

Essence & Attributes; Names, Roles & Historical Acts

Now we will discuss essence and attributes. We noted last week that God's transcendence, His ontological otherness, does not entail unknowability. Simply because God transcends our world it does not follow that we must therefore be agnostics. But God's transcendence *does* require that if we are to know anything about Him, He must reveal Himself. He must reveal His will and His character in our world, and He must do so in such a way that we human beings can apprehend that disclosure. The Christian confession is that God has done exactly that. As the sovereign Lord over His creation, He enters into His world, He acts within it, He personally relates to other persons, and He reveals His Word—and all of that without being relativized by it, without losing His deity. God is never shut off from His creation; He is never rendered incapable of revealing Himself simply because of that ontological difference. On the contrary, even apart from His historical acts, God has created the universe in such a way that all of creation screams His presence, screams the fact that He is the Creator.

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul tells us that all men, fallen as we are, are still able to know that we stand under the covenantal obligation of God. Yet certain limitations *do* attend the idea of revelation. Our knowledge of God is never perfect; it is never exhausted. The more we know about God, the more aware we become about how little we know about God, for we begin to get some glimpse, however vague and finite, of just how much more of Him transcends our knowledge and our experience. But this should not unduly concern us. Imperfect or incomplete knowledge is not automatically a bad thing.

There are many things that limit our knowledge of God. Certainly sin is a limiter. It motivates us to distort reality; it motivates us to flee from truth and to misuse it. Therefore we can speak of sin as producing culpable errors, moral errors. But our immaturity is also a limiter. Adam did not come into the world just knowing stuff; he had to learn. Learning about God and God's world was part of his calling to exercise a delegated lordship within creation, and there we can sometimes speak of honest mistakes. We do make honest mistakes; we measure the 2x4 wrong; we forget so-and-so's name, instead of calling him 'Lloyd,' we call him 'Boyd.'

But that is just the beginning. Our finitude is also a limiter. Our heads are only so big and our brains have to fit inside of that, and all of our thoughts have to fit inside of those brains. Even a perfect creaturely knowledge, that is, a knowledge that is held by a sinless, mature creature, one who possesses as much information as a creature can possess, would still be a finite, limited knowledge. To be a creature is to be limited in knowledge, and it is to know in creaturely ways. Thus our knowledge of things, and our knowledge of God, is never equivalent to God's knowledge. We never know precisely as God knows. Thus the Christian tradition has spoken of God as the Incomprehensible One.

Psalm 145:3 says, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised and his greatness is unsearchable." God's greatness is so beyond our experience that it can never be fully known by man. In Psalm 147:5, we read, "Great is our Lord, abundant in power. His understanding is beyond measure." Both God and His understanding transcend all our abilities to reason, to think, to experience, to hold those thoughts in our head. Right at this point, David concluded in Psalm 139:6, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." *Yahweh* Himself, in chapter 55 of Isaiah, says, "For your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the highest heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." In Romans 11:33, Paul says, "How deep are the wealth and wisdom of the knowledge of God. How inscrutable his judgment, how unsearchable his ways." The witness of all of Scripture is that God, His thoughts, and His ways, far outstrip our creaturely reality and our creaturely ability. In other words, we can only know what is revealed to us.

