

Chapter 6

THE PERSONALITY OF GOD

THE MEANING OF PERSONALITY

One of the most important truths about God is that He is personal. Not surprisingly, however, theologians differ over what *personality* means.³⁴⁵ Sometimes personality is described by the three qualities of intellect, emotion, and will. At other times, only two qualities are indicated: self-consciousness (i.e., the ability to make oneself the object of one's own thoughts) and self-determination (i.e., determination or will that arises from within). Variations of these exist. For example E. Y. Mullins suggests that personality means "one who is intelligent, self-conscious, self-determining, and moral."³⁴⁶ Millard Erickson says that God's personality means that "He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings."³⁴⁷ Alva J. McClain, however, gives the most preferable (and extensive) definition, saying: "Personality is a name given to the nucleus of a definite group of functions or characteristics." He continues, explaining further that "personality is living, intelligent, purposive, active, free, self-conscious, emotional *spirit*."³⁴⁸ This definition will be followed in the discussion below of God's personality.

³⁴⁵ See A. H. Strong, who lists several definitions (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907], p. 253).

³⁴⁶ *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Development* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1917), p. 217.

³⁴⁷ *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 295.

³⁴⁸ Alva J. McClain, "The Doctrine of God" (Theology notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN).

Finally, it is impossible to make a clear dichotomy between attributes and personality. God is both personal and absolute (i.e., He is self-contained in every attribute, and His attributes and His person are correlative). In other words, God *is* what His attributes are. The attributes are not simple abstractions but are what characterize Him as a *person*. And His personality is not abstract and free from His attributes but is, rather, characterized by them.³⁴⁹

THE COMPONENTS OF PERSONALITY

Spirituality

Spirituality is considered by some theologians to be a divine attribute, something which belongs to the divine essence itself, rather than a component of personality. Erickson, for instance, makes spirit an attribute of God's greatness.³⁵⁰ Louis Berkhof understands God's spirituality as one of His communicable attributes, one of those which belong to God as a personal Spirit (along with the moral and intellectual attributes and those attributes of sovereignty).³⁵¹ These both reinforce the fact that the line between attributes and personality is thin.

What is clear, however, is that God is indeed a *spiritual* being. Jesus affirms, for instance, that "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). Jesus is here simply reflecting the theology of the second commandment, which testifies to

³⁴⁹ See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), p. 602.

³⁵⁰ *Christian Theology*, p. 289. See also J. Carl Laney, Jr., "God," in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 180.

³⁵¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 65–66.

the spirituality of God when it says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Exod 20:4; cf. Deut 4:12, 15; Rom 1:23). In short, this is itself a commandment to worship God spiritually because God is Spirit. He is, in sum, the infinite and perfect Spirit, and He is to be apprehended and worshipped spiritually.

Two ideas are comprised in the fact of God’s spirituality. First, there is the idea that God is personal. That is, the functions, characteristics, or attributes of personality arise out of spirit. Spirit is, in this sense, the metaphysical source of personality but not necessarily a synonym for personality.³⁵² Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, in their section on God’s spirituality, agree, suggesting that “‘God is Spirit’ means that God is one indivisible, *personal* [emphasis added], living, and active being.”³⁵³ Herman Hoeksema also connects the two, summarily saying, God (who is spirit) “is absolute, self-existent Personality. Everywhere in Scripture he meets us as *the Ego*, in whom consciousness and self-consciousness are absolutely one and identical.”³⁵⁴ Erickson, however, demurs, contending that spirituality does not imply personality because Aristotle, Hinduism, and others suggest reality is one great, thinking mind or some other kind of *impersonal* spirit.³⁵⁵ Erickson’s observation notwithstanding, this idea of *impersonal* Spirit is foreign to *biblical* thought, for in Scripture, a

³⁵² This counteracts the purely materialistic view of personality which suggests that it arises out of the brain, though, it must be admitted, there is an undeniable and necessary connection between the two. God is the very essence of personality because He is pure spirit (John 4:24; cf. Heb 12:9).

³⁵³ *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:197.

³⁵⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub., 1966), p. 59.

³⁵⁵ *Christian Theology*, p. 295.

spiritual being is, by definition, personal.³⁵⁶ In sum, there is no such thing as an impersonal spirit in theology.

Finally, because of God's personality, one can have fellowship and communion with Him. Because of His tri-personality, one can be not only in fellowship and communion with God but can also be indwelt by Him through the Holy Spirit. Christianity is the only religion that puts a worshipper in personal touch with its Founder and causes him to be *personally* indwelt by the Founder.

A second idea that God's spirituality comprises is His incorporeality and invisibility. In essence, spirit has no necessary connection with matter; it has neither physical nature nor aspect. God is, therefore, neither material nor reliant upon such. As Strong notes, "Spirit . . . is an immaterial substance, invisible, uncompounded, indestructible."³⁵⁷ And, since spirit in itself has no body or bodily parts, so neither does God.

Again, the prohibition of the second commandment shows God as an incorporeal spirit (Exod 20:4; 34:17) who is lawfully worshipped *only* spiritually (cf. John 4:24). Further, Moses clearly recounts that when Israel heard God's voice at Sinai, they saw no form because God is invisible (Deut 4:12). Paul speaks similarly in Colossians when he speaks of Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (1:15) and in 1 Timothy when he prays to "the King . . . invisible, the only God" (1:17).

In sum, God is of an essence which makes Him a being all His own, distinct from the universe. He is immaterial, invisible, and without composition or extension.³⁵⁸ As matter has properties that manifest

³⁵⁶ For example, Scripture speaks of spirit's perceiving (Mark 2:8), purposing (Acts 19:21), rejoicing (Luke 1:47), and worshipping (John 4:23)—all activities of *personal* beings.

