

The Attributes of God

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon explores the attributes of God, including definitive and descriptive attributes, and discusses the nature of God's power, love, and knowledge.

Scripture: Psalm 139:1, Isaiah 55:8, Malachi 3:6, Matthew 28:19, John 1:14, John 10:30, Romans 11:33, 1 John 4:8, 1 John 5:7, Revelation 1:8

Topics: "Gods Attributes", "Trinity Doctrine"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the deep mysteries of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, exploring the rationality behind these concepts that may have seemed absurd in agnostic perspectives. The interconnectedness of the Trinity and the Incarnation is highlighted, emphasizing the unity within the plurality of persons. The concept of personality in connection with separate beings is discussed, particularly in relation to God, where distinct persons are united in one being. The sermon also touches on the divine attributes, focusing on the essential characteristics that define God's nature and the significance of the Triune-Spirit as the structural characteristic.

Transcript

The doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity seemed to me most absurd in my agnostic days. But now, as a pure agnostic, I see in them no rational difficulty at all. As to the Trinity, the plurality of persons is necessarily implied in the companion doctrine of the Incarnation. So that at best there is here but one difficulty, since, duality being postulated in the doctrine of the Incarnation, there is no further difficulty for pure agnosticism in the doctrine of plurality.

-- George John Romanes, Thoughts on Religion, pp. 174, 175.

Athanasius, then, held to a trinity of three personal Beings. But if Athanasius held to three persons in the strict sense, how did he save himself from tritheism? I answer In the same way as his predecessors had done before him, by the doctrine of one supreme cause. The Latin fathers before Augustine universally held to a trinity of three personal beings united in a generic nature by community of essence. They held to the real subordination of the Son to the Father.

-- Levi Leonard Paine, A Critical History of the Evolution of Trinitarianism, pp. 45, 47, 62.

Perhaps, however, one may be allowed to doubt whether, in all respects, the term person may not be taken to signify "the same thing" in us as in God. It is true, as before observed, that three persons among men or angels would convey the idea of three different and separate beings; but it may be questioned whether this arises from anything necessarily conveyed in the idea of personality. We have been accustomed to observe personality only in connection with separate beings; but this separation seems to be but a circumstance connected with personality, and not anything which arises out of personality itself. . . . In God, the distinct persons are represented as having a common foundation in one being; but this union also forms no part of the idea of personality, nor can be proved inconsistent with it.

-- Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, i, 449, 450.

But how this community in unity is possible is one of the deepest mysteries of speculation. The only suggestion of solution seems to lie in the notion of necessary creation. Such creation would be unbegun and endless, and would depend on the divine nature and not on the divine will. If now we suppose the divine nature to be such that the essential God must always and eternally produce other beings than himself, those other beings, though numerically distinct from himself, would be essential implications of himself. There would be at once a numerical plurality and an organic unity.

-- Borden P. Bowne, *Theism*, *The Deems Lectures for 1902*, p. 288.

Each is necessarily and eternally one in Being with the Others, there are not three Gods. Each is not the Others; there are three Persons.

-- H. C. G. Moule, *Outlines of Christian Doctrine*, p. 23.

Theology, or the doctrine of God, is usually discussed at the beginning of systematic theology, and doubtless there is much formal advantage in the usual method; but there are several reasons why I have kept this great doctrine for our last work together. In the first place, this system of doctrine has been largely a study of the divine movement in redemption, and now at the end of our study it is fitting to ask the question, What is the conception of God which has been gradually revealed in this redemptional movement? In the second place, the atmosphere of our study has been intensely and intentionally anthropological, and I wish, if possible, to change the atmosphere, and leave you thinking of our God who hath redeemed us, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. I want you, as the last thing in systematic theology, to lay hold of that true Trinitarian conception of God which is both the fundament and the culmination of all real Christian thinking. And, in the third place, I have a pedagogical reason. As a teacher I deem it a mistake to discuss the Trinity with only the preparation which comes from theism. The student needs that new world of ideas and feelings which is created by following the stages of salvation. The Trinity is not a doctrine which can be made clear and vital in any situation and by mere rational equipment. It is a doctrine among the finer culminations of Christian requirement. And a teacher may wisely adjust himself to this fact.