Can we know the essence of God? The Dutch tradition of Reformed theology (that tradition that I originally come from) is sometimes called neo-Calvinism and it is represented by such thinkers as Herman Bavinck in the Netherlands and Cornelius Van Til here in the United States. That Dutch tradition has taken God's incomprehensibility to mean that God's knowing and our knowing are so different that a real knowledge of God is always somewhat problematic. One of the leading questions relative to God in Reformed theology, at least since the 1940s, has been the issue of the nature of man's knowledge of God. Much of the discussion has revolved around this question: Can we know God's essence? It has been common within the neo-Calvinist tradition to say that we cannot know God's essence. The notion of a divine essence, the idea that we can know God as He is 'in and of Himself,' unrelated to His covenant, unrelated to His creation, is thought to be presumptuous. It was presumptuous, first of all, on the part of Greek metaphysics; second, on the part of the early church apologists who syncretistically brought together Christianity and Greek metaphysics; thirdly, on the part of medieval scholastic theology; and was also presumptuous even when 17th century Reformed theology tried to do it. As a matter of fact, Herman Bavinck said, "Calvin deemed it vain speculation to attempt an examination of God's essence. It is sufficient for us to become acquainted with his character and to know what is conformable to his nature." According to the neo-Calvinist tradition, essences are static philosophical abstractions. They are the ideas of our minds, and Scripture does not speak the language of Greek metaphysics. It does not speak of essences or being. Rather, the Bible speaks of character and relationships. Scripture is concerned with God's redemptive work and His relationship with His human covenant vassals. While God may have an essence, that essence is largely irrelevant to man and to his need. God as He is 'in and of Himself' is not what revelation is about. Rather revelation communicates God as He comes out to us in His Word. Thus, this tradition concludes that we do not study God per se; what we actually study is His Word, His revelation. And that Word is always as much a boundary between God and us as it is a bridge. We study His revelation and revelation belongs to God's outgoing work, not His inner essence. It involves Him as He comes out to us, not as He is by Himself.

Now, I think there are some positive elements about this tradition and I want to draw your attention to them. First of all, I think the neo-Calvinist tradition, with its denial of a knowable, divine essence, rightly seeks to get away from the speculations that attend scholastic metaphysics. It does not want to speak beyond the Bible, and the Bible does not use the abstract language of essence or being at all. In fact, such language may not be as serviceable as the western philosophical tradition has led us to believe. The phrase 'the divine essence,' may not communicate anything substantial to us at all. We use that kind of language sometimes—'God's essence, God's being'—but do we really know what we are saying?

Second, the neo-Calvinist tradition seeks to emphasize the covenantal reality, with which Calvin began his *Institutes*. Calvin said, "God is only known in relationship." We never have a theoretical, dispassionate, or abstract knowledge of God. Remember we made the point formerly that one does not know God the way that one knows a hammer or a rock. But we need to be careful here. Sometimes people have taken Calvin and used him as an historical precedent for what we might call a neo-orthodox denial of propositional revelation. According to neo-orthodox theologians, God is known personally and only personally, only in the moment of passionate personal encounter. This knowledge is thoroughly ineffable; it is not open to propositional articulation. In other words, we have an experience of God, but we cannot put that experience into words because God always transcends our language. As Wittgenstein once put it, "If man cannot describe the aroma of coffee, what makes him think he can describe the nature of God?" Another way of saying this is that there is nothing that we might call an objective reference for our biblical statements about God. William Placher (about whom we spoke last week) belonged to this school. We have an experience of God but we cannot capture that experience in words. That is not what Calvin is talking about. Calvin affirms an objective referent for our language about God

and he affirms that God can be known. But Calvin *does* caution that God cannot be studied as we study a lab specimen. Our knowledge of God is always bounded by the fact that He is the sovereign Lord. What Calvin is after, I think, is a proper reverence, a reverence for the God of Scripture. He wanted to be careful to think in biblical ways, and not to run ahead of the biblical revelation.

A third positive aspect of the neo-Calvinist tradition is that it seeks to safeguard God's majesty from human presumption, and to safeguard the Creator-creation distinction, and it does that by rejecting the medieval notion of the analogy of being. Remember we talked about the analogy last week—the idea that all being that is not God is derived from His being and there is a continuum of being, so that you have a similarity. The neo-Calvinist tradition would say that as creature man can only know in creaturely ways, never divine ways. The human mind, in other words, is not a reflex of the divine mind. We are not just simply God made on the small and God is not us made on the large. We are creatures who are subject to the bounds of time and space and the covenantal law of God.

Fourth, the neo-Calvinist tradition seeks to appreciate the mediated nature of human knowledge of God. The object of theology is not God Himself but revelation. Now there is something about that that seems properly humble to me but I think we are going to see at the last moment that there is also something insufficient here. God is not simply speaking words to us; He is also disclosing Himself.