³⁵⁷ *Systematic Theology*, p. 249.

³⁵⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 66

themselves directly to the bodily senses, Spirit has properties that manifest itself directly to the self-consciousness.³⁵⁹

There are a few questions, however, raised by such a discussion. First, how are texts explained which depict various people as having seen God? For example, Moses (and a few others) “saw the God of Israel. . . . They saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exod 24:10–11). In fact, Moses describes God as speaking “with [him] face to face just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:11). Isaiah describes a similar situation in which he “saw the Lord sitting on a throne” (Isa 6:1).

These are best understood as *theophanies* (i.e., appearances of God). God was not seen as an invisible Spirit but in a visible form in which He chose to be manifested, though the particular manifestation, as such, did not have a divine nature. At other times, Scripture recounts that God chose to manifest Himself as a dove (John 1:32) and a burning bush (Exod 3:2–6). Further, when God chose to manifest Himself in a human person, it was always the pre-incarnate Christ. And, since the incarnation, God has chosen to manifest Himself permanently in Jesus Christ. That is, to see Jesus is to see God (John 14:9; Acts 7:56).

Second, if God is an invisible Spirit, how can He have hands, feet, eyes, and ears as numerous texts indicate? These are best understood as *anthropomorphism*, which is, as described in chapter 2, the metaphorical attribution of bodily parts to God. These expressions are rhetorical aids for the common people for whom the Bible was written. That is, Scripture was not written primarily for the philosopher and his philosophical inquiries. Most people cannot think of a purely spiritual person without some kind of bodily extension. As such, anthropomorphism is exceedingly

³⁵⁹ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 140.

helpful, allowing the finite mind to understand the infinite and spiritual God. In fact, it was the incarnation which was the final installment of anthropomorphism (and theophanies, as well). God revealed Himself completely, perfectly, and finally in terms of a physical body. The incarnation was in the physical form from which the human body is patterned;³⁶⁰ it is not some form of Platonic formulaic abstraction.

Life

On numerous occasions Scripture calls God the *living* God. For instance, the Israelites ask, “Who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the *living* God?” (Deut 5:26). Jeremiah writes, “The Lord is the true God; He is the *living* God and the everlasting King” (Jer 10:10). Paul speaks of the Thessalonians who gave evidence of their conversion in that they had “turned from idols to serve a *living* and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). Paul says on another occasion that believers fix their “hope on the *living* God” (1 Tim 4:10; cf. Josh 3:10; Ps 42:2; Matt 16:16; and 2 Cor 6:16). Another way Scripture speaks of this is with the Old Testament phrase “as the Lord lives,” which is a form of an oath (1 Kgs 17:1; 2 Kgs 2:2, 4, 6; et al.), in fact, an oath God sometimes imposed on Himself (e.g., “As I live,’ declares the Lord,” Isa 49:18; Jer 22:24; et al.).

This *life* spoken of here refers in its theological sense to potential energy or activity directed by its own intelligence. In other words, God is able to do things external to Himself, while the non-living are unable to *do* anything.³⁶¹ Further, internally, God is active in Himself. That is,

³⁶⁰ John Gill, *Body of Divinity* (reprint ed., Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1965), p. 52.

³⁶¹ As McClain says, life “means that [God] is able to do things, things which the non-personal cannot do” (“The Doctrine of God”).

this life speaks of God's self-sufficient, self-referring, self-affirming, self-maintaining energy out of which He is able to do things external to Himself.³⁶²

Theologians differ in their descriptions of this life. For instance, Both Heinrich Heppe and Strong connect life to mental activity, speaking of it as the energy of the mind.³⁶³ Gerald Bray, on the other hand, notes the difference in the Greek words *dunamis* and *energeia* and suggests that God's life is not only potential (*dunamis*) but also active (*energeia*) in Himself, independent from His creative activity or anything external to Himself. Thus, His creative acts spring from His own intrinsic or pure action, from His own self-sufficient energy.³⁶⁴ Robert D. Culver speaks simply of life as self-movement, which, he suggests, indicates such life.³⁶⁵ John Gill speaks similarly, calling "life . . . a principle in the creature by which it moves itself. . . . It is self-motion only that shows a creature to be alive."³⁶⁶

Finally, as the distinctly *living* God, God is able to (1) impart life to others (Gen 2:7); (2) speak (Deut 5:26); (3) create and preserve the universe (Jer 10:10–13); (4) deliver His people (Dan 6:26–27); (5) work miracles (Josh 3:10–17); (6) save men from sin (1 Tim 4:10); (7) impart life to others (Gen 2:7); and (8) judge and punish sinners (Heb 10:30–31).

³⁶² This is in contrast, say, to dynamite which certainly has potential energy, but its power is not directed by its own intelligence; its existence cannot be described as a living existence nor can it be said to have personality.

³⁶³ Cf. respectively *Reformed Dogmatics* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 68 and *Systematic Theology*, p. 252. Strong also defines God's life as "having in his own being a source of being and activity, both for himself and others" (*ibid.*). Strong's point seems to reflect both David's statement that "with [God] is the fountain of life" (Ps 36:9) and Paul's that "in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28). E. Y. Mullins similarly says that "the life of God is his activity of thought, feeling, and will" (*The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 219).

³⁶⁴ *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 59ff.

³⁶⁵ *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Fern, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2005), p. 72.

³⁶⁶ *Body of Divinity* (reprint ed., Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1965), p. 32. He later says that "the life of God is *of himself*" (p. 51).