Perhaps also I should add a personal reason. I myself reached not only my interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, but also my full conception of its meaning, by means of my years of study of the ways of God with men in their redemption. I had almost no interest in the doctrine of the Trinity -- it was a vague burden in my mind -- until I felt the significance of the work of Christ; then I saw the Christian doctrine of God for the first time.

Before taking up the doctrine of the Trinity, it is important for us to make a study of the divine attributes. But our study will be a brief one, inasmuch as I consider the subject entirely subordinate to our work on the doctrine of the Trinity.

What is a Divine Attribute? It is any characteristic which we must ascribe to God to express what he really is. The question comes up here: Does an attribute express a divine reality or merely a way in which we need to conceive of God's nature? My answer, as implied in my definition, is: Both. Surely an attribute expresses our human conception, and so it is a relative truth probably; but there is a point of reality in the human conception. I hold that the revelation of God in redemption is reliable. By this I do not mean that we get the total reality; but we do get some reality, and all the reality possible to us in this life. Deeper down, this must be connected with our discussions of knowledge, Christian certainty, and the intermediate state.

Kinds of Divine Attributes. There are two kinds of divine characteristics: 1. Definitive attributes, or those which are essential to an adequate definition of God; 2. Descriptive attributes, or those which are essential when we aim to describe more closely the Being that we have already defined.

There is always a temptation to say that what I call a definitive attribute is more fundamental than a descriptive attribute; but I am not quite ready to say so. For example, I am not sure that personality is any more fundamental, any more necessary to the very existence of God, than is moral love, although surely personality is more primary in our own thinking about God.

Definition of God. The characteristics which we need to define God are the following: 1. Spirituality; 2. Unity or individuality; 3. Personality; 4. Moral bearing; 5. Absoluteness; 6. Triunity.

With these six characteristics we can so define God as to have in terse speech the basis -not the practical basis but the philosophical basis of the Christian conception of God, namely: The God of the Christian faith is one Spirit, personal, moral, absolute, and triune. A better definition for homiletical use is this: The God of redemption is a personal Trinity, one God of absolute moral love. In many connections it is enough to say: God is moral love. Or, where the moral background is entirely protected, we may say, with Saint John, simply, God is love.

Plan of the Descriptive Attributes

I. Belonging to the Personal Nature

Omnipotence, the characteristic of God's will.

II. Belonging to the Personal and Moral Nature

Righteousness, the first characteristic of God's personal relation to holiness.

Moral Love, the second and culminating characteristic of God's personal relation to holiness.

III. Belonging to the Absolute Nature

Aseity, the characteristic of God's absolute relation to causation.

Eternity, the characteristic of God's absolute relation to time.

Immutability, the characteristic of God's absolute relation to the process of history.

Omnipresence, the characteristic of God's absolute relation to Space.

Omniscience, the characteristic of God's absolute relation to reality.

IV. The structural characteristic of the one Triune-Spirit is holiness.

Comment on Some of the Attributes

In other connections enough has been said concerning righteousness (moral concern), moral love, and holiness; but there are some of the attributes remaining which require explanation, and others which require more or less notice.

Omnipotence. By the divine omnipotence we are not to understand that God can will anything whatsoever. To will anything, even God must have a motive, and so he never can make any volition contrary to his own nature. Not only so, but all the features of his nature come together in a perfect organism, under the law of holiness, and so no volition can spring out of a fragment of God. Aseity. This means merely that God causes himself. "God's essence is his own act." "God eternally makes himself what he is." Two things are really covered by the attribute: 1. That God is uncaused. He is (as in theism) the First Cause; and so he is, in causation a Se, from himself. 2. There is a profounder idea, namely, God is absolute life. All the infinite potencies of being he has just in himself. He is life, life, eternal, absolute life.

Eternity. As aseity emphasizes God's vitality from the standpoint of the idea of causation, so the attribute of eternity emphasizes that vitality from the standpoint of the idea of time. In his own life God is timeless. The surface thought is that God has neither beginning nor end. The deeper thought is that his being is so absolute that he is independent of the time process and has only a living present. Dr. Latimer used to say that the succession in God's thinking was logical but not chronological. And Saint Augustine, in commenting on the ninetieth psalm, says: "In the life of God nothing will be as if it were not yet; or hath been as if it were no longer; but there is only that which is; and this is Eternity." But the attribute of eternity does not mean that God is incapable of taking our point of view, and perfectly treating us under the terms of the time process.

