

# A Systemic Approach to God's Attributes

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## Abstract

There is nothing more important than a correct understanding of God. This essay reviews the very common, historic practice of describing God according to his individual attributes. While acknowledging the value of this practice, the limitations are also noted. A complementary approach of describing God according to the broader, relational attributes found in scripture provides a biblical context for the individual attributes, and adds a devotional quality to beholding our glorious God that the historic formulations often neglected.

## 1. Introduction

Many systematic theologies approach the topic of the doctrine of God using a number of individual attributes, commonly classified as communicable and incommunicable (e.g. Berkhof 1958:57–76; Grudem 1994:156–225; Reymond 1998:161–200). Some of these authors caution that the distinction between communicable and incommunicable attributes is not very helpful, and also that the whole approach can be scholastic in nature (MacLeod 1990:20–21; see also

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Grudem 1994:156). Their point is that scripture nowhere attempts to classify God's attributes.

In whatever way these attributes are classified, they are nevertheless usually treated in an isolated fashion in the systematic theologies. A few authors do caution that God's attributes can never be considered as parts of him, but rather, 'perspectives on his whole being' (Frame 2002:388). Frame (2002:388–389) also points out that each attribute is inseparable from the other, as each attribute contains or encapsulates all the attributes of God. For example, God's love is an eternal, holy, wise, and just love. God's anger is righteous, infinite, holy, and just. According to Frame (2002:388), while this does not mean that all God's attributes are identical (as they do give different perspectives of God's essence); it does mean they ultimately coalesce. Frame (2002:21–35), therefore, prefers to treat the attributes of God within the overarching theme of God's lordship.

The isolated fashion in which the attributes are often treated can also lead to an imbalanced view of God. Either the order of the attributes is seen as incorrectly significant or some attributes are over-emphasised at the expense of others (Grudem 1994:156). MacLeod (1990:8) also notes that treating attributes in an isolated fashion renders them more liable to philosophical bias, which can distort one's view of God. This is primarily due to the fact that the attributes, when examined in an isolated way, are divorced from their biblical context and proportions. For example, MacLeod (1990:14) notes that God's righteousness, power, and omniscience are often discussed without reference to their main context in scripture, namely, their role in redemption.

Another possible objection to studying God's attributes in an isolated fashion is that they can be presented in a dry, academic way that robs God of his majesty and wonder. This point will be elaborated on later.

However, that is not to say that the historic treatment of God's attributes has been without value. On the contrary, the reformed and evangelical treatment of God's attributes has contributed greatly to our understanding of God. There is also biblical warrant to consider the being of God according to his individual attributes. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul reflects on God's being in terms of his individual attributes of eternity, immortality, and invisibility.

Scripture, however, often describes God and his characteristics in relational attributes. An attribute is simply a property, quality, or feature belonging to a person or thing (Collins 1982:67). This means that any of the qualities or features found in scripture concerning God could be used or systematised into a list of attributes. A relational attribute is a description or characteristic of God that shows how he relates to his creation. The historical, individual attributes could even be discussed under the relational attributes found in scripture. The role of the systematic theologian is to present God's attributes in a way that best conveys their biblical meaning to the current generation.

## **2. Some Insights from Systemic Thinking**

The world of organisations, process re-engineering, and business practice has been revolutionised in the last few decades with the advent of systemic thinking (thinking in terms of systems as opposed to individual parts).

The following is a brief description of the insights of RL Ackoff. Ackoff (1994:1–3) makes the point that modern societal ideas of organisations, production, and business processes have been based on a particular mind-set (originating in medieval Europe and percolating

through the industrial revolution) and assumptions which can be described as the process of analysis.

The basic idea of analysis is that we can understand an object when it is broken down into its individual parts (Ackoff 1994:11). As the individual parts are understood, the whole can be understood. For example, in order to understand a car, it must first be broken down into all its individual parts, such as wheels, cylinders, valves, nuts and bolts. As each part is understood, an accurate idea of what a car is can be determined.

However, Ackoff (1994:10–11) notes the limitations of this approach. A process of analysis in itself will never reach the conclusion that a car actually moves (as it needs a person to drive it), nor that it can be used to drive a family around and give them enjoyment! It happens rather that as the object of a whole car is observed in its environment (or in its system) that the purpose and function of the car can be determined. This process of systemic thinking is based on synthesis (putting the 'pieces' of a system together to understand their relations with other pieces and therefore the whole) and the direct opposite of analysis (breaking the objects down into their individual parts).

'Systems thinking' emphasises the interdependence of the parts and how they interact to create the whole in its environment. It stresses the fact that, when a system is taken apart (analysis), it loses its defining characteristics. For example, when a car is dismantled, it loses its ability to move, which is its defining characteristic. Many popular authors, such as Senge (1990), have taken the basic premise of systemic thinking and applied it to modern business practices.

A few comments regarding systems thinking are necessary. Firstly, while admitting the validity of Ackoff's basic premise and the value of

systems thinking, it does not mean that analysis is useless. On the contrary, breaking down a car into its individual parts does help understand how a car works. Both analysis and synthesis have value, a point admitted by Ackoff (1994:12).

Secondly, therefore, analysis in itself must not be seen as the only way to understand an object or ‘thing’. There are other approaches that may render equally valuable, if not superior, the understanding of objects and ‘things’.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the above discussion is a reminder that one’s thinking and approaches to understanding ‘things’ are in fact framed by assumptions and presuppositions of which one may not necessarily even be aware.

The point of this section is not to motivate making systemic thinking a ‘new’ and ‘dynamic’ approach to revolutionise our understanding of God. Biblical Christianity is, after all, a *divinely-revealed* religion (Grudem 1994:149), not a *man-discovered* religion. Many of the systemic thinkers also have assumptions and presuppositions that are alien to scripture. The point is rather that the process of taking our study of God and breaking it down into isolated attributes, while being of value, is not necessarily the only way to understand who or what God is. It is also as God is seen in relation to his creation (environment) that we discover the wonder of his being<sup>2</sup> (which is essentially a systems approach). For this reason, scripture itself often describes God in terms of relational attributes as he interacts with his creation.

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<sup>2</sup> God is therefore finally and most fully revealed to man in his incarnate Son (John 1:18; 14:9). However, this does not mean that God’s revelation of himself in the Old Testament was so inferior that he was unknowable. A correct study of God and his attributes from the Old Testament enabled the Old Testament saints to truly, although not fully, know and understand God (Jer 9:23–24).

This article, therefore, approaches the topic of the doctrine of God using some of these relational attributes. Five relational 'attributes' of God are selected to demonstrate the approach and value of the exercise. In essence, as will be shown, these relational 'attributes' assume many of the historic attributes and present them in their *relation* to created beings and things. These individual attributes are clarified and contextualised in the process. This is useful, as Frame reminds us that 'meaning' is drawn out and clarified as truths or concepts are 'applied' to situations (987:83–84). In other words, selecting some of the relational attributes in scripture to begin this study of God, and then, noting the individual attributes in the process may be a better way of approaching the subject. The relational attributes of God provide a contextual framework to enable the individual attributes to take on their biblical meanings in their biblical proportions. It will also minimise (but not entirely eliminate) the risk of distorting an individual attribute through academic speculation.

A few clarifications may be required before moving on to describe God in some of his relational attributes. Firstly, the list of attributes below is by no means comprehensive. There are, no doubt, many other 'relational attributes' that we can find in, deduce, or derive from scripture. These five attributes should function as examples to show the benefit of describing God in these ways.

Secondly, as these attributes are described, it is hoped that they will immediately commend themselves to God's people with a freshness that compensates for the all-too-common dryness and scholasticism that can beset a theological discussion of the historic attributes of God.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this article should not be seen to detract from the value of studying the historically-formulated attributes of God. As noted earlier, the approach of studying the individual attributes has

biblical warrant (1 Tim 1:17). These have been of immense value and benefit to God's people over the years. In this regard, it is equally true that the relational attributes do not provide a complete description of God. After all, God was God (with his essential attributes) before he created the universe and started 'relating' to people or things.

### 3. Examples of Relational Attributes

There is nothing more important for theology and devotional life than having a clear and correct view of God (Frame 2002:1). Errors (both theological and practical) can often be traced back to incorrect views about God.

Five relational attributes are given below by way of example to demonstrate a systemic approach to God's attributes.

#### 3.1. The friendliness of God

Friendliness can be defined as someone expressing liking and goodwill towards another. It is also suggestive of a kind disposition to draw alongside someone with help or support (Collins 1982:446).

