

Series: Incommunicable Attributes of God #1677

Title: Introduction: Contemplating God

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. It's always good to have you with us, and especially today as we begin to take on aspects to the nature and character of who God is, some things that perhaps (actually, in many cases) you have not thought of before. For example, I want to talk with you about the doctrine (or the teaching) of the simplicity of God and the aseity of God. God's simplicity and God's aseity are essential to grasp but they are difficult to understand. This will definitely require some *thinking* on our part. We will need to bring our *minds* to this. If we will, we will enjoy the benefits of gaining a more robust understanding of who God is. And it is my prayer that you will join us and invite someone to listen with you.

Before we dig into the theology (simply put, by theology I mean the study of God), before we dig into the theology, these doctrines, I want to spend some time highlighting a struggle or a problem we face in discussing these aspects to who God is in our contemporary culture – and by that I mean *Christian* culture. Most of you who listen to me are Christians, or you claim to be, or you are at least open minded about the God of the Bible. And for those of you who tune in and none of what I have just said describes you, you're very welcome to be here. Thank you for listening and I hope you will continue to seek the truth about who God is, who you are in relation to Him, and how you can enjoy peace with God through your faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something I am always available to discuss with you, and my mailing and email addresses are included at the end of the program so stay tuned for those, and write to me.

As Christians, and especially functioning in our Christian communities (churches primarily), we suffer from two of what Carl Trueman describes as “pathologies.” Trueman is a Christian historian, insightful also about theology, and he's written several helpful books, the most popular of which deals with culture by the title *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. I recommend it to you. I heard him give a recent lecture on classical theology and in that presentation he mentioned these pathologies alive in the Christian church. Pathologies, meaning the conditions of a disease or a problem. Both of these reflect the larger world around us.

First, he says, we live in an era of “instrumental reason.” We like arguments that lead to practical results. We are a very *practical* people. But a lot of theology is contemplative. The purpose is *not* practical. For example, theologians in the ancient period (the first century AD through, say 590AD), in the medieval period (590-1517AD), all the way through the reformation period (1517-1750), the Puritans, and even a bit beyond that into what we can call the modern period – when we read these theologians and pastors and bishops and thinkers and Christian philosophers and writers – what we get is *the contemplation of God as an end in itself*. The theology, the study of God, was not instrumental to something else. A great deal of their time and attention was given to working through who God is by investing time examining Him in the Scripture and in the mind.

Here are some names, in no particular order. Maybe you have read these? Irenaeus, Anselm, Origin, Augustine, Clement, Athanasius, certainly the Reformers and the Puritans (whom you know I favor), and many others, when we read them we gain a tremendous amount of insight into the Living God, because they contemplated Him and thought about Him and wrote about the Lord with that as their goal. They were not so quick to jump from, let's say the theoretical to the practical. But in the church today the majority of us are not like them. We clamor for what is *relevant* and *practical*!

Christians, attending churches, demand their pastors and ministers deliver sermons that are not just pragmatic, but *overly* pragmatic. Even pastors and teachers who resist this and would love to dig deeper into the Scripture and borrow from these learned and Christ exalting theologians of the past are facing an uphill climb because they know people will not come, attendance will diminish, if they go down this path. For these spiritual leaders, I pray.

And my heart goes out to them because when I was a pastor in a specific church – for those years I served in this way – my congregation also demanded that I be...I am quoting, “More relevant.” It is very challenging to lead the people of God, in the Word of God, if you are committed to the contemplation of God as an end in itself! For those of you with ministers who *do* this, encourage them!

That being said, in my experience, most pastors – even well trained ones in the seminaries – and I say this feeling very sad about this, sometimes even distraught, the majority very much want to and enjoy being purely practical. These ministers, themselves, are only contemplating God and the Scripture insofar as it is a means to an end – that which helps the person in the pew solve a present and persistent dilemma. So, our evangelical churches, are filled to the brim with “How To” sermons, teaching, and talks (conferences). How to save your marriage, how to overcome addiction, how to better parent your children, how to fix your finances, and so on. “Hey, Pastor, give me something I can use!” The days of a pastor or minister or spiritual leader also being a theologian seem, dare I say it, *gone!* I seriously shudder to think it.

Ironically, sort of, let me now share with you a practical example of this that comes from the Trueman lecture. He cites the average church prayer meeting. If you attend, and I think we should attend our church’s prayer meeting, if you attend you know that ninety percent of the prayer requests are for healing of illnesses and diseases. Everything ranging from “pray for my cat who just does not seem himself, he’s not been eating” to “intercede for my grandmother who has cancer.” Now we are commanded in Scripture to pray for the sick. We should and we must seek God on their behalf. *But*, we are commanded to pray for *more* than the sick.

In contrast to most of our prayers, Trueman recites the prayer of a Patristic theologian, the 4th century archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus. He prayed the following, “O All-Transcendent God what words can sing Your praises? No word does You justice. What mind can probe Your secret? No mind can encompass You. You are alone beyond the power of speech, yet all that we speak stems from You. You are alone beyond the power of thought, yet all that we can conceive springs from You. All things proclaim You, those endowed with reason and those bereft of it. All the expectation and pain of the world coalesces in You. All things utter a prayer to You, a silent hymn composed by You. You sustain everything that exists, and all things move together to Your orders. You are the goal of all that exists. You are one and You are all, yet You are none of the things that exist, neither a part nor the whole. You can avail Yourself of any name; how shall I call You, the only unnamable? All-transcendent God!”

In that prayer – wow! – we get rich *theology* and that came from the heart and mouth of a man who *contemplated God*. This is not exactly the sort of prayer that comes out of our inner being or that of a man or woman at the Wednesday evening or Sunday morning time of intercession in our local congregation, is it? If many of today’s believers heard such a prayer the response might well be, “How impractical. How lofty and full of himself is this guy? All that flowery language. *And*, he didn’t even mention my aunt who needs pray for the swelling of her ankles.”

First, Trueman says, we live in an era of “instrumental reason.” We like arguments that lead to practical results. We are a very *practical* people. But a lot of theology is contemplative. The purpose is *not* practical. This is a problem we will face as we move towards a discussion on divine simplicity and aseity and associated doctrines.

Second and related, in this same lecture Dr. Carl Trueman is right to point out that we live in what he calls a very “therapeutic culture.” Our beliefs are most important when connected to our needs. God exists, so many people in our churches believe, God exists to be our therapist. He states, quote, “The contemplation of God as God is not a significant part of modern protestant, reformed, or evangelical piety.” Again, he is correct. We have gotten to the point where God exists for us, not us for God. We (“me”) are the focus, not the Lord. And if we do not get what we think we need out of church, then we are out of there and driving down the street or across the town or city to the next church to listen to the more popular, *practical* speaker.

Have you noticed this within yourself? Within others? Let’s continue this discussion next time on God Is.

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