Immutability. When we say that God never changes, that "He is the same yesterday, today, and forever," we do not mean that his personal bearing is ever the same. For the record in the Bible indicates change after change in God's dealings with men. And, in the very nature of the case, man being free, the divine volitional attitude must vary somewhat to meet the changing conditions in man's life. The very joy of God over the conversion of a sinner, for example, would mean some change in the divine bearing toward the sinner. No, what we mean is that in being, nature, character, motives of action, God is unchangeable. You can always rely upon him. In our employment of the term immutable we are not seeking, we are not predicating a rigidity of personal life, with no fresh pulsation in self-consciousness and no new movement in self-decision; we are seeking simply a personal and ethical reliability. Such absolute reliability, of course, implies perfection ever, and shuts out the pantheistic notion of a developing God.

Omnipresence. This might well be called the spot of ingenuity in systematic theology; for right here the theologian (even if he have not an atom of basal metaphysics) tries to see what new thing can be said. Bishop Martensen says: "As the bird in the air, as the fish in the sea, so all creatures live and move and have their being in God." A striking amplification of Saint Paul, but not extremely elucidating! Dr. Samuel Clarke taught that God is omnipresent "by an infinite extension of his essence." What that means I do not know. I always feel some gratitude, though, toward Richard Watson for his hesitation at Dr. Clarke's view!

Dr. Shedd says: "The divine omnipresence means rather the presence of all things to God than God's presence to all things." This is an unintentional evasion growing out of an unconscious deism. Dr. Miley says: "In the plenitude and perfection of these personal attributes God is omnipresent in the truest, deepest sense. This is entirely true, and on the right trace; but it needs as much explanation as the term it aims to explain.

In considering the divine omnipresence we would better quickly make distinction between the practical message of the doctrine and the philosophy of the doctrine. The practical message of the doctrine is very plain. It means simply that space is no hindrance to God. Wherever a thing may be hidden, God can get at it. Wherever in the universe you may be, the whole of God is there available for judgment, or help, or companionship. The underlying philosophy should begin with the swift banishment of deism. How that unspeakable curse hides and lingers in the Christian church! Already I have several times suggested what I myself need as a substitute for deism, namely, a universe entirely and constantly dynamic of God, a universe which is nothing other than God in cosmic action. If you are unable to accept such a philosophy, then it is wiser to be content with the practical message of the doctrine of omnipresence, for the rhetorical ingenuities in explanation will never land you in any reality. Merely quote Saint Paul without the bird in the air and the fish in the sea!

The Attribute of Omniscience

By the divine omniscience we mean that attribute whereby God perfectly and eternally knows himself and all reality and all possibility. The moment we say that God's knowledge is perfect and eternal we are really affirming that it is not acquired. There is no process, no progress from what is known on and on to further knowledge. In other words, the knowledge of God is intuitive.

The Point of Difficulty. How can God know a contingent event before the event has any beginning? About this point of difficulty there has been hot dispute both in theology and in philosophy, some of the strongest thinkers claiming that divine foreknowledge of a truly contingent event is impossible. For an elaborate discussion I cannot afford the space; but I will notice the most important points.

Main Objections Noted and Answered. The main objections to the doctrine of divine foreknowledge of contingent events are these:

1. An event contingent upon a future free volition is not an object of knowledge, for there is nothing to know until something begins to take place.

Answer: When it is said that there is nothing to know the objector is really quietly assuming that God's knowledge is acquired, and our claim is that God intuits the contingent event.

2. Were there foreknowledge of what a person will decide to do, the foreknowledge would necessitate his decision, and so his personal freedom would be destroyed.

Answer: The idea that foreknowledge would be coercive arises from the confusing of certainty with necessity. A future event may be certain to take place, and yet it may not be necessary. The foreknowledge is not causal. "A thing will not take place because God foreknows it, but he foreknows it because it will take place." Knowledge of any sort is purely subjective and can bring nothing to pass unless it can employ an efficient will. Can you not see how entirely inoperative knowledge alone is? If as a teacher I could in any way come absolutely to foreknow that Brother Z. will master one lesson next week,

would my secret knowledge, by just being there in my mind, compel him to master the lesson? If I had such knowledge, the event, his mastery of the lesson, would be a certainty, but it would not be a necessity.

