

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's incommunicable attributes. Dr. Spencer, we ran out of time in our last session while discussing God's attribute of omnipresence. What else do you want to say about that attribute?

Dr. Spencer: We noted last time that God can be present to bless or to punish, but we should also mention that he is present to sustain. In fact, this particular function is specifically ascribed to Jesus Christ. Most famously in Hebrews 1:3, where we read that "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."¹ This passage in Hebrews 1 also provides tremendous evidence for the deity of Christ as we have noted before.

Marc Roby: It certainly does. It would be illogical in the extreme to think that Jesus Christ could be a part of creation and yet simultaneously be the one who sustains, or upholds, all of creation.

Dr. Spencer: It would indeed be a serious logical problem. But getting back to discussing God's omnipresence, we also read about Christ being the one who is present to sustain in Colossians 1:17. It says there that Christ, "is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Marc Roby: Alright, we have established that God is present everywhere in creation to sustain it, and that he may be present either to bless or to punish. What else do you want to say?

Dr. Spencer: I want to point out that when the Bible speaks of God's presence, it is almost always talking about his presence to bless. Therefore, when you read in the Bible that God will be present in some situation, you should assume it means to bless unless there is a compelling reason to conclude otherwise. For example, in the verses we cited last time that say God will never leave us nor forsake us, the clear intent is that he will be present to bless us. Also, in John 14:23 Jesus tells us, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." This is, again, clearly speaking about God being present to bless.

The opposite is also true, when the Bible speaks about God being absent, it really means that he is not present to bless, but rather to judge. That is why, as you noted last time, Hell is sometimes described as being a place where God is absent.

Marc Roby: But, as you pointed out, in the case of hell, God is not absent at all, rather he is present to pour out his wrath.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the terrifying truth. But the Bible itself speaks about God being distant as a way of expressing the idea that he is not present to bless. For example, look at Isaiah 59:2,

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which is a well-known verse, it says that “your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”

Marc Roby: It is, of course, not possible for God to not hear us. He not only knows what we say, he knows it before we say it as we are told in Psalm 139. He knows our every thought. But to say that he has hidden his face and will not hear sounds like someone getting angry and turning his back to you.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is exactly the picture that is being presented. The Bible often uses anthropomorphic language to explain God’s actions to us. When it tells us that he will not hear us, it means that he will not respond favorably to our requests. And we see the same kind of language in Proverbs 15:29 where we read that “The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.” This does not mean that God is literally far away from any part of his creation, but it is figurative language to refer to God not being present to hear and bless.

Marc Roby: And it immediately makes you think of the opposite promise that’s given to believers. Perhaps most famously in Romans 8:35-39, where the apostle Paul asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” And then he goes on to say that he is “convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a glorious promise that all true Christians should rejoice in and keep in mind to strengthen us to do God’s will.

And with that I think we are done discussing God’s omnipresence and, even more, we are done examining God’s incommunicable attributes. Although, before we move on, I’d like to read the answer to Question 4 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism because it is an excellent summary statement about the nature of God. In fact, I highly recommend memorizing this answer. Question 4 asks, “What is God?” And the answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” You can spend a long time meditating on that statement.

Marc Roby: I agree, it is a wonderful statement.

Dr. Spencer: And it begins by saying that God is a spirit, which is the first communicable attribute I want to discuss. But before we start that, we should also notice that the catechism answer next says that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. These refer to the incommunicable attributes we have been discussing. The fact that God is infinite is tied to his omnipresence and his eternity; remember that God’s eternity can be called his infinity with respect to time and his omnipresence can be called his infinity with respect to space. Then also remember that the fact he is unchangeable, or immutable, implies his eternity. These attributes all work together and we must guard against thinking of them separately.

Marc Roby: We mentioned what theologians call God’s simplicity in Session 49, which means that God’s attributes are not separable in any way.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good thing for us to constantly keep in mind as we go through God's attributes. They all work together. We break them out and examine them individually to help ourselves try and grasp the totality of God's being to whatever extent we are able, but God is not made up of different parts as we are.

Marc Roby: And, once again, we find ourselves not able to comprehend fully even that which God has chosen to reveal to us about himself! I assume that we are now ready to move on to look at God's communicable attributes?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. And I want to begin by reminding our listeners that while these categories are not absolute or perfect, the basic idea is that God's communicable attributes are ones which we share to some degree. Therefore, they will also naturally lead into a discussion of biblical anthropology; in other words, what the Bible teaches us about ourselves.

Marc Roby: I look forward to that. And you said you want to begin by examining God's spirituality first?

Dr. Spencer: I do want to begin with that. We are continuing to follow the order used in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.²

Marc Roby: And we just noted a moment ago that God's spirituality is the first thing said about him in the answer to Question 4 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. It begins by asserting that God is a spirit. And this attribute is considered communicable because we also have spirits, although our spirits are confined in space in some way, which is not true of God. And our spirits did not exist prior to God's creating this universe, so there is a clear difference between God's spirit and our spirits.

Marc Roby: That is certainly a huge difference.

Dr. Spencer: It is an extremely important difference. As always, we must remember that God is the Creator and we are creatures. Nevertheless, getting back to our having a spirit, it is clear that there is more to a human being than just this physical body. In fact, way back in Session 1, where I gave my top four reasons why I think it is intellectually untenable to be an atheist, the fourth reason I gave was that it is impossible to explain volitional creatures like you and me and all of our listeners if you consider the material universe to be all that exists. Atoms in motion according to the laws of physics cannot explain any creature that makes real decisions. Therefore, something beyond our physical body is needed to explain us, and the Bible calls that something else our spirit.

