

Series: Incommunicable Attributes of God #1685

Title: Questions About Divine Simplicity

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. I hope you have been with us, listening for what it means that God is simple. By this we mean God has no parts, because if God was made up of parts then a) He would have to depend upon the parts of which He was composed and b) He would have to depend on whatever maker, composer, or assembler put together those parts in God. But God was not made by a maker outside of Himself. Therefore, no other being put God together using many parts. Let me put it this way: God does not depend on what is not God to be God. God does not depend on what is not Himself to be Himself, is another way to put it.

Sometimes statements like these take a moment to settle in, so let me say this again: God does not depend on what is not God to be God. God does not depend on what is not Himself to be Himself. That's very well said and comes to us from theologian James Dolezal and his writing and lecturing on divine simplicity. And over the last couple of days together it may be that as you have listened to me a few questions have popped up into your mind. I guess this because I know that as I have read and studied the simplicity of God I have had questions. So, I want to anticipate these inquiries and answer them as best I can given our limited time. Let's at least start this today.

Whenever we talk about the attributes of God we have to keep simplicity in mind, because as we have said, the attributes (or the excellencies and perfections of God) these are not parts of God that when cobbled together make up God. Now, as soon as I say this a legitimate question can be raised. How can an absolutely simple God have more than one attribute? Or, are we saying that all God's many attributes are identical to one another?

That is exactly what we are saying, in this sense. All that is in God is just God. Quoting Dr. Dolezal now, "God doesn't have love, He is love. He *is* the love by which He loves. God doesn't have wisdom, He is wisdom. He *is* the wisdom by which He is wise." End quote. Think about it. To be human and to love are not the same thing. I am human and I can love but I can also hate. To be human and to be wise are not the same thing. I am human and can be wise, but I can also be a fool. But in God love and wisdom are the same thing because love and wisdom are God. And this applies to all the other attributes, excellencies and perfections. I am using love and wisdom as examples.

The Puritan John Owen is helpful here. Listen to what he writes, "The attributes of God, which alone seem to be distinct things in the essence of God are all essentially the same with one another and every one of them the same with God Himself (*Works*, 12:72)." You see, friends, God is God. His attributes are really one attribute. His excellencies are really one excellence. His perfections are really one perfection.

"Ah," someone says, "if that is true, then how come we talk about God's many attributes (plural)? And *if* God is simple, then how come our talk about God is not so simple?" Good questions! It is true that when we talk about God we have to talk about Him in a way that is very human, because...we are human. This is when we find ourselves bumping headlong into our limitations. This happens to me all the time preparing to talk about the Living God with you. How can I use my words to speak of Him in such a way that is accurate to who God is and without being esoteric so that you're like, "What?"

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to say that God, recognizing our human limitations, God allows us to think of Him and speak of Him in multi-parted ways even though He has no parts. The Lord knows He is incomprehensible to you and me. And so He gives us a revelation of Himself that is in our language and that speaks into our bounded minds and hearts. Or, another way to put it: God is infinite and we are finite. How does the infinite communicate with the finite? He condescends to us.

Take for example one of God's perfections: His mercy. When the Bible talks about the mercy of God it does so often in ways that may make it seem like God is being merciful and, in those moments, only merciful. But that's a misreading, because while God is showing mercy He is simultaneously also wrath, justice, immutable, and so on (all His other perfections continue to operate while we, reading the text, may only find His mercy). And then when I talk about this, with my vocabulary, I say, "God is merciful," indicating that it is God, plus mercy. But there is no distinction in God between being God and being merciful. I may make a distinction in my language, but the corresponding distinction between God and mercy is not there within God. Do you see what I mean?

Dr. Dolezal, drawing on the analogy of earlier generations, talks about the effects of white light when it goes through a prism. This is called the dispersion of light, invented by Sir Isaac Newton. This is how it works. If on a very clear and sunny day you take a piece of cardboard with a small hole in the center and hold that up to the light. On the table put a prism. And then behind the prism hang a pure white sheet.

When the sunlight, blasting through the hole in the cardboard hits the prism out the other end of the prism and onto your white sheet fall all the colors of the rainbow. Going from the bottom up you will see the beautiful colors violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. This dispersion of light, the spectrum, results in all these colors. We see this in a rainbow, or sometimes a water fountain, bubbles, even on a CD (if you remember what a CD is).

The reality is there is only one color light. That is white. But when the white light is refracted – wow - out the other end we see all the colors. In this analogy God is the white light. He is only white light. All His attributes are just that white light. Ah, but when we encounter God we see violet (that's one attribute), indigo (a different attribute), blue (still yet another attribute) and so on. That is, God allows us to experience Him and to speak of Him in what can consider to be "multi-parted ways," even though God is not multi-parted. God has no parts. God is simple.

This is our answer to these questions: how come we talk about God's many attributes (plural)? And if God is simple, how come our talk about God is not so simple? I hope what I have passed along to you is helpful for you think through this some more on your own. Let's move on to a third question that often comes up when we discuss divine simplicity. And that is a question about the Trinity.

Doesn't the biblical teaching on the Trinity contradict this teaching on God being simple? If God is simple, then why is God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Isn't the Father one part of God, the Son (Jesus Christ) a second part of God, and the Holy Spirit the third part of God? That, right there, is three parts. But you have been telling us He has no parts. Well, let us handle this simply (no pun intended) given our time.

The statement that I have just made, putting it in the form of a question, is not accurate. The Bible *does* teach that God is one in three and three in one. God is Father. God is Son. God is Holy Spirit. He is *simply* one in three and three in one. And everything God does is done in a Triune way. Though we believe in three distinct Persons (capital P), we do not believe in each Person in the Trinity being a part. The Person of God the Father is not one part, the Person of Jesus Christ the Son another part, and the Person of the Holy Spirit yet a third part. No. What we believe is God is three Persons in One, not three parts in one. That is a straightforward way to answer this question, or concern.

A couple of thoughts: first, you may need to know more about the Trinity, about the Trinitarian nature of God, before you can grasp what has just been said. The Trinity is not an easy doctrine to understand. Again, our human limitations show up. I want to encourage you to dig in and study what the Bible says about the Triune God, and as you do, think about how simple God is. Second, there are (presently and historically) some theologians and deep thinkers on divine simplicity who argue that the Trinity means that God is *not* simple. I will not be sharing these voices and opinions with you because their arguments get technical and we want to keep on moving on. But, you will not be the first person to object with something like this: if simplicity is true, then the Trinity is not true. I believe that has been disproven, but that's for another day.

Speaking of which, I have to go! More on this next time because God Is.

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