3. In actual history God treats men as if he were uncertain as to their ultimate decisions, for he treats all men with redemptional urgency.

Answer: The supposition here is that God would not try to save any sinner who will ultimately reject salvation, if he foreknew the fact of the ultimate rejection. The supposition is entirely wrong. Take this case: The Holy Spirit urges a sinner to repent -- what does that urgency mean? It means just three things, neither more nor less: first, that the sinner can repent; second, that the sinner needs to repent; and, third, that God wants the sinner to repent. Whatever God might know or not know as to the final outcome, the moral love of God would never give up striving with a sinner as long as there was any conscience remaining.

4. Here the objector relates the doctrine of foreknowledge to the doom of the lost, and says: To create a man foreknowing his everlasting doom is out of harmony with the conception of God necessary in a Christian theodicy.

Answer: Not to repeat my own discussion in theodicy, I will meet this objection narrowly. The idea that an adequate theodicy can more easily be constructed under the terms of divine nescience than under the terms of divine foreknowledge is precipitant and superficial. Even a nescient Deity would now know that some men have irretrievably rejected righteousness, and yet he continues to create free moral persons. And, deeper than all that, conceive of the Creator starting a race of men, every one of them having the possibility of eternal damnation, and yet not having any certainty as to the outcome! The doctrine of nescience has in it no superior possibilities in theodicy.

The Unanswerable Argument. Along the line of prophecy a Scripture argument of great force can be formulated; but the argument which to me is unanswerably convincing is this: If God has no foreknowledge of contingent events, then he not only arranged a vast and complex plan of redemption without knowing that even one moral person would ever be saved; but in carrying out this plan of redemption he actually sent his only Son as Redeemer into the reality of human temptation without knowing that this Son, Jesus Christ, would resist the temptation. To accept this strange, strange doctrine of divine nescience I would need to become a necessitarian, and once a necessitarian I would not have any need for the doctrine at all.

Fact and Method. Of course, the divine foreknowledge cannot be comprehended by us; but in this respect it is not different from many features in God's life; indeed, it is not different from some features in our own life. How extremely easy it is for shallow minds to think, because they are familiar with certain phases of human activity, that they comprehend the deeps of manhood! About all we can do in any chapter of search is to lift a bit of reality up into apprehension. And that is all we aim to do with the doctrine of God's foreknowledge -- to apprehend it, to make it seizable mentally.

In trying to apprehend the doctrine of foreknowledge, there are several helpful things which we can do:

1. We can carefully distinguish between fact and method. That is, we can narrow our difficulty. We can, if convinced by the evidence that God does foreknow contingent events, say, "I grant the fact, but I do not see how there can be such knowledge, I do not apprehend the method of it." If you say that you cannot

make this distinction between fact and method, I will insist that you can; for you have already apprehended many facts without even trying to lay hold of the method.

What I urge is this: It is not wise -- neither is it fair -- to let your difficulty vaguely spread all over the doctrine, and to hesitate before the evident fact merely because you are unable to get a clue to the method.

2. The fact once seized, we can do something in apprehending the method. For one thing, we can get rid of time. Even if you are not willing to touch the point in metaphysics, you already, with the attribute of eternity, have the idea that God himself is absolutely independent of time. If God, then, in grasp of reality is unhindered by time, why do you say that mere futurity, one phase of the time process, can shut him away from an event? Why do you require the Eternal God to plod through your tenses? But you say, "I cannot think away time." You mean that you cannot picture it away; you can think it away.

3. One further thing we can do in lifting the method of foreknowledge into apprehension. We can emphasize the point that God's knowledge is all intuitive knowledge. We ourselves have a certain degree of intuitive experience, not very much, surely, and yet enough so that we have a clear point of departure in our thinking about God. With this point of departure, I find it possible to apprehend God as having an absolute and eternal self-consciousness, and this consciousness as being filled with the certainty of all reality and all possibility.

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