One of the most striking features of God expressed in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ was his kind disposition and goodwill toward others. It is noteworthy that even his enemies described him as a *friend* of sinners (Matt 11:19). In other words, this was a dominant characteristic of his relationships with others. He himself designated his relationship with his disciples as that of friendship (Matt 9:15; Luke 12:4; John 15:14–15). This characteristic is not only confined to the life of Christ. In Eden, one finds God walking in the garden, presumably to have interaction with his creation and Adam and Eve in particular (Gen 3:8). In other words, it is part of God's disposition to be friendly towards his

creatures. Even after the fall, we find that God's servants are often designated as his friends, which implies a two-sided relationship (e.g. Jas 2:23).

Friendliness assumes a number of individual divine attributes such as personality, kindness, love, benevolence, 'emotivity', grace, and goodwill. In other words, God's personality, kindness, love, benevolence, 'emotivity', grace, and goodwill come together and present themselves to us in a broader, relational attribute or quality of divine friendliness.

This means that the current enmity between God and man is a direct result of the fall of man into sin. It is not as a result of any anti-social tendency or a capricious nature within God. The fault for the disruption in friendship lies at the feet of man and his sin, not God.

This attribute of God has immediate devotional implications in the life of the unbeliever and believer. For the unbeliever, it speaks of grace and goodwill toward him, and an encouragement to be restored into a genuine friendship through Christ with the living God. There is willingness within God to forgive the sinner through the provisions of sacrifice and atonement in Christ, and to enter into a relationship with the creature which can be described as friendship.

For the believer, there is every encouragement to enjoy fellowship with this God whose disposition is towards friendship with his creation. It speaks of a restored intimacy that can and ought to be the experience of every believer.

The advantage of this approach hardly needs to be pointed out. By delineating 'friendliness' as a basic attribute of God, it provides a context for understanding the grace, kindness, love, personality, and

emotivity of God. It is not merely an academic consideration of individual attributes, but a devotional consideration of these individual attributes as God relates to his creation. Obviously, each of these individual attributes could be expanded on within this context. For example, the attribute of ‘friendliness’ immediately settles the question about the ‘knowability’ of God (see Grudem 1994:151–152). Friendship is impossible without some degree of mutual knowing and being known, and yet, does not require comprehensive knowledge. Friendship implies that God can be truly known, though not necessarily comprehensively.

### **3.2. The vengeance of God**

Another striking, consistently biblical theme in scripture is God’s indignation against sin and sinners (Gen 6:5–6; Rom 1:18). God’s wrath is always portrayed in relationship to sin and sinners, never in isolation, as if God has a naturally angry, irritable, or grumpy nature. This indignation against sin and the sinner is then expressed as vengeance (Rom 12:19).

God’s indignation and vengeance assume and contextualise a number of individual attributes, such as emotivity, personality, anger, righteousness, and holiness in relation to sin and sinners. Indignation also gives some insight into the nature of sin. Firstly, it indicates that sin, primarily, is against God (Ps 51:4). God takes sin personally, even when the actual sin is seemingly only against another creature (2 Sam 11; Ps 51:4). Secondly, it speaks of the strong emotional response in God towards sin. Sin is not a light issue with God, but a violation of his very person. His reaction to sin is indignation culminating in vengeance against those who have not been redeemed and drawn into a relationship with himself.

This attribute of vengeance decisively deals with the erroneous expression found today that 'God loves the sinner but hates the sin.' While there is a sense in which this expression is true, the Bible is equally emphatic that God hates sinners (Ps 5:5). Vengeance, by definition, is against a person, not just an abstract principle. Sin is the acting of a sinful person, and makes that person an enemy of God (Jer 46:10).

The attribute of vengeance also has immediate devotional and emotional content. It shatters any notion that God's anger is either mild or only directed against some abstract principle. It is directed against sinners who have become God's enemy and stresses the urgency of reconciliation with a vengeful God before the day of vengeance (Luke 21:22). Vengeance implies an active, personal pursuit of an enemy, not a mere abstract principle of sinners receiving the natural consequences of their actions. It therefore ought to stir unbelievers to pursue reconciliation with God.

### **3.3. The artistry of God**

Any casual observer of creation cannot miss the diverse beauty of creation. God could easily have created a single type of bird, plant, fish, and animal. These could have been bland in appearance and functional in design. Yet, in creation, we find an astounding variety of design, colour, sound, and taste. This points to God's intrinsic artistry, where he delights to give vent to his creativity and power. The artistry of God, therefore, draws together individual attributes such as power, personality, ingenuity, and omniscience. All the wonders of human creativity are a faint reflection of the creator's artistry and creativity, and aid our understanding of man being created in God's image.