Fifth, while it is not immediately apparent, we should also notice that this tradition inherently denies the possibility of natural theology. In other words, God must come to *us* in revelation. We cannot reason our way to God. Our knowledge of God is always the result of divine initiative and grace.

Having said something positive about the neo-Calvinist tradition, let me say something that is a danger of the neo-Calvinist tradition. The neo-Calvinist humility could be taken to suggest that nothing essential about God is knowable at all. Ronald Nash goes so far as to dismiss the neo-Calvinist tradition as being agnostic. While I think that is far too strong, I appreciate his concern. The neo-Calvinist tradition can suggest a kind of hidden God behind the revealed God. All we have is God's Word, and remember that Word is as much a boundary as it is bridge. There is no necessary connection between that revelation, that Word, and God as He actually is. We will have more to say about that later.

We want to affirm that God is knowable, but we are still left with the question, 'What is an essence?' That is difficult, but in general terms, an essence is the quality or qualities by which something is defined. It is the quality or qualities that make something what it is, that tell us that a thing is X rather than Z. These qualities, sometimes called attributes, speak to the entire issue of definition. But the neo-Calvinist tradition says that defining God is a bad idea, and it is a bad idea right from the beginning. I, quite frankly, think that it is on to something here, and I say that for two reasons. First, you define things, not persons. Maybe you can define the concept of mother, but you cannot define your mother. Persons transcend definition, at least until they die; maybe then you can define them as corpses. But persons cannot be defined. Secondly, beings, essences, and definitions are our mental constructions. Neither the natural world, nor the biblical text invites us to speak of God in the language of Aristotelian metaphysics. I think that we should let our thoughts be controlled by the biblical revelation of God rather than seek to control the biblical revelation by our philosophical thoughts. In fact, it is quite possible that the language of essences and being and all that other stuff really obscures God's actual revelation of Himself. And when it comes right down to it, when we use the language of essences and being, we may be talking a kind of communal gibberish. When we hear that kind of stuff, we all nod our head as if we know what is going on but if we were asked what it means we would be left speechless.

Now what we are going to see next week is that in the early church's discussions about the trinity the category about 'being' became important. And at some points the distinction between being and person is essential, as in God is one being in three persons. There it is helpful but in many other places philosophical language has been less than helpful.

Our knowledge of God is real and we can state that knowledge in propositional statements. We may ask, 'Cannot we have, or cannot we know, certain qualities that are essential to God?' Yes. We cannot know them exhaustively and certainly we cannot know things as God knows them. We cannot know all of God's essential properties, but it seems necessary to say that we *can* know certain things about God, know them truly, know them sufficiently. While we want to affirm that God is always more than the qualities or attributes that we ascribe to Him, we may in fact know things about Him.

John 17:3 tells us, "And this is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent." While we may not know God as He is in and of Himself, while we may not know God abstractly, we know God. But let me comfort you here a little bit. Go back to that whole thing about mother. You know your mother in exactly the same way; you do not know her abstractly; you do not define her by abstract language. Knowing God is a lot like knowing any other person, knowing a loved one. The mere act of attributing characteristics to God is not absurd, in and of itself. We can have real knowledge of God and that knowledge speaks to very important realities about Him, realities we can articulate in meaningful and true propositional statements. God is the Mighty One of Israel. God is the Holy One of Israel. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. While we want to respect the distance between God and ourselves, and to respect Calvin's warning against unhealthy speculation, we also need to affirm that our knowledge of God is real, as Calvin himself affirmed. Our talk about God is human talk, but it can be true talk nevertheless.

