

## Lesson 4

### Part One – Introduction to Systematic Theology

- I. Introduction
  - a. What is Systematic Theology?
  - b. What is the relation between Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics?
  - c. Why is it important to study the Bible systematically?

### Part Two – Theology Proper - Beginning at the Beginning

- I. Introduction to the One True God
  - a. Arguments for the existence of God
  - b. Why only one God
- II. The Nature of God
  - a. God's incommunicable perfections (attributes)
  - b. **God's communicable attributes**

According to **Genesis 1:26**, God said, *“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...”* This doesn't mean that God looks like us, it simply means that there are certain of God's attributes that He has seen fit to share with us. Before we proceed with our study, note this: Whereas God's attributes are often referred to as His *“perfections,”* the attributes that **we** possess as a result of his communicating them to us are **not** perfect. Since the fall of man, we exhibit what are often referred to as *“tainted”* attributes. In other words, God *is*, by nature, love and that is an attribute that He has shared with us. However, because of our fallen nature, we are utterly incapable of loving perfectly. Our love, which has been tainted by the fall, is imperfect. By and large, we love conditionally while God loves unconditionally. The same can be said of the other attributes that God has shared with us (we have an intellect but it is not the same as omniscience; we have a sense of justice but it is imperfect; we exhibit righteousness from time to time but it is in no way a perfect righteousness, etc.)

It is also very important that we acknowledge that the reason God has shared these attributes with us is not for our benefit (that's a by-product) but for His glory. God has communicated some of His divine attributes with us so we will better understand who He is and, in turn, glorify Him.

- **Spirituality** – According to **John 4:24**, *“God is Spirit...”* Contrary to the teaching of the Mormons who believe that God has a very real human body, this means that God has no *“corporeity”*; he is said to be *“incorporeal”* or without a physical body.

As Gill observed:

*“God is a spirit, and not a body, or a corporeal substance: the nature and essence of God is like a spirit, simple and uncompounded, not made up of parts; nor is it divisible; nor does it admit of any change and alteration. God, as a spirit, is immaterial, immortal, invisible, and an intelligent, willing, and active being; but differs from other spirits, in that he is not created, but an immense and infinite spirit, and an eternal one, which has neither beginning nor end...”*

And how are we to understand God’s spirituality as a communicable attribute? John goes on to say that those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth. Here we see the connection between God being Spirit and our being spiritual beings as well. The fact that we are spiritual as well as physical beings is well documented in Scripture (see **Romans 8:16**, for example).

### ***What about the passages in Scripture which attribute physical attributes to God?***

These are known theologically as “*anthropomorphisms*” and are simply condescensions made by God to accommodate our understanding of that which would otherwise be impossible to understand.

- **Sovereignty** – We referenced **Genesis 1:26** with regard to our being made in the image of God. If we read a little further, we see that we have also been given sovereignty over “...*the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.*” In this way, God has shared a bit of His transcendent sovereignty with us over the things in our own environment.
- **Intellect (includes knowledge, wisdom, & veracity)** – God is omniscient, that is, He knows everything there is to know. Made in God’s image, we too are intellectual creatures.
- **Morality (includes goodness, love, grace, mercy, & longsuffering)** – God is a moral being and, since we have been created in His likeness, we too exhibit varying degrees of morality. As you’ll recall, this is one of the leading arguments for the existence of God. Man has an innate or in-born sense of right and wrong, a sense of morality that is not shared with any of the other creatures. Where does this morality come from? Where does the sense of justice come from? If man is only a biological or physical being, why does he have a sense of moral obligation? Evolutionists have long wrestled with these questions because the evolutionary model is simply not able to answer them. As Christians, however, we understand these things as having come from God.

Look at **Romans 2:14-15** and we'll see that even Gentiles who have had no revelation of and no exposure to the law have an inner, moral witness placed there by God. Paul writes:

*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

- **Holiness** – God is holy, that is, He is set apart from all other “gods” who would dare claim equality with Him. God has also shared his holiness with His children. As He is set apart, we too have been set apart. We are the *hagiosmoi*, the “*set apart ones*,” for the cause of Christ in the world. Throughout the word of God we see, both implicitly and explicitly, the exhortation to God’s children to be holy as He is holy. The following passages shed light on this reality: **Leviticus 11:44-45, Leviticus 19:2, Leviticus 20:7, & 1 Peter 1:15-16.**
- **Righteousness** – Righteousness is another of God’s shared or communicable attributes. One of the best proof texts for this is **Philippians 3:8-9**. There, Paul expresses his desire to possess, not his own righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ.

*“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...”*

So then, our righteousness comes from Christ and is not innate. As a matter of fact, throughout Scripture we see that the innate “*righteousness*” is worthless. As Isaiah said, “...*our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.*” The parable presented in **Luke 18:9-14** clearly speaks to this issue.

- **Justice** – God is perfectly just. We get our own sense of justice from His having shared this communicable attribute with us. (See *morality* above as the two are very closely related).

### c. God as Trinity

- **Definition** – The Trinity of God is a doctrine fundamental to the Christian faith. Belief or disbelief in the Trinity marks orthodoxy from unorthodoxy. Human reason, however, cannot fathom the Trinity, nor can logic explain it. Although the word “Trinity” is not found in Scripture, the doctrine is plainly taught there. The word “Trinity” really doesn’t express the Scriptural teaching as well as it could as it speaks more to the three persons than to the unity within the Trinity. The German word for this concept is *Drei-einig-keit* and is really a better word as it means “*three-oneness*.” A proper definition of the Trinity is as follows: “*The Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence – so completely united as to form one God. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*”
- **Misinterpretations/Misunderstandings** – There are several misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Trinity that have popped up over the years. Among these are:
  - **Tri-theism**. In early church history men such as John Philoponus taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was that its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within a single Godhead.
  - **Sabellianism or Modalism**. This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. A.D. 200), erred in the opposite from that of Tri-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. This teaching is thus also known as modalism because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
  - **Arianism**. Arian doctrine had its roots in Tertullian, who subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen carried Tertullian’s concept further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father “in respect to essence.” This ultimately led to Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant that Christ was created by the Father.

According to Arius there was a time when Christ did not exist. Arius and his teaching were condemned at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

- **Explanation** – There are several important things to note by way of explanation of the Trinity:
  - **God is one in regard to essence.** This means that God is essentially One. See **Deuteronomy 6:4** (the *Shema*). The word translated as “one” is the Hebrew echad and implies a “*compound unity; united one.*” This means that all three Persons possess the summation of the divine attributes but yet the essence of God is undivided. This also emphasizes that the three Persons of the Trinity do not act independently of one another. This was a constant theme of Jesus in rebuffing the charges of the Jews (see **John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10**).
  - **God is three with respect to Persons.** The word “*persons*” can be confusing but all it means is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have personality. This speaks to the error of modalism or Sabellianism which states that God is one but operates at various times in different capacities. This unity within three Persons is seen in OT passages such as **Isaiah 48:16** where the Father has sent the Messiah and the Spirit to speak to the restored nation. In **Isaiah 61:1** the Father has anointed the Messiah with the Spirit for His mission. These references emphasize both the equality and the unity of the three Persons.
  - **The three Persons have distinct relationships.** Within the Trinity exists a relationship that is expressed in terms of subsistence. The Father is not begotten nor does He proceed from any person; the Son is eternally begotten from the Father (**John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9**). The term “*generation*” suggests the Trinitarian relationship in that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (**John 14:26; 16:7**).
  - **The three Persons are equal in authority.** The Father is recognized as authoritative and supreme (**1 Corinthians 8:6**); the Son is also recognized as equal to the Father in every respect (**John 5:21-23**); the Spirit is likewise recognized as equal to the Father and the Son (cf. **Matthew 12:31**).
  - **Both the OT and NT teach important truths about the Trinity.** There are several OT passages which lend credence to the validity of the Trinity. The term “God”

in **Genesis 1:1** is the Hebrew “*Elohim*” which is a plural form for God. Likewise, the use of the words “*us*” and “*our*” at creation imply plurality. **Isaiah 7:14** refers to Messiah as Immanuel or “*God with us.*”

Ultimately, to demonstrate that the Scriptures teach the Trinity, two things must be affirmed: 1) that there is only one God, and 2) that all three Persons are called God. The *Father* is called God (**1 Corinthians 8:6**), the *Son* is called God (**Hebrews 1:8-10**), and the *Holy Spirit* is called God (**Acts 5:3-4**).

- **Difficulties** – Those who deny the Trinity sometimes object to the use of certain terms that seem to imply that Christ is inferior to the Father, which if true, would deny the Trinity. Here are a couple of the most problematic terms:
  - **The meaning of begotten.** The term *begotten* is used in several senses in respect to Christ. First it is evident in **Matthew 1:20** that Christ was begotten in His humanity but not in His deity. Christ was God from all eternity (**Micah 5:2**), but at Bethlehem He took to Himself an additional nature, namely, a human nature. The word *begotten* refers exclusively to the humanity of Christ. Psalm **2:7** and **Acts 13:33** emphasize that “*begotten*” refers to the public declaration of the Sonship of Christ. Scripture also speaks of Christ as the “*only begotten*” (monogenes) Son of God. This simply implies His *uniqueness* as the only God-man who ever lived.
  - **The meaning of firstborn.** The word “*firstborn*” is the Greek *prototokos* and literally means “first in rank.” You’ll notice throughout the NT Scriptures that this most often denotes one’s rank concerning inheritance or authority in the family. In **Colossians 1:18** where Christ is referred to as the firstborn, the meaning is clear: as firstborn, Christ is the Head of the Church and preeminent in everything. In **Hebrews 1:6** the supremