

What Does the Word Say?
Session 49: The Attributes, simplicity and aseity of God
WhatDoesTheWordSay.org

Marc Roby: Well, Dr. Spencer, I'm excited about today's session because we are ready to begin studying systematic theology proper.

Dr. Spencer: I'm excited as well. We've gone nearly a year now and have covered a lot of material as background and motivation. We first talked about why people should be interested in what the Word of God says and gave a summary of the Bible's teaching. We then noted that the Bible claims to be the infallible Word of God and spent quite a bit of time on extra-biblical evidence that corroborates the Bible's claim. We also discussed the nature of true saving faith to make it clear that our faith does not depend on the extra-biblical evidence. We then moved on to discuss the doctrine of the Word of God. We did that because even though it is true that God reveals himself in nature, that revelation is not sufficient for a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: And so God graciously gave us special revelation in his Word.

Dr. Spencer: And we showed that the Word of God is sufficient, necessary, authoritative and clear in its teaching. It is sufficient and necessary for salvation. It is our ultimate and absolute authority in life, and the basic message is clear to anyone who takes the time to explore what it says. We also went on to discuss delegated authority in the home, state and church. And, most recently, we covered the infallibility of the Bible and the science of hermeneutics, which allows us to interpret it correctly.

Marc Roby: We also gave a couple of examples of really bad theology, which is common in the world today, as evidence for why it is so important for us to read the Word with great care.

Dr. Spencer: The time we're living in makes me think of what the prophet Amos said. In Amos 8:11 God told his people that "The days are coming, ... when I will send a famine through the land— not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD."¹

In our day we are swimming in a sea of heretical views of Christianity – so it isn't like dying of thirst because of having no water at all, but of having no fresh water! It's more like dying of thirst while surrounded by salt water! We need to know what the Word of God really says so that we can have the pure, fresh water of the Word of God to assuage our thirst for truth.

Marc Roby: That's a good metaphor. So, now that we are ready to dive into systematic theology, where do you want to begin?

Dr. Spencer: We are going to follow, somewhat loosely at times, a well-established outline in reformed theology. It covers what are called the six loci of theology. A locus is a central point or focus of something, so the six loci are the six main headings under which we can organize all of systematic theology. Those six loci are: 1) Theology proper, which means the study of God; 2)

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Anthropology, which means the study of man; 3) Christology, which means the study of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; 4) Soteriology, which means the study of salvation; in other words, how sinful men can be saved; 5) Ecclesiology, which means the study of the church; and 6) Eschatology, which means the study of last things; in other words, of the final eternal state of everything.

Marc Roby: I might add that some theologians would add the doctrine of Scripture, which we have already covered, as another locus, rather than as background.

Dr. Spencer: I'm not surprised that you would mention that since one of your favorites, John Frame, is an example of a theologian who would do so.² If we include the doctrine of the Word of God as a locus, then it would be first and we would have seven loci. In that case, we could say that we are done with the first of the seven loci and are moving on to the second.

Marc Roby: This outline also roughly conforms to that followed by John Calvin in his monumental work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His work is divided into four books, with Book 1 being on the knowledge of God the Creator, Book 2 being on the knowledge of God the Redeemer, Book 3 being on the mode of obtaining the grace of Christ, and Book 4 being on the Holy Catholic Church. Now, the word "Catholic" here simply means universal and does not imply any connection to the Roman Catholic Church.

Dr. Spencer: And in his *Institutes*, Calvin includes a discussion of the Scriptures in Book 1. We can also look at the Westminster Confession of Faith and note that it begins with the Word of God. We've said before, but it bears repeating in this day of self-professed Christians ignoring the Bible, that the Bible is the only place we have an objective revelation of Jesus Christ. It makes no sense therefore, to call myself a Christian and not take the Bible very seriously.

