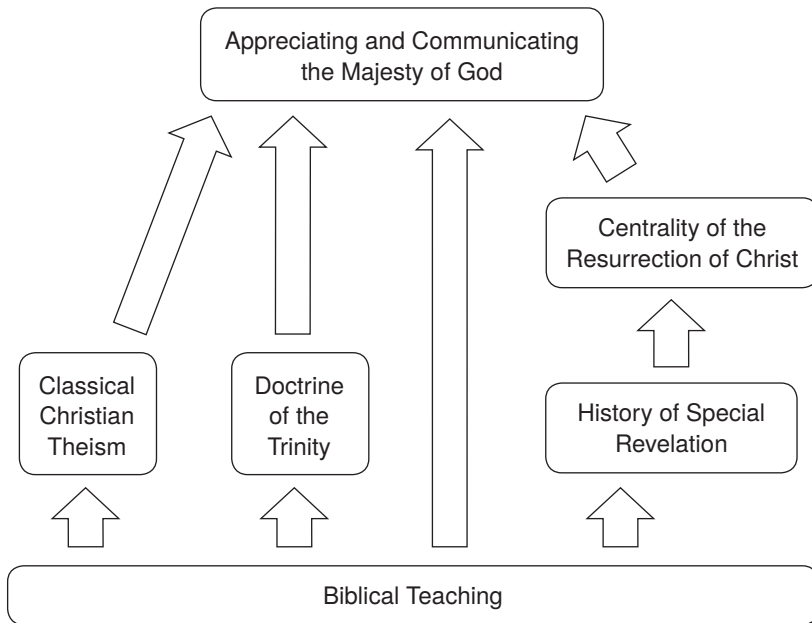


Fig. 1.1. Contributions to Growing in Understanding the Majesty of God

2. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975). Vos had predecessors, but his work sets forth the idea of *biblical theology* in a clearer way.

3. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). Even though our method involves some innovation, we must leave most of the discussion concerning method

Readers do not need to be familiar with any of these three strands in order to profit from this book. But these three strands have helped in producing the book.

In appendices we will also briefly consider a fourth strand, a recent controversy between some adherents of classical Christian theism and some advocates of other forms of expression. The controversy concerns whether our theological reasoning today should reinforce previous generations of classical Christian theistic formulations, or be enhanced, or be changed in directions other than the classical formulations.

How Can God Be Known?

Let us begin with a fundamental question: Can we know God? Can we know him in his majesty, the God who made the world, the God of infinite wisdom? How can we know him?

For thousands of years, God has made himself known to human beings through the things that he has made (Rom. 1:18–23). “For his [God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (v. 20). For thousands of years, in every culture of the world, human beings have suppressed the knowledge that God has given—they have turned to idols. They

to other books: Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999); Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

“exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (v. 23). It is a sorry story.

The History of Redemption

One people was different. In God’s grace, he chose Abram and made a covenant with him and his offspring.⁴ The Jewish people descended from Abram. To this people God gave true knowledge of himself, through his special words and deeds, now recorded in the Old Testament. Not all the Jewish people responded to God’s words and deeds with true faith and understanding, but some did (Num. 12:7–8; Deut. 29:4; 2 Sam. 23:2–7). In the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), in fulfillment of promises that God had made in the Old Testament, God sent Christ into the world to redeem us from the futility of idols. (See fig. 1.2.)

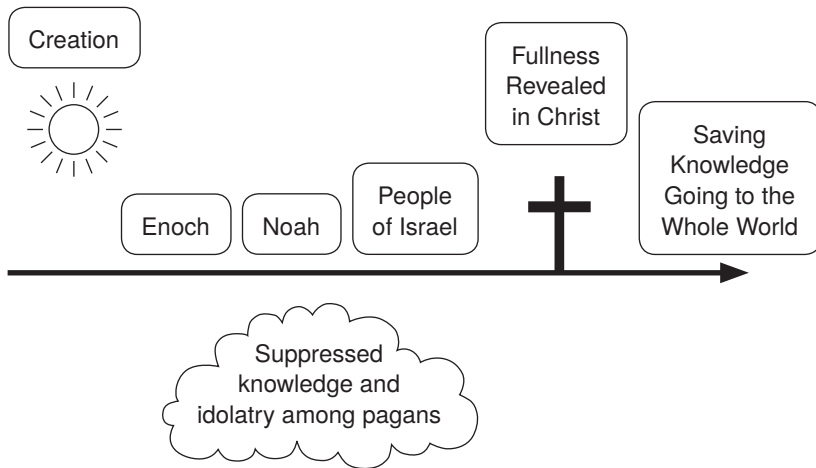


Fig. 1.2. History of Human Knowledge of God

God has sent out to the nations the gospel announcing Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Through the Spirit of God, who unites us to Christ and changes hearts, people are being redeemed

4. Earlier, God had showed favor to Adam and Eve and to Abel, Enoch, and Noah, among others.

from the wrath of God and restored to spiritual fellowship with God. By believing the gospel of Christ and receiving the Word of God in Scripture, they have received the truth and sound knowledge of God:

All things have been handed over to me [Jesus Christ] by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and *anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*. (Matt. 11:27)

And this is eternal life, that they *know you, the only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

The climax of redemption and the climax of revelation of God came when Jesus Christ came into the world (Heb. 1:1–3). But even before that climax, in Old Testament times, people came to know God and to praise him in his majesty:

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt.
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.
Your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting. (Ps. 93:1–2)

In the New Testament, such praise continues:

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Rev. 7:12)

Praising God

The wonder of who God is has been summarized over the centuries in many ways. It is celebrated in poetry such as Psalm 93, just quoted above. David expresses his awe toward God in prayer:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. (1 Chron. 29:10–14)

Classical Christian Theism

The wonder of God is also summarized in what has been called *classical theism*, that is, meditations on God in connection with his characteristics, his attributes. The words *immortal* and *invisible* in 1 Timothy 1:17 designate attributes or characteristics of God. Classical theism discusses these attributes and explains their meaning. Classical theism has been precious to many people because, like David, they have known and experienced who God is in his majesty. The language of classical theism has served in their lives to deepen their knowledge of God and their praise and service to God.

Psalm 93 and 1 Timothy 1:17 are both instances in which God himself is speaking, because the Bible is the Word of God. They are particularly precious and noteworthy because when God speaks, we do not need to remain in doubt about who he is. He is who he says he is.

After the completion of the Bible, other people have imitated the language of Scripture and have meditated on the attributes of God. These later meditations are comprised in what we are calling *classical theism*. In this book, we want to enrich the meaning of classical theism by using truths about the Trinity and by focusing on the resurrection of Christ as the path to knowledge of God.

God, the true God, is one God in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God revealed himself progressively through the course of the Old Testament. He was always the Trinitarian God.

The Old Testament already contains some signs of a differentiation of persons within God (e.g., Gen. 1:2, 26). But only in the New Testament, at the climax of redemption and the climax of revelation, with the coming of Christ, did it become more obvious and evident that this God is one God in three persons. To indicate the distinctiveness of who God is, we might use the phrase “classical *Christian* theism.”⁵

Included among the expressions of classical Christian theism we find academic reasonings about God. As one principal example, we may take the work of Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.⁶ The design of these reasonings is to confirm and strengthen people’s knowledge and praise of God, as well as to refute objectors.

But we who dwell on earth are still subject to sinful temptations, including intellectual ones. The academic reasonings could be twisted in at least two ways: (1) People might treat the reasonings as *merely* academic, and in a way that would isolate them from personal communion with God that includes joy and praise. Reading and thinking about God might become only a narrow intellectual exercise. (2) People who read might think that they can by human rational power *dictate* to God what he must be like.

Francis Turretin and others who wrote about classical Christian theism did not intend these misuses. Nevertheless, the misuses can arise because of remaining sin.

This book is for believers in Christ, because it is you who have received a true, saving knowledge of God. We all need to grow in appreciating the positive benefits of classical Christian theism. It serves as an explanation and a reminder of who God is in his majesty, and as a stimulus to personal, intimate communion with him. But we should be aware of the two temptations mentioned above. To deal with the first, this book includes reminders of our personal relation

5. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 40–45.

6. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992). Volume 1 contains the material on God and his attributes. For convenience, citations from Turretin will include both the volume and page number from the English translation, and the division by topic (uppercase Roman numerals, I), question (lowercase Roman numerals, i), and paragraph (Arabic numerals, 1).

to God and the goal of serving him with praise. To deal with the second, we will give ourselves at the beginning some reminders about our subordination to God—a point that a healthy understanding of classical Christian theism should reinforce.

And then there is a third issue—how does the language of classical Christian theism take on its life from the foundations of human language and thought in God himself, in his Trinitarian nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord for our salvation? We will focus on this issue later on (part 4).