This brings us to the denigration of cognitive or propositional knowledge in modern theology. We typically draw distinctions between different kinds of knowledge. We talk about the knowledge of facts (knowing *that*), the knowledge of skills (knowing *how*), and the knowledge of persons (knowing *whom*). I think that kind of distinction is appropriate but we need to be careful. It is common both within the existentialist tradition of neo-orthodoxy, the Dutch tradition of neo-Calvinism, and certain kinds of pietism to denigrate cognitive, factual knowledge and to affirm or only affirm personal knowledge. And the reason is that there is a certain fear of doctrinalism within the Dutch tradition, within existentialism, and within pietism. After all, we can know all the facts about God and not know Him personally. It is often said that cognitive knowledge is speculative, distant, and cold, but the reality is that this fracture between different kinds of knowledge is really false; it is a false problematic. To know God I must have personal knowledge of Him in exactly the same way that I have personal knowledge of my wife and my children. I must also have a 'skill knowledge' to know Him; I must know how to obey Him. And I must have a cognitive knowledge; I must be able to distinguish between the true God and a false god. Outside of this cognitive knowledge, the other two are undifferentiated and non-referential.

Does our knowledge of God extend beyond the revelation of His acts in Scripture? No. Does our knowledge of God extend to the intricacies of the divine mind, to God's private life? No. Do we know anything about God away from the stage of human history? No. But what we *do* have in history is what we can know: God as He acts; God as He enters into covenant relationship. God has declared and revealed Himself in Scripture, and we need to affirm that this revelation is one piece with who He truly is. Here I think Nash is right with his complaint about neo-Calvinism. Neo-Calvinism will sometimes want to suggest that all we have is His revelation and we have no assurance that God, as He stands behind it, conforms to that revelation. I think we need to affirm that this revelation reflects Him as He

truly is, that He is consistent with it. After all, He invites us to attend to that revelation, to accept it as true, to study it and pattern our thoughts and ways upon it.

Roman numeral ‘III,’ Attributes. You may find Gerald Bray’s *The Doctrine of God* a little bit confusing on the discussion of divine attributes. On pages 81 and following he puts the best possible face, and in some ways the worst possible face, on the discussion. The worst face is that he almost appears to reject the entire notion of divine attributes before he is done. The best face is that he uses the discussion of John of Damascus when he enters into this. It is the best face because John of Damascus was a Greek Orthodox theologian and he was always careful to balance his understanding of attributes with the Eastern notion of apophatic theology (apophatic means ‘the way of denial’). John of Damascus wanted to say that even as we speak of these attributes, God is always more than, always greater than, what these attributes say. I am going to take a similar tact as Bray in that I want to give you a worst case understanding, then I will come back later to take up the question of attributes within a covenantal framework and see if we can rehabilitate the entire discussion of divine attributes.

Letter ‘A,’ Classical theism, as it has come down from Thomas Aquinas. Remember we talked both about classical theism and Aquinas last week. Classical theism identified a number of logically connected attributes as the central core of God’s being. The idea was: If one knows the attributes, one knows God, at least at a cognitive, analytic level, because this collection of attributes defines the divine essence. If you know the divine attributes, you know God’s being because the attributes, taken together, define His being. According to Thomas Aquinas’ list of attributes, God is, first, pure actuality, following the Aristotelian tradition of actuality and potentiality. Second, God is immutable. Third, God is impassable. Fourth, He is infinite and invisible. Fifth, He is eternal, that is, beyond temporality. Sixth, omniscient. Seventh, omnipotent. Eighth, simple (not like simple-minded; rather, having no parts, simple rather than complex). Ninth, necessary. Tenth, underived (another way of saying independent. The word ‘aseity’ is sometimes used here). Eleventh, omnipotent.

Using John of Damascus’ list, Bray points out that many of these attributes have come under question, both during medieval times and in modernity. Some of the terms—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient—have so entered popular Christian vocabulary that if you question them people will be suspicious of you. If you say, ‘God is not eternal,’ or ‘I do not know about that omniscience stuff,’ people are going to start wondering if you are orthodox, so this language has become part and parcel of the Christian tradition.

Each item on this list, with the possible exception of #1, is saying something true and real, something genuine about God. But I admit that this language leaves me cold and asking, ‘so what’? This God of natural theology, for all its immensity of power and knowledge, for all of its lack of creaturely limitations, is a thoroughly unapproachable thing. What is the one thing missing on this list? Person. Outside of person, who cares about this list? “Thing” is the key word here, as the classical attributes were worked out in natural theology in classical theism.