But, getting back to our outline of systematic theology, it also conforms, again loosely, to that followed in a number of systematic theology books. For those listeners who are interested in references to use as we go through this material, I recommend James Boice's book *Foundations of the Christian Faith* as a good readable introduction.³ For a more in-depth treatment I recommend Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*⁴ and also Charles Hodge's 3-volume *Systematic Theology*, which is even available online as a pdf for free.⁵ A good but extremely concise treatment can also be found in J.I. Packer's *Concise Theology*.⁶

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 3

³ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, available online as a pdf from <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Systematic%20Theology%20-%20C%20Hodge%20Vol%201.pdf>

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993

Marc Roby: Those are all good references. And perhaps we should also mention that for those of our listeners who are well read and want to dive into something more challenging, there are good translations of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* available as well.⁷

Dr. Spencer: In fact, you can also find a pdf copy of the *Institutes* online for free.⁸ The detailed references for all these things are given in the transcript of this session as always. All of our podcasts and their associated transcripts can be found on our website at whatdoesthewordsay.org. And I would also like to mention, since many people don't listen to the end of our podcasts, that we have a free gift available to any of our listeners. If you go to our webpage, whatdoesthewordsay.org, you can request a free copy of *Good News for All People*, a short presentation of the gospel written by our founding pastor, Rev. P.G. Matthew. It is, in my opinion, the finest short presentation of the gospel available.

Marc Roby: I agree with that view. And I would point out that if someone is a mature Christian and doesn't think he or she needs the book, they could get a free copy and give it to a friend. So, at long last, are we ready to start with Theology proper?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we finally are. This topic often starts by discussing the knowability of God through general and special revelation. But we've already covered those topics, so we are going to jump right in and start to examine the attributes of God.

Marc Roby: And by attributes you mean different aspects of God's being.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Theologians have come up with different ways of categorizing God's attributes, but I like the common approach of breaking them into two categories; his incommunicable attributes, meaning those that he does not share with his creatures, and his communicable attributes, which are those that we, in some measure, share.

Marc Roby: Of course, as Grudem points out in his book,⁹ these categories are not absolute.

Dr. Spencer: No they're not absolute, but they are useful because we have to always be aware of the infinite gulf between God as the Creator and ourselves as creatures.

Marc Roby: We also have to guard against God being thought of as just a collection of different attributes.

Dr. Spencer: We absolutely have to guard against that. In dealing with that subject, theologians talk about the simplicity of God.

Marc Roby: I don't think most people think of God as simple, but that isn't what is meant here, is it?

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008

⁸ See the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.pdf?url=>

⁹ Grudem, op. cit., pp 156-157

Dr. Spencer: No, it is not what's meant here. When theologians talk about the simplicity of God they are using the word to mean that God is not composed of parts. Some theologians would prefer to use the term unity, rather than simplicity, to avoid the confusion;¹⁰ but the word unity doesn't have quite the same idea.

Marc Roby: What is the essential idea?

Dr. Spencer: The central idea of saying that God is simple is that he isn't made up of parts and he can't in any way be separated. Of course God is not a physical being as we are, so we aren't talking about God being made up of arms and legs and so on. But even though we have a hard time imagining what a pure spirit is, we must guard against thinking of God as disconnected parts.

For example, consider one of modern pseudo-Christianity's favorite verses, which gives us one attribute of God; 1 John 4:16 says, in part, "God is love." And that is without any doubt true. But God is also just and holy and therefore his simplicity tells us that his love is a just love, and a holy love. And his justice is a loving and holy justice, and so on. It helps us to think of God's attributes separately, but we must always remember that God is all of them, all the time and that they all interact all the time. There is no conflict or separation in God. That is what is meant by the simplicity of God.

Marc Roby: John Frame puts it this way, "Each [of God's attributes] is essential to him, and therefore his essence includes all of them. God cannot be God without his goodness, his wisdom, and his eternity. In other words, he is necessarily good, wise, and eternal. None of his attributes can be removed from him, and no new attribute can be added to him. Therefore, none of his attributes exists without the others."¹¹

Dr. Spencer: I like that explanation a lot.

Marc Roby: Alright, which of God's attributes would you like to examine first?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin with his aseity.