God's Making Himself Known in the Resurrection of Christ

We will add one more feature, by considering how the resurrection of Christ testifies to God and deepens our understanding of him.

Why focus on the resurrection of Christ? The resurrection of Christ, together with the ascension of Christ to the Father and his rule at the right hand of the Father, offers a climactic revelation of God. How so? The resurrection of Christ brings us salvation in all its richness. And this salvation is given by God, worked out by God, and applied to us by God. God shows who he is in the process of saving us. And the resurrection is no exception. It shows who God is—a God who gives life, who is merciful to sinners, who plans the end from the beginning, and who has infinite power.

The resurrection has a central role in the New Testament. It is the culmination of the story of the life of Christ in the Gospels. It is a prominent point in the preaching in the book of Acts. It is the basis for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32–33). It has a weighty role in Paul's writings because Paul sees the resurrection as the decisive turning point in history that brought about the transition to a new era of history, the era of the age to come. This age to come has already dawned in the resurrection of Christ, because he is the fountainhead and source of the life in the age to come (as contrasted with "the present evil age," Gal. 1:4).⁷

Christ is not dead but alive. Christ reigns now as the living Christ, who provides to all who come to him all the blessings of salvation:

7. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ *with every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). Christ announces to John, “I died, and behold I am alive *forevermore*, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). He has defeated death. He has the power over death (“the keys”). He gives his eternal life to those who trust in him:

I am the resurrection and the *life*. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall *never die*. (John 11:25–26)

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have *eternal life*, and I will *raise him up* on the last day. (John 6:40)

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has *eternal life*, and I will *raise him up* on the last day. (John 6:54)

Now, Christ’s resurrection was the resurrection of his body, which belongs to his human nature. He is fully human, with a full and complete human nature. He is also fully divine, with a full and complete divine nature. He is God and man. This joining of two natures in one person is a deep mystery.

The resurrection involves the transformation of Christ’s body from death to life. That transformation is the basis for our transformation. We are raised with him spiritually, even now, to walk in new life (Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1–17). We will be raised in transformed bodies when he returns (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). We receive these blessings from God the Father, who gives them to us in Christ. So Christ’s resurrection and the blessings it contains reveal not only his human nature, in the transformation of his body, but also his divine nature. They reveal who God is.

The resurrection of Christ is the turning point in the history of the world, where new creation begins. But it is also the turning point for each individual Christian, because we are united to Christ and experience the benefits of his resurrection. We are raised to new life, already, in Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1–4).

The resurrection of Christ has a central role in our knowledge of God in at least three respects. First, it displays openly and climactically who God is in his infinite power and majesty (Eph. 1:19–21). Second, it displays who Christ is, as the divine Son of God who mediates the knowledge of God the Father (Matt. 11:27; Rom. 1:4). Third, it provides the foundation for our new life. The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ and his resurrection (Rom. 8:11). The Holy Spirit renews our whole being, including our minds, so that we may know the things that God has freely given us (1 Cor. 2:12). So we can profit by looking at the resurrection of Christ as we consider the attributes of God.

Considering the resurrection also alerts us to the Trinity. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in Christ's resurrection. They are involved in a differentiated way:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom. 8:11)

God the Father raised Jesus, who is God and man. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Christ's resurrection life gets imparted to us.

This Trinitarian differentiation in the resurrection will help to remind us that all our knowledge of God and his attributes has Trinitarian differentiation.

Key Terms

Aristotle⁸

attributes (of God)

the Bible

biblical theology

character (of God)

classical Christian theism

eternity

8. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

infallible
love
omnipotence
omniscience
perfections
resurrection (of Christ)
righteousness
Trinity

Study Questions

1. What are some prime resources in learning about God and coming to know him more fully?
2. In what way is the Bible a unique source for knowing God?
3. What is classical Christian theism, and why is it important to reckon with in studying God?
4. What is the Trinity?
5. Why is the resurrection of Christ an important focus when we are studying the doctrine of God?
6. What is biblical theology, and how does it contribute to knowing God?
7. What are some of the ways in which human knowledge of God can be corrupted?
8. What are the implications of Romans 1:18–23 for how we think about human knowledge of God?

For Further Reading

- Gaffin, Richard B., Jr. *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Pp. 31–41.
- Poythress, Vern S. *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001. Chaps. 2–3.
- Vos, Geerhardus. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975. Chap. 1.

Prayer

May the only true God, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, magnify his greatness in us, and magnify also our understanding of his greatness!