According to the tradition of classical theism, the affirmations that Scripture most repeatedly puts forward regarding what is important about God and that it includes within its creedal and confessional statements are non-essential, accidental, and even beside the point. A divine attribute according to the Aristotelian tradition is an essential property of God. A property is said to be essential if and only if the loss of that property entails that that being ceases to exist. A divine attribute is a property which God could not lose and continue to be God. Aristotle distinguished between an essential property and an accidental property. Many properties of a thing can be non-essential. They can be changed without affecting the essence of the thing. Let us think of a table, for example. You can paint a table white or

black and it is still a table, right? You can varnish it or leave it unfinished. It is still a table. You can cut its legs shorter, you can move it to another point in the room. It is still a table. You could eat your lunch on it or perform open heart surgery on it. It is still a table. Now you take a sledgehammer to it and turn it into a billion different pieces. Is it still a table? No. Now it is not a table. There are changes we can make and not affect the essence of the thing. Some other property we might take away will make this thing cease to be, and that is the distinction Aristotle is making between essential property and accidental property. Essential properties belong to the nature of a thing and cannot be changed or lost without altering the kind of thing it is. On the other hand, any change of a thing's non-essential properties would not change the kind of thing it is.

Now, many of the predicates applied to God in Scripture do not denote attributes or essential properties of God, but non-essential properties. These non-essential properties, according to Aquinas, relate God to His creatures. Relational predicates like personhood, emotional states, character traits, and actions do not denote divine attributes. Let me give you an example from that tradition. To say that God is a creator, or to say that God is a covenant Lord, are to make non-essential statements. It is logically possible, after all, that God might never have chosen to create, and He would still be God. It is logically possible to suppose that God might never have chosen to enter into covenant relationship, and He would still be God. Well, that might make good logic, but it makes bad Bible. It fails to conform to the biblical pattern of God's self-disclosure. And right here we are starting to turn the corner.

We now see the problem of thinking of attributes as essential properties of being. Scripture treats this in a completely different way. It does not try to define God; it does not try to argue His existence; it does not give us an enumerated list of essential properties anywhere. It is very common today for theological writers to preface their chapters on divine attributes with a little sticker that says, "Warning, contents of this chapter may lead to fruitless speculation." And they often do. Neither is a philosophical construct (like an essence), nor an abstraction (like an essential attribute), capable of bringing one person one step close to another. Because of that, I think it is worth our time to reconsider whether this method of studying God is the way we ought to be going.

We now want to turn our attention to names, roles, and historical acts. I want to suggest that the biblical question concerning God begins with a completely different interrogative than the definitional question of essence, being, and attribute. When we read Scripture, noting the ways that God is actually spoken of, we will not find words like infinite, omniscient, or omnipotent. Nor will we find a discussion of beings or essences; instead we will find stories, statements, clauses, which identify God in terms of His relationship to His world and His relationship to His people. It seems to me that the proper question is not, "What is God?" It is rather, "*Who* is God?" Or as Calvin put it, "Who is the God with whom we have to do?" Calvin claimed that questions of definition and essence were idle speculations when it comes to the God of Scripture. Once we understand that the proper question is, "Who is God?," we find that the Bible abounds with answers, and gives a great diversity in the ways that it answers that question. Now we *will* find along the way that there are many things we are going to predicate to God, to attribute to Him. But we want to see that biblically those attributes are not abstract but are given in covenantal, relational, and existentially relevant context.

I should say something about the Westminster Standards and the way they address this issue. The Westminster Confession and the Shorter Catechism do ask the question, "What is God?" Does that mean I am dumping on the Westminster tradition? I better be careful because I am on tape. Well, yes, I am, but tenderly I hope. Westminster was a child of its time. It seems to me that Calvin's approach is superior to that of Westminster. Now by saying that the *who* question, the descriptive question, is superior to the *what* question, the definitional question, I am not completely saying that Westminster is

wrong. Westminster is right in a definitional sense, but it is somewhat cool and somewhat abstract in its presentation. The Westminster Standards were meant to be short, to the point, easily memorizable statements about God and different theological issues. The Westminster Standards were never meant to stand alone. They were not meant to say everything there is to say. The Westminster materials were meant to drive you to Scripture.

Having said that, before we look at the ways that Scripture actually talks about God and how it describes Him, it is worth our time to think about how we talk about persons. If I ask you to tell me a few things about someone in your family, you will probably tell me a name, some characteristics, some social roles, some accomplishments. These are the ways that we naturally introduce people. We do not talk about people abstractly. We do not say, "Well, my sister is a human being." No, we will describe a person in personal terms. Scripture does not begin with or even entertain the kind of impersonal descriptors that we find in philosophical theology. We are not going to find a prime mover in the Bible, or an uncaused cause, or a supreme being. From first to last, God is thoroughly personal. We find that He is the One who speaks, acts, walks, commands, loves, makes, judges, fights, battles, loves, hates, etc. And this is how we know Him, and how we are to describe Him. All of the language I just used is more meaningful for the God of Scripture than all that talk we did for the first 40 minutes, and a lot of the stuff we did last week. So we are finally past the philosophy stuff.

Right from the beginning, however, we have already attributed something to God. We have said that God is a person. For our purposes, we do not need to define a person too carefully, but there are qualities that seem to adhere to personhood. First of all, life; God is alive. Second, He possesses self-consciousness; God knows Himself. And third, intelligence: He knows others and other things. Now, maybe we want to get fancier with the idea of personhood, but we really do not need to. We have already attributed personhood. If you think about it, we have attributed other things to God. Last week, we began attributing transcendence to God, did we not? We said that God is a transcendent person.

I do not want to take this too far right now, except to point out that we are not negating the idea of attributes, even what we might call metaphysical attributes. To say that someone is *someone* and not a *something* is to make a statement about nature, not merely function. We simply want to put attributes into biblical, covenantal context. Some philosophers object right here, and this might be the issue for you, too. To say that God is a person is to use an anthropomorphism. An anthropomorphism is applying human characteristics to God. The objection says, "We are speaking of God as if He were a human being, and that is not only imprecise, it is wrong because God is not a human being. The biblical language referring to God," so the argument goes, "is equivocal in nature. That is to say, the biblical language that speaks about God may refer to Him as a person but that is merely the language of appearance. It is stated that way for our sakes so we can relate to something, but God is not really a person; we simply speak this way. To predicate personhood to God is to reduce or limit the divine being." That is the objection.

My response is, if God truly has the characteristics of personhood, like self-consciousness and intelligence then to speak of God as a person is not to employ an anthropomorphic descriptor. If He has the characteristics of a person, He is a person. And there is no reason from the biblical materials to assume that it uses language equivocally when it speaks of God. You see, many of the so-called anthropomorphisms that we are told about are not anthropomorphisms at all. They are rather theomorphisms. Since God is the Creator, His personhood has a priority over our personhood. Rather than think of God anthropomorphically, we might better think of man theomorphically. Our personhood is part of our calling to image God. God is the truly personal One. We mimic something of His personhood and to do that well, we must know Him personally. Yes, God is supremely more than our

creaturely notions of personhood. But that is no reason whatsoever to deny personhood to God. While He transcends our conceptions, He is never less than our conception. While the realities of God's own person far outstrip our conceptions, He is never less, and that is an important construct in thinking about God. That was part and parcel to C.S. Lewis' understanding of God: He is always more than, more than, more than, never less.