There is neither a blandness nor lack of variety in God's creativity. Therefore, there should be a corresponding enjoyment in all the aspects of God's creative beauty and variety that our senses can perceive. This attribute comments directly on asceticism. It means that religions that emphasise ascetic lifestyles for the mere sake of it are contrary to God's nature and will (e.g. 1 Tim 4:1–4; Col 2:20–23). God has created variety and beauty of all shapes, sizes, colours, and tastes to delight the senses of the creature and resound to the creator's glory. The biblical forms of temporal self-deprivation, such as fasting and self-denial are due to the 'fallenness' of creation and to aid our striving within that context (Matt 9:14–15).

The devotional quality of this attribute is manifold. For example, it must heighten the desire of believers to experience God's new heavens and new earth, where the results of his artistic creativity will not be marred by the fall. Randy Acorn has highlighted the continuity between the old earth and new earth (2004:49–51). If this earth displays the magnificence of God's creativity, the new heavens and new earth are sure to be beyond description.

### **3.4. The ego of God**

Greg Nichols (Lecture 21:1994) has an almost unique treatment of the ego of God in his lectures on the doctrine of God. An ego can be described as the 'self' of a person (Collins 1982:356), and is closely related to one's image of oneself.

Isaiah 46:5–11 gives us an insight into God's estimate of himself. God says that when he considers himself, and then looks over all creation, there is no one as great as he is. Nothing can even remotely be compared to him. It is important to notice that Isaiah 46:5 expresses God's estimate of himself. There is no 'third-party' doing an evaluation

and comparing God to the universe. This is God himself, reflecting on his own being, and then declaring to people that he is so great and glorious that nothing at all can ever be compared to him. In this text we see God's ego on full display (see also Jer 9:24–25; Isa 48:9–11). Conversely, there is no verse in scripture where God ever indicates to his creation that they are over-esteeming him. Fallen creation invariably under-esteems him. There is therefore no false humility or coyness on God's part regarding his glory and majesty. God's ego or self-esteem, therefore, draws together individual attributes such as personality, self-awareness, power, wisdom, and majesty.

One of the basic truths in scripture is that God does all things for his glory (Eph 1:5–6). This includes making sure that his person and works are displayed before his creation.

Such egocentricity is the height of sin in the creature, and utterly repulsive (e.g. Prov 27:2; Matt 23:5–7). This attribute, therefore, may seem to create some problems. Firstly, God judges and humbles his creatures when they seek to glorify themselves (Isa 5:15; Matt 23:12). Secondly, scripture indicates that pride and self-glorification are sinful (Prov 16:18; Hos 5:5). Is God thus not guilty of sin, and unjust in judging his creatures for attempting to do what he does?

This problem vanishes when we consider the greatness of God. His divine attributes of infinity, omniscience, omnipotence, self-sufficiency, majesty, and wisdom mean that he is worthy of praise and admiration, and that it is in fact altogether righteous and just that he should esteem himself to be worthy of such praise. There are many attitudes or actions that, while being sinful for the creature to perform, are entirely legitimate for God to perform. For example, while it is wrong for man to take revenge, God can legitimately take revenge on his enemies, as noted earlier (Lev 19:18; Rom 12:19). It is the same with God's self-

glorification. It is sinful for man to parade himself and seek his own glory, since he is a limited creature entirely dependent on his creator. This is even truer after the fall. Man has in fact nothing to boast of within himself (Eph 2:8–9). This is not true of God, however. He alone is self-sufficient.

As an aside, a closer look at Isaiah 46:5–11 provides some valuable insights into the basis of God’s estimation of himself. In verse 9, God contemplates his own being and declares himself to be utterly glorious and the unique God. Verse 10 gives the immediate attribute that God is contemplating, namely, his sovereign rule over all creation. In other words, in this passage, God’s ego or self-esteem is based on his contemplation of his sovereignty. His sense of his own deity is tied closely to his awareness of his supreme sovereignty. A denial of God’s sovereignty must therefore substantively detract from God’s glory and rob him of an essential aspect of his glorious deity. Scripture reveals that the will of the creature (human or otherwise) never thwarts God’s decree, predetermination, and ruling providence over all events, including the salvation of man. He controls and determines random events (Prov 16:33). He controls all aspects of nature (Ps 104:14, 17, 21, 27–30). He raises and brings down rulers and empires (Dan 2:20–21; 4:35). He has complete control over evil (Acts 4:27–28), and even chooses who will be saved out of a depraved humanity (Acts 13:48; Eph 1:3–6, 11). The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (and the Westminster Confession of Faith) ably expounds the biblical testimony to God’s sovereignty (e.g. Waldron 1989:60–73).

The man-centredness of much modern Christianity and prevalence of Arminianism (which is closely aligned with the prevailing world view centred on man’s autonomy) seriously undermine God’s glory and

essential deity. God certainly has no doubt about his sovereign rule and authority.

### **3.5. The abundance of God**

The scriptures often depict God as the provider (Ps 104:27–28) and sustainer of all things (Ps 104:19–23). His provision extends to all of creation, and it consists of a vast variety, from physical needs (Ps 104:21) to spiritual salvation (Deut 32:43). The scope of God's sustaining influence is no less varied. The quality of this provision and sustenance leads us to conclude that there is an infinite abundance in God. It is not meagre, but bountiful (2 Cor 9:8). God's provision for sinners in Christ speaks of unimaginable lavishness on the undeserving (Rom 8:32). There is grace upon grace. Numerous biblical images of God's abundance are given. For example, God is described as a fountain, indicating his consistent and abundant provision (Ps 36:9; Jer 2:13).

This attribute draws together individual attributes of God's infinity, grace, kindness, wisdom, and power. Some qualifications need to be noted. Firstly, this does not mean that, at times, God does not let people experience need. He often sends famine or deprivation. But these are invariably to warn people of sin and to turn them back to himself, the fountain of living water (Jer 2:13, 30). Also, those material and earthly deprivations that he does send are to accomplish spiritual good in his people (Jas 1:2–5) and earn for them immeasurably greater rewards in heaven (Matt 5:11).

Secondly, hell is a place of total deprivation. In hell, unbelievers receive no good thing from God. Nevertheless, for his children, God has an overabundant abundance. Having lavished his grace on them through the gift of his Son, how will he not give them all things (Rom 8:32)?

The pictures of heaven depict immense abundance for redeemed sinners. Even the streets are made of gold (Rev 21:21)! While hell is the total removal of all abundance and provision, heaven is the removal of any want or influence that can diminish joy and gladness.

There are times when believers reflect on their lives and experience the state of blessedness and contentment (Ps 23:1). God's spiritual and temporal blessings satisfy their souls. However, there is still no need to be shy or feel guilty for asking God for more blessings. It is not as if God is depleted in any way in blessing and providing for his people. This again does not mean that we must expect that God will provide every material need we ask for. After all, God's purpose is to make us holy and Christ-like. This is often accomplished through trials, difficulties, and deprivation (Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 1:6–8).

#### **4. The Abuse of God's Attributes**

All statements of scripture can be twisted and misrepresented (2 Pet 3:16). As with the individual attributes of God, the above relational attributes of God can also be misunderstood or misrepresented. In other words, a systemic approach to God's attributes does not entirely remove the potential deficiencies from which the historic approach often suffered. For example, an isolated, narrow emphasis on God's friendliness can lead to loss of fear of God and flippant, superficial Christianity. An isolated emphasis on God's indignation and vengeance can diminish the enjoyment of intimacy with God through Christ. An unbiblical understanding of God's abundance can lead to the destructive 'health and wealth' teachings which are prominent in some Christian circles today. However, this paper argues for the fact that when God is considered according to his relational attributes, the potential deficiencies of the historic approach are lessened, as the individual

attributes are given a broader context within which they can be correctly interpreted.

Any consideration of God's attributes must always take into account all that God reveals himself to be. For this reason, our view of God must be based on all the revelation of who he is and what he does to have a complete picture of our glorious God.

## 5. Conclusion

There is nothing more important than having a correct view of God. This paper argues that, while the historic approach to the doctrine of God by defining and examining God according to isolated attributes does have value and biblical warrant, there are other relational attributes that provide equally valuable insights into who and what God is. These broader, relational attributes assume and often contextualise these individual attributes and, therefore, diminish the risk of the individual attributes being distorted through scholasticism and philosophical speculation outside the intent of scripture.

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