Marc Roby: But the clear contrast is that God does not have a physical body as we do, he is pure spirit.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. Jesus told his disciples, in John 4:24, that "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." That first statement, that "God is spirit" is very

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994

important. Louis Berkhof notes that it is the closest thing in the Bible to a definition of God.³ And the Greek construction is interesting as well. The Greek language has no indefinite article, so the difference between saying “God is *a* spirit” and “God is spirit” is indicated in a different way than it is in English. I think it will be worthwhile to take a moment to discuss the grammar, and hopefully some of our listeners will find it interesting, but if not, at least the conclusion will be useful and the discussion will be short.

Marc Roby: We don’t want to trigger any terrible memories of high-school English class.

Dr. Spencer: I can’t imagine why anyone should have terrible memories of English class!

Marc Roby: Nor can I, but not everyone is as enamored with language as we are.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. But if those who aren’t interested will put up with this for just a minute, we will arrive at a useful, interesting and important result. First, let’s examine the English. Consider the sentence “God is spirit”. The subject of this sentence is God, the word “is” is the 3rd-person, singular, present tense form of the verb “be”, and the word “spirit” is the predicate, meaning it is the part of the sentence that tells us something about the subject. A sentence like this, where we equate the subject with the predicate, is called an equative sentence. For example, if I say that “Knowledge is power”, that is also an equative sentence.

Now, in English, the difference between saying “God is spirit” and “God is a spirit” is in the predicate. When we include the indefinite article in the predicate and say “God is *a* spirit”, the sentence means that there is a class of objects called spirits and God belongs to that class, he is one of them. When the article is not present and we say “God is spirit”, it means that God is spirit in a deeper sense, it isn’t just that he is one of a class of objects, it is his essential nature.

Marc Roby: And how is that distinction indicated in the Greek?

Dr. Spencer: It is indicated by the structure of the sentence. In the case of the first clause in John 4:24 there isn’t any explicit verb, it is implied. If we were to stupidly render the Greek word-for-word into English, the clause says “spirit the God”, which clearly makes no sense in English. In the Greek however, the verb “be” is implied and the article in front of God tells us that God is the subject of the sentence. The question then becomes whether it should be rendered “God is a spirit” or “God is spirit”.

I should state right up front that there is no theological problem with saying that “God is a spirit”. In fact, that is how the King James Version translates that clause and the American Standard Version follows. That is not however, the best translation. There has been a great deal learned about New Testament Greek in the past 100 years and current scholarship would say that the right way to translate that clause is “God is spirit.” Daniel Wallace, in his book *Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics*, says that the Greek noun for spirit in this clause “is qualitative –

³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938 (This can be purchased as a combination of his *Systematic Theology* and *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* in one text from Eerdmans, 1996), pg. 65

stressing the nature or essence of God”.⁴ And he gives a detailed explanation of why the best translation is “God is spirit” in case some of our listeners are interested in looking at that.

Marc Roby: This is similar to the question of how to translate the last clause in John 1:1, which we talked about translating in Sessions 51 and 52. But that verse, which says “the Word was God”, does explicitly include the verb.

Dr. Spencer: You’re right, the two verses have a similar construction in the Greek. Leon Morris agrees with the meaning we are giving to John 4:24, he writes that “Jesus is not saying, ‘God is one spirit among many’. Rather His meaning is, ‘God’s essential nature is spirit’. The indefinite article is no more required than it is in the similar statements, ‘God is light’ (1 John 1:5), and ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8).”⁵ Berkhof also agrees with this analysis of the Greek and says that “This is at least a statement purporting to tell us in a single word what God is. The Lord does not merely say that God is *a* spirit, but that He is spirit.”⁶

Marc Roby: That is a somewhat subtle, but significant difference. I also remember that in Session 55 you quoted from the 19th-century theologian William Shedd, who commented on the meaning of John 4:24.

Dr. Spencer: You have a good memory! I did quote from Shedd. He wrote that the “omission of the article, implies that God is spirit in the highest sense. He is not a spirit, but spirit itself, absolutely.”⁷

Marc Roby: But the Bible doesn’t define for us precisely what is meant by spirit, does it?

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn’t. But it doesn’t define for us precisely what the nature of our physical universe is either, and we still haven’t figured it out ourselves, so I doubt we could understand God’s explanation.

Marc Roby: Which may be why he doesn’t give us one.

Dr. Spencer: That is a definite possibility. But returning to the idea of what is meant by the word spirit, it is helpful to note that both the Hebrew and Greek words that are rendered in our English Bibles as “spirit” also mean wind or breath. But we don’t want to conclude that spirit is referring to some power, we must remember that it is God’s essence. The whole issue is complicated by the fact that the third person of the Trinity is called the Holy Spirit, which you might think could imply that the other two persons are not spirit, although that would be wrong. God is spirit, not just one person in the Trinity, but God in his essence. Although it is also true that the eternal Son became incarnate and exists in union with the man Jesus Christ.

⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, 1996, pg. 270

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, part of the *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce Gen. Ed., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971, pg. 271

⁶ Berkhof, op. cit., pg. 65

⁷ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888, pg. 151

Marc Roby: And with regard to knowing exactly what spirit actually is, as you noted about our physical universe, we probably couldn't understand God's explanation if he gave us one.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is a very safe bet. Especially given the fact that spirit, whatever it is, is *not* something that is restricted to existing in the same spatial dimensions in which we exist. Which implies that there is no way we can make any measurements or do any kind of direct experiments to study the nature of spirit.

Marc Roby: Although that doesn't mean that we can't know anything about it.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't mean that at all. That would be a completely erroneous conclusion. God has revealed a number of things about the nature of spirit to us.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to getting into that next time, but we are out of time for today. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd love to hear from you.