Marc Roby: Let me define that word for those listeners who are not familiar with it. Aseity means to exist in and of yourself; in other words, to exist independently, without a cause.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And it is the attribute that is highlighted by the name of God. In Exodus 3 we read the story of Moses being confronted by God. Remember that Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the Jewish people had been commanded to throw all male babies into the Nile because the Egyptians were concerned that the Israelites were becoming too numerous as we read in Exodus Chapter 1. Moses' mother however, put him in a basket and left him floating in the Nile, where he was discovered and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. He was raised in Pharaoh's household but knew about his Jewish identity. At one point he murdered an Egyptian

¹⁰ E.g., Ibid, pg. 177

¹¹ Frame, op. cit., pg. 226

for beating a Jewish slave and he had to flee to a foreign country. And it is in that foreign country where God appeared to him in a burning bush.

Marc Roby: And God famously told Moses that he was sending him to Pharaoh to deliver the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians.

Dr. Spencer: To which Moses replied, as we read in Exodus 3:13, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

Marc Roby: I’m always amazed at the audacity of Moses to ask God for his name.

Dr. Spencer: It is even more amazing that God actually revealed his name! In Verse 14 we read that “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”’” We need to understand that names had much greater significance to the ancient Jewish people than they do to us today. And the name God gives to Moses is very significant. As Boice points out in his book, “It is a descriptive name, pointing to all that God is in himself. In particular, it shows him to be the One who is entirely self-existent, self-sufficient and eternal. ... these attributes more than any others set God apart from his creation and reveal him as being what he is in himself.”¹²

Marc Roby: I remember you noting that the Creator/creature distinction is central to the message of the Bible way back in Session 2, when we first outlined what the Bible teaches. You were commenting on Genesis 1:1, which says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Dr. Spencer: The Creator/creature distinction is absolutely critical. We cannot understand the Bible in any meaningful way without knowing that we are merely dependent creatures. I very much like the way Matthew Henry put it, and Boice quotes him on the same page as the comments I quoted above. Henry wrote that “the greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely – and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say – *I am that I am*.”¹³

It is impossible for us to grasp the full import of this name. God exists necessarily, independently, eternally. His existence is necessary because, as I noted in Session 1, something, or someone, *must* be eternal. If there ever was a time when absolutely nothing existed, then nothing would exist now. Nothing comes out of nothing. He also exists independently. God doesn’t need us, or anyone or anything else. He is entirely self-sufficient. The fact that God exists necessarily also implies that he has existed eternally; his existence had no beginning and it will have no end.

Marc Roby: I agree with you that we cannot fully grasp this point. But it does put the lie to a common view in modern churches that God created men in order to have fellowship.

¹² Boice, op. cit., pg. 102

¹³ Ibid, quoting from Matthew Henry’s Commentary, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, Vol. 1, pg. 225

Dr. Spencer: That view is profoundly unbiblical, at least in the way it is understood by many. We *do* have fellowship with God, that is true. In fact, the greatest thing about heaven is that we will see him as he is and have perfect fellowship with him. But we must never let ourselves think that God was moping around in his loneliness prior to creating us. There was perfect fellowship within the three persons of the godhead. God does not need his creation in any way. He created simply because he chose to out of his own good pleasure, not because he had some need. We read in Ephesians 1:11 that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”.

He doesn't need our worship, he doesn't need our help in saving others, he doesn't need us to govern the rest of creation. He doesn't need us in any way. We are to live for his glory, but we cannot add to his glory. The best we can possibly do is to reflect his glory to the rest of creation.

Marc Roby: Boice gives a quote from A.W. Tozer, which makes the same point, and which I really like. Tozer said that “Were all human beings suddenly to become blind, still the sun would shine by day and the stars by night, for these owe nothing to the millions who benefit from their light. So, were every man on earth to become atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what he is in himself without regard to any other. To believe in him adds nothing to his perfections; to doubt him takes nothing away.”¹⁴

Dr. Spencer: That is a fabulous quote to end on, so I think we are done for today. I'd like to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We appreciate hearing from you.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 104