Before we look at the different ways that Scripture identifies God, perhaps we should spend a couple of minutes talking about anthropomorphisms' equivocal language. There *are* true anthropomorphisms. The Bible often talks about God metaphorically, as if He possessed bodily parts. Scripture speaks of God's eyes, ears, mouth, nose, hands, and so forth. We know that God does not literally possess these bodily parts. Scripture insists that He does not possess a bodily form (see Deuteronomy 4:15-18). Thus God is incapable of being seen by human eyes (John 1:18, 1 Timothy 1:17, and 6:15-16). There is an important qualification there. God is incapable of being seen by human eyes *except in Jesus*. That is also said in John 1:18: "No man has ever seen God, but God the one and only has made him known." We must say that God is not composed of matter. Indeed, the second commandment forbids the confusion of God with any thing or any shape within the material world. Not being fleshly, God does not possess the bodily limitations of creaturely existence.

There is another thing that we have to attribute to God. He is a spirit, and that is stated exactly that way in John 4:24, "God is a spirit." But we need to be careful. What is a spirit? Spirits transcend our phenomenal reality. Scripture does not give us anything like a substantial description of spirits. All we really know about spirits is that they do not have bodies. While Scripture affirms the existence of spirits, it does not give us the material so that we could go out and build one or do the physics of spirits or anything like that. But back to the issue of anthropomorphisms and bodily parts. While God transcends the bodily, the functions communicated in these anthropomorphisms are real, and again this goes back to Lewis' idea: more than, not less. God does not have hands, but does He make things? Yes. He fashions, He sculpts. He does not possess eyes like you and I have but nothing escapes His gaze. So while the anthropomorphism is not literally true, the function is true. These anthropomorphisms even tell us something important about God's character. The nose of God is a good example. Interestingly, the Hebrew word *ah* is used both for nose and for wrath, and not accidentally. To look down your nose at something is to take a stance of displeasure toward it, right? To turn up your nose is to act in a superior, condescending fashion. And Scripture speaks of God's *ah* in exactly these ways. Yes, the Bible also speaks of God smelling smells, smelling aromas. Does God smell? Yes. While we should be careful not to think of God too materialistically, we should also be careful not to commit the opposite error. That is, thinking of God so spiritually that we subtract Him from any meaningful contact with His world, that we define Him in such a way that we deny Him the joy of His creation.

Letter 'D,' The nature of language relevant to God. Theology is, in many ways, a talking about God. But what status and weight can we attach to our talking about God? What currency does human language have in reference to God? Remember, our language is creaturely, but God is transcendent. He is infinitely different from us, infinitely greater than us. He is the incomprehensible one; He is the incomparable one. How does the language we use relate to who God really is? Historically, there have been three main schools of thought here. The first school of thought has held that our language is equivocal. God and man stand at such a distance that human language is incapable of speaking of Him with any certainty. Williams Placher and existentialism would fit into this category. The emphasis is on discontinuity. Our language, at best, is vague and approximate. There is no direct, explicit statements that are possible for God and we have nothing in common. There is no link, there is no bond.

Another school of thought has said that our theological language is univocal, which simply means “same voice.” This view presupposes a substantial commonality between God and man. While the first position pushes God as far off as possible up into heaven, with man at the greatest distance possible, this second position pushes them together so that there is overlap between them; they are drawn so close together that it makes possible a number of shared qualities: being, rationality, and language. The Creator-creation distinction tends toward overlap, and therefore our God-talk corresponds to who God really is in a roughly one-to-one relationship.

A third view holds that our language about God is analogical. Classical theists like Thomas Aquinas made much use of the category of analogy. As a matter of fact, Aquinas is often credited with developing the language of analogy for theological language. But what Thomas and classical theists had in mind was an ontological correspondence: man is like God, made up of the same stuff as God. What we have in mind when we speak of analogical language is not an ontological correspondence, but a moral, rational, more functional analogy. For example, when Scripture speaks of God’s eyes, He is in fact seeing (therefore not equivocal), but the language is obviously not univocal either because God does not have eyes. Rather, a comparison is functional. So when we talk about the analogy between God and us, it is primarily an analogy of moral relationship, of covenantal relationship, and of function.

The point is simply this: our talking about God, our God-talk is not precise; it is never exhaustive, never comprehensive. But having said all that, it can be real, true, sufficient, and trustworthy.