

Names, Roles & Historical Acts

What is the key to God's identity? By what method do we want to proceed? I think there are a number of things we want to look at here. We want to look at God's names. When we talk about persons, they have names, and God's names are important in Scripture. Second, we want to look at God's actions, or what are sometimes called His mighty deeds. We might also want to add here, under this category, God's words as well. After all, words and deeds go together. Socrates once said that as long as a person remains silent, he remains unknown. God is not silent. He names Himself and He declares His status and His rights as the sovereign Lord. Third, we will want to look at the roles that God plays within creation, including social roles, relationships, and the fact that God is judge, king, shepherd, husband, etc. Fourth, we want to look at character traits. I am going to leave that somewhat undeveloped and challenge you to think your way through this. Scripture certainly gives us enough information so we see that God has a character. He is not bland. Scripture talks about His jealousy, His passions, and His loves. This is one of the areas that is often overlooked but it tells us a lot about a person. And then fifth, and we will do this separately, we will want to take up the issue of the trinity as God's persons. Now I am not sure exactly the best order in which to proceed. Scripture does not give us a lot of clues outside of the fact that it places inordinate emphasis upon God's naming of Himself and the public articulation of His mighty deeds. Those seem to be where we should begin looking at God's identity.

One of the things you will notice here as we proceed is that we will not be giving the divine attributes anything like a nice, tight, analytic treatment. We will do that later, but do not let that frustrate you. Scripture does not give us an analytic treatment of God's qualities or perfections. Scripture's emphasis seems to lie elsewhere. While we would like to be systematic, we must first be biblical. I might say it this way: Scripture and its methodologies, Scripture and its pedagogies, must be allowed to shape our reasoning about the biblical content.

One of the most theologically significant modes of divine self-revelation, or self-disclosure, is the revelation of the names of God. As we noted when we looked at Exodus 5:22-6:8, in the world of the Ancient Near East, a person's name was considered to be a shorthand for everything about that person. One's name was a descriptor. It was not just a sound, and that is especially true of the God of Scripture. We see an example of this in Genesis 32 where we have Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel. In verse 29, Jacob asks the stranger to tell him his name. What he is saying is, "Tell me who you are." He is not simply asking for an evocable, or some sounds. He is saying, "Tell me who you truly are. Tell me the truth about yourself." And when the name of God is front and center, then that is the issue: who God is and what we need to know in order to know Him. In Psalm 22, the psalmist says, "I will declare your name unto my brethren." What is in view here is something more than a title or a mere collection of syllables. In Exodus 14, God Himself declares that through His mighty deeds at the Red Sea, the Egyptians will know that "I am Yahweh." It is hardly likely that God is merely saying the Egyptians will learn merely His name. What they are going to learn is who He is. They are going to learn His character. And just before His death, Jesus said to the Father, "I have manifested Your name unto the men You have given Me." What did Jesus do? He demonstrated the very heart and soul of God.

The first thing we come across in Scripture is *Elohim*. *Elohim* is something of a generic word for deity. Its New Testament equivalent would be *theos*, or in English, 'god.' And it is a plural. It is a plural of the word *El*. Now this word can be applied to the true God—*El* or *Elohim*. But it is also applied to false gods, just as we use 'god.' And in Scripture, it is even sometimes used of a man of renown. It is a very generic term. When it is applied to the true God, its emphasis is first of all on God's power and His majesty. We see this name in Genesis 1. *Elohim* is the God of great power. *Elohim* is the great Creator. He is the King of creation. This name is also very common in compound forms—*Elyon* is 'God most

high,' and *El-shaddai* is 'the God of Hosts.' There are others, but throughout Scripture the emphasis falls on God's majesty and His kingly power. And of course, this name also emphasized God's transcendence. Interestingly this again is the name throughout the first chapter of Genesis: "In the beginning, *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth."

Scripture addresses *Elohim's* transcendence in a number of ways. First is the Creator/created distinction that we have talked so much about. *Elohim* is the Creator. He is not a constituent of the created universe. Second, height is a very common image in the Old Testament, to speak of God as the High and Lifted Up One. The earth cannot contain Him, nor comprehend Him. And third is enthronement. *Elohim* resides in heaven above. The Old Testament word that we translate as heaven is *shamayim*, and it is very interesting. It actually participates in many different semantic ranges. It does not always refer to a place. Sometimes the word is used to emphasize God's transcendence. It is used somewhat metaphorically to signify His distinction from this creation, and the way that He is exalted above His creation.

But we need to say this also about *Elohim*: it does not usually connote personhood. If the only name we had in Scripture was *Elohim*, we could in fact think of God as the unmoved mover, a supreme being, or some other abstraction. But the biblical record quickly moves toward a much more fulsome and personal name. In the second chapter of Genesis, we encounter Yahweh. We have already talked about this name in relationship to the covenant in Exodus 5-6. Yahweh is the name God gives Himself, and unlike *Elohim*, Yahweh does emphasize God's person rather than merely raw power, or raw transcendence. So here is what we have: in Genesis 1 the majestic, powerful, transcendent *Elohim* stands apart and calls creation out of nothing. In Genesis 2 Yahweh enters into His creation and forms man. It is very intimate in Genesis 2. It is covenant. In Genesis 1, it is transcendence, power. In Genesis 2:7, the Lord bends down, picks up some dust, forms it into the shape that He wants, breathes His breath into it, and this dust ball becomes a *nephesh hayah*, a living being.

Generally, when the emphasis is upon God's transcendent and sovereign power, the name is *Elohim*. But when the emphasis is on His personal character or His covenantal relationship, Yahweh is employed. The two can be brought together—'Yahweh *Elohim*.' Usually we translate that as 'the Lord God.' It is hard to capture the name Yahweh in a few comments, for it seems to call up everything that the covenant represents, for Yahweh is the covenant name. In the Old Testament, it appears in contexts in which covenant relationships, personal relationships, moral relationships predominate. In his book *The Doctrine of God*, Christopher Kaiser brings the entire Old Testament teaching about God under the heading of Yahweh, and that makes sense. If God is not the personal God of the covenant, He is not God at all. Kaiser rightly contends that outside the biblical revelation of Yahweh, our God-talk is just talk. As the name Yahweh is introduced in the book of Exodus, it carries the promise of God's presence for this people, His Fatherly and redemptive concern for them, His steadfast love and His faithfulness toward His people, and the moral relationship that adoption into the covenant entails. In short, the name Yahweh invites us to think of God with all the intimacy, emotion, and moral expectation of a parent/child relationship. Thus, anything that is appropriate to attribute to a father is appropriate to Yahweh: kinship, protection, counsel, love, faithfulness, and sustenance. Where the New Testament equivalent to *Elohim* is *theos*, god, the New Testament equivalent to Yahweh is *pater*, father.

We will spend a little bit of time looking at Exodus 34:6-7, which says, "The LORD, the LORD (that is, Yahweh, Yahweh), the compassionate and gracious *Elohim*, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to the thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet, he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations." Very interestingly, this is Yahweh's description of Himself because Yahweh is the speaker here. And this text is often, and I think rightly, considered to be the closest thing to an Old

Testament list of attributes. But notice what kind of attributes we have here. They are attributes of character, attributes of relationship, and so we want to pause briefly and think about the implications of this text (we are going to come back again later and look at the attributes.) First, Yahweh is a moral God. God's moral nature is usually spoken of in terms of His holiness—Psalm 99, Isaiah 6:1-7, 1 Peter 1:14-17. In fact, Isaiah often used the title “The Holy One of Israel” as a veritable synonym for the divine name, for Yahweh. We are going to come back and look at the issue of holiness at some length a bit later when we discuss the attributes. I just want to draw your attention to it here. Second, God is long-suffering toward His covenant vassals. He restrains His wrath and His judgment in spite of man's sin. And He restrains His wrath and judgment for the sake of His gracious intention. We might call this God's common grace to man, or we might point out that God does not immediately pour out His wrath or His righteous judgment on every act of wrongdoing because as a God who binds Himself to the covenant, He seeks the good for His creation and for His elect. God wants to be in the life business, rather than the death business. He seeks redemption rather than condemnation. To say that God is long-suffering is also to call up His mercy. He loves His creation and He loves His elect, even though corruption and sin are real. Throughout the biblical story, God works the good in spite of us, even in spite of His elect. Covenant always stands upon God's grace. When you read through Genesis, you read a story about a bunch of losers and Yahweh. God is always acting in spite of His covenant people. If the covenant depended on us, it would crash and burn.

The Exodus text quite explicitly tells us that God is loving. He cares for His people, but notice that God's care here is not some idealized, generalized, universalized benevolence. It is rather a passionate and intimate love, the love that a father has for his children. It is a love that manifests itself in God's gracious intent.

God's long-suffering mercy and His love notwithstanding, we must also remember that God is righteous in His judgment. The divine wrath is directed against sin. As a righteous judge, as a moral God, God must punish sin, and that is the only way to maintain a moral universe. Now it is common to attempt to erect some kind of hierarchy here, one in which we seek to organize God's holiness, His love, His justice, His mercy, and His wrath into a kind of causal chain. We want to see one of them, or some group, as being more fundamental than others. From which one of these attributes, from which one of these moral perfections, does God's redemption come from? Which one of these is the headwater of His punishment upon sin? Well, I think there is a mistake being made when we do that. What is the ground of redemption? All of it is, for it all comes from God. God redeems a people because He is merciful, because He loves, and because He is holy. In the same way that I discipline my children because I love them, because I want to be faithful to them, because I want to be just to them, because I want them to be righteous, so God acts. His redemption, His wrath, His discipline, and all the rest are the products of His entire person.

God is faithful. He is consistent and reliable in His words and ways. He keeps His promises. We will talk more about this again later, but here I would like to say that often this reality, the reality that God is faithful, is expanded into a metaphysical direction, in which we say that God is immutable or unchanging. God is faithful not only in His relations but also in His person. In order for His ways to be consistent, He must remain consistent within Himself. Bray, at one point in his book, gets at this point marvelously. Even though three millennia have passed since the time of Abraham, even though the history of redemption has seen earth-shaking progression in the unfolding of the covenant, the same God who dealt with Abraham deals with us such that if Abraham were here, he would affirm our God as God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Yes, God is faithful in His character; He is faithful to Himself.

God is the King over His creation. That God has the right to hold man morally accountable, that He has the right to judge man for man's moral actions, means that God is the sovereign Lord, that He is the King. And it is lordship that forms the bridge between *Elohim* and Yahweh. As *Elohim*, God is Lord over His creation, that creation He calls into being. As Yahweh, He is the Lord of the covenant, and He has the right to rule over all things.

Finally, when God gave His name Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3, He told Moses to go to Egypt and tell the people there that He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not only the Creator, He is also the Lord of history. He is active and powerful in historical events, in man's ongoing life within the world. One of the most recurring claims throughout the Old Testament revelation is that God is the living and powerful God. He is not the creation of man like the idols but rather the active and sovereign Lord of history. That is seen in Joshua 3:10, 1 Samuel 17:26, Jeremiah 10:10, and Isaiah 40-41.

This raises the issue of God's power and thus it gives us an opportunity to further reflect on the divine attributes as envisioned by classical theism. I do want to come back to that issue one more time, and you will see why. The classical method of attribution represents a right insight gone wrong. The right insight is that God's character and His ways are universally true and universally relevant to human life. Where it went wrong, and theologians as diverse as Stanley Grenz on one side and David Wells on the other have seen this and drawn attention to it, is that classical theists sought to emphasize the universality of their theological assertions by emancipating theology from any one historical, cultural context. Thus they sought to produce a theological system of truth that was timeless and culture-free. In other words, they were trying to create a theology that did not have any anchors—anchors to history, anchors to culture, anchors to particularity. They were looking for statements that were universally true, universally valid. It would not matter if you were male or female. It would not matter if you were black or white. It would not matter if you lived in Canada or Mexico. It would not matter if you lived in the first century or the 29th century.

What was missed was that the Bible does not work that way. Yes, the truth about God, about sin, about angels, about Christ, about the Spirit is universally true. But that does not mean that the Bible speaks a-historically or a-culturally. We might better speak of the biblical materials as being transcultural and transhistorical. Biblical revelation takes place within a historical, cultural context in the sense that it is revealed within, and is always applicable to human cultural and historical existence. That is the very reason it can touch our lives. It was articulated in real people's lives. God is not giving a philosophy lesson. By choosing a philosophical frame of reference for talking about God, by choosing a language which spoke of universal, abstract, and impersonal categories—being, essence, and all that stuff we talked about—classical theists spoke about God in ways that were largely irrelevant to our historical life in the world.

In *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, Dorothy Sayers has a great little essay called "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged." She makes the point that we theologians have made the Word of God boring, because we have decontextualized it. And once you have done that, you cannot get it back. So rather than go that direction in the first place, tell the story. Because God acted with Abraham, He can act with us. What is He doing when He says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" He is saying, "I was in it with them. I can be here too." It is in that very particularity that God's action is real, true, and relevant.

I want to pick up the issue of omnipotence that we briefly addressed previously. It has long been the tradition within dogmatics to speak of God's power by the word 'omnipotence.' I have to admit there is

something about the classical ‘omni’s’ (omnipresent, omniscient, etc.) that leave me again feeling quite cold. They may be correct in a kind of technical sense, in the sense that you know a flow chart or a schematic can be right. But they are also somewhat lifeless. Does God possess all power? Yes. Is God all-powerful? Yes. As Yahweh Himself said to Abraham, when Sarah laughed at the promise of a child, “Is anything too hard for Yahweh?” He is Maker of worlds. Isaiah 40 speaks of God measuring out the waters in the palm of His hand, and marking off the heavens with His fingertips. Truly His power is incomparable and inconceivably great. My problem with the notion of omnipotence, and I admit it might partly be linguistic, is that the language of the ‘omni’s’ is too diffuse, too generalized, too abstract.

When Scripture speaks of God’s power, it is always directed power, personal power, righteous power. It is never just power. It is never power in the abstract. It is always His power. The classical approach was concerned to articulate God’s power, knowledge, and presence in universal, undifferentiated, and extensive terms. Thus, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. But God’s particularity, His person, suffered in the equation. Yes, God’s worship is universal, but it is as the particular God of Scripture that He is the universal Lord. I think the Apostle’s Creed helps us here. The first article of our English version says, “I believe in God the Father Almighty.” ‘Almighty’ is a translation of the Greek word *pantokrator*, which could be rendered in English as ‘all-governing one.’ Latin versions of the creed employ the word *omnipotens*, which is translated as ‘omnipotence.’ Omnipotence is unqualified, universal, impersonal, and extensive. *Pantokrator*, on the other hand, is directed, purposeful, particular, and personal power. After all, a ruler, as in ‘all-governing one,’ presupposes a subject or a realm that is ruled. It presupposes a relationship. Further, a kind of rule is implicit in the creed, a morally righteous rule. Therefore, I suggest that *pantokrator*, or all-governing, is closer to the biblical reality than *omnipotens*, or omnipotence. I understand that all Christians are not going to change their language because of what I say here. We are not going to change our language, but I think that when we use the language of omnipotence, we need to be reading a more biblical content into it.

The way the term ‘omnipotence’ was intended means power within itself, power without reference to anything else. And that was a real problem for medieval theology. God was, as they came to say, *potentia absoluta*. He was absolute potential. By definition, God can do anything, for that is what the word ‘omnipotence’ means. Medieval theology concluded that if God can do anything, then He may do anything. This caused real anxiety of soul for a young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther. He hoped, “Perhaps God will change His mind about me. For if God is absolute power, God has arbitrary power.” But biblically God’s power is bound to the covenant. Remember we said there are things God cannot do. He cannot fail to keep His Word. He must keep His promises. He cannot say, “I changed My mind.” He cannot say, “I loved you yesterday. Yesterday I elected you. Today I reject you.” Put simply, His covenant promises limit the range of things He can do. God binds Himself to His covenant. I am not binding Him. He binds himself, and He is bound not by definition but by His decree, by His choice, by His relationship. It means that when we look at God’s power, we do it in the context of His covenant, and we do that in the context of His historical promises. Go to Isaiah 40 and read the wonderful statements that Isaiah said there. He measures up the heavens with His hand, but there are things He cannot do, and the things He cannot do will not make you mad.

What of omniscience and omnipresence? Psalm 137:5 says, “There is no limit to God’s understanding.” Thus we would be right to conclude that God knows everything there is to know. There is nothing that God does not know. I want to affirm that. But the biblical focus usually relies upon God’s intensive knowing. Here we are playing that game again between extensive and intensive. I hope you caught it. The biblical focus lies upon God’s intensive knowing. The existential relevance of God’s knowledge is that God knows me inside and out. Yes, God knows everything. Psalm 139 is the classic text on God’s knowledge and presence. In that text, divine knowing and presence are functions of God’s covenantal

relationship. The first six verses of Psalm 139 talk about His knowledge: “O LORD, [again, ‘O Yahweh’] you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in behind and before. You have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.” David’s point here is that nothing is hidden from His gaze. There are no secrets in His universe. Then for David, that means there are no secrets he has from the Lord. God’s knowledge of David is intensive.

In the next section of Psalm 139, David changes his focus, and here it is the presence of God rather than His knowledge that is in view. The presence spoken of is not a diffuse presence that exists everywhere like oxygen. We say that oxygen is everywhere. That is not the kind of presence we have here. It is rather a personal, purposeful, and again, intensive presence. There is no place to hide. There is nowhere to which God cannot reach out. There is nowhere that you can end up being where God cannot help you. There is nowhere that God cannot be with His covenant people. God may be present everywhere, but intensively so, covenantally so.

In Jeremiah 23:23-24, Yahweh Himself warns us against limiting His presence to the parochial as well as making His presence so vague, so universal that it is of no practical good or effect. “‘Am I not a God nearby?’ declares the Lord. ‘Am I not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ declares the Lord.” So there is an emphasis there on both the extensive and intensive.

The Old Testament as well as New Testament suggest that God intends that we look at Him through the spectacles of His mighty deeds. God is known by His acts. To know God’s mighty deeds is in a sense to know Him. And the reason is simply that God’s acts are not erratic. They are not arbitrary events. They are rather the natural outflow of who He is. One would be right to say that God’s nature precedes His acts, but in the realm of knowing, the reverse is the case. For us to know God’s nature, we must witness His acts. For us to know His character, we must watch what He has done. And thus the biblical authors seem to put most of their eggs into the basket of God’s actions as the key to His identity: “Do you want to know who I am? Watch Me work. Do you want to know what I value? Watch the things I do. Do you want to know what makes Me mad? Watch how I judge.” But God transcends both creation and temporality. It is only in space and time that we experience Him, and thus our talk about God, if it is biblically legitimate, will always be timely and relevant to historical existence. In short, we know God as He comes to us in the midst of our creaturely existence. George Ernest Wright put it this way: “Old Testament Israel’s doctrine of God did not come from their speculative thoughts. Rather, it came from God’s own historical action on her behalf, and it comes from His proclamation of the significance of His actions.” Now we see this pattern of God identifying Himself through His mighty deeds throughout all of Scripture. Let us look, first of all, in the Old Testament, then the New Testament.

First of all, Deuteronomy 26:5-9 is often called the ‘little credo.’ It functioned for the Old Testament community of faith much like the Apostles’ Creed functions for the New Testament community of faith. This was a declaration of praise for the great things that God had done. Once a year, the faithful Hebrews were to bring their sacrifice to the priests and they were to publicly declare their gratitude to God by rehearsing the litany of the mighty things He had done on their behalf and on behalf of their ancestors. They would say, “A wondering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous, And Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard bondage. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers [that is ‘Yahweh, the *Elohim* of our fathers’], and the LORD heard our

voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders. Yet he brought us into this place and gave us this land.” This was the fundamental confession of Old Testament Israel. If you were to ask an Old Testament Hebrew “Who is the Lord?” the answer you would hear is this text. Who is God? He is the one who brought us out of Egypt. God’s very identity was tied up with His historical actions on Israel’s behalf.

Another text is Deuteronomy 6:4-5. What we have just said does not mean the Old Testament could not think in more metaphysical terms. Next to the ‘little credo,’ we must place the *shema*, as a fundamental formulary for Old Testament Israel. As a matter of fact, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 were the first words that a Hebrew child was taught to speak. “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, [the Yahweh, our *Elohim*] is one, and you shall love the LORD [you shall love Yahweh, you shall love your Father in heaven] your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The Hebrew confession is that one God did it all. *Elohim*, the Creator, is Yahweh, the covenant Lord. There is only one true God.

Thus the confessional existence of Israel revolved around two issues. First was monotheism—there is one God. And second was His mighty acts in history—He is the living, powerful, delivering, redeeming, speaking God. Think about these two for just a second. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the *shema*, fits with the first commandment: “You will have no other gods.” And the ‘little credo,’ in Deuteronomy 26, fits with the Exodus, God’s historical acts of bringing Israel out. If you have those two, the first commandment and the Exodus, the rest of the Old Testament will inevitably flow right forth. You go to Exodus 20 and you get them right there. It starts with those two ideas: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt,” and “You will have no other gods.”

It is widely recognized today that there are a number of liturgical and hymnic confessional statements that were developed in the early church, even before the New Testament was written, and that a number of those statements were picked up in the New Testament and have been cited for us, or quoted for us. Some examples of texts that are usually thought of as having existed before are Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Timothy 3:16, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. That does not mean that Paul was a plagiarist because he wrote all those. It means Paul was picking up songs and confessional statements from the early church, recognizing them as true, and by the inspiration and authority of God, he is including them in his quotes. By and large, the New Testament confessional material is Christological in character; it is about Christ. Who is Jesus? What did He do? Why is He important? Those were all crucial questions for the early Christian community. Like the Old Testament confessional materials, the New Testament hymns and confessions declare the oneness of God and the mighty deeds of God.

We have the same pattern in the Old Testament but with one difference. For the New Testament, the mighty deeds of God center on the mighty deeds of God in Jesus. God is known in Jesus Christ. Where the Old Testament will center on the Exodus event as that one event which reveals God’s character, which fulfills His promises, which proves His presence, the New Testament will look to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. See 1 Corinthians 15 for an example. What does Paul say before he gets to the end of the chapter there? He says, “If Christ was not risen...” Moses could have said, “If you were still in Egypt...” Where the Old Testament Hebrew would identify God as the one who brought us out, the New Testament believer identifies God as the one who raised Jesus from the dead.

In Herman Bavinck’s *The Doctrine of God*, he has several pages of analogies that are used in Scripture. God is likened to a lion, an eagle, a hen, a lamb, the sun, the morning star, a light, a torch, a fire, a fountain, food, bread, drink, water, ointment, a rock, a hiding place, a refuge, a shadow, a shield, and a temple. These should all be thought of as functional analogies. God is like them in some way. Scripture

also speaks, however, of certain roles that God plays in the ongoing life of His people. They are roles that speak of office, profession, or some kind of relationship. Thus God is a bridegroom, a husband, a father, judge, king, lawgiver, warrior, hero, builder, architect, sculptor, workman, creator, farmer, shepherd, physician, lover, and a Savior. I have to admit I am a little bit uncomfortable calling these social roles either anthropomorphisms or even analogies. When you talk about analogies there is a level of dissimilarity, and that dissimilarity is inappropriate here. God is every bit as much a father as I am. Now that is not simply because He has more children than I do, but it is because He is the Father par excellence. He is not fatherlike; He is a Father. God is a King. He is not merely kinglike. A king is someone who exercises sovereignty over a domain or subjects. That is what a king is and what a king does. God does king stuff just as much as any king ever did king stuff, so He has every right to call Himself King, and we should call him King rather than kinglike. God is a judge. He is not merely like a judge. A judge is a person who makes critical decisions about guilt and innocence, culpability, responsibility, truth and falsehood. Does not God do those things? Yes. God's actions, His relationships, are neither metaphorical nor analogical. God is more than anything that these roles communicate. He is more than all of them put together, but He is never less than what they communicate. He is never less than a judge. He is never less than a shepherd. He is never less than a king. He is never less than a husband. He is never less than a father. And everything that is appropriate to attribute to a father, a judge, a king, a friend, a lover, is appropriate to attribute to Him. We tend to denigrate the biblical depictions of God when we categorize them as analogues. We think that they come from a kind of naïve, anthropomorphizing tendency, and we think that our abstractions about the divine being are more advanced and insightful. But they are not.

I am not going to take the time to God's character traits, as referred to on the outline. As you read through Scripture and think about God's character ask yourself, "What sort of person am I meeting here?" I think we do not spend enough time with Jesus. What sort of person is He? We are actually surprised when we sit down and start reading the text and find out. Yes, He is meek and mild, but He can be the kind of guy you do not want against you.

Many of our theological problems would simply dissipate if we thought about God more biblically, if we thought about Him in the ways that He wants us to think about Him. Let me take an issue: law and grace. That is something that has been a problem in the history of the church. Now how do you relate law and grace? How do you relate relationship and obligation? Biblically, it is as easy as this: God is a Father. Fathers are sovereign over their children. Kids do not become kids by keeping laws. They become kids by the father's decision. What does the law do? It maintains relationship. It protects relationship. It nurtures relationship. I tell my youngest son he must pick up his room. But what I am telling him is, "This is how you live and operate as a member of the Williams family." Biblically, grace always comes before law. Biblically, relationship always comes before obligation. And if we only thought about God as a Father, we would see that. We will take up the issue of God's sovereignty and our freedom. For much of that, the same thing happens, if we only thought about God by way of these rules. What I am trying to get across, and what I would like to commend to you is that rather than starting with attributes, we will finish with attributes. We start with thinking about ways that Scripture speaks about Father, Husband, Friend, King, Judge, and Shepherd. If we took those seriously, we would let them shed light upon our theological questions. Let them go through your prayer life. Start praying to the Lord that way. See if it does not change things.

Let me end here with a comment from George Ernest Wright. I think it puts this entire discussion into its proper biblical perspective. "As long as we are human, and there seems to be small chance of our becoming gods, we must use human categories to describe the Divine Being. There is little in an abstract

principle which can stir emotions or strike at the will. We are forced therefore to make use of such concrete terms as may make God appear to be what He is: a living, compelling, and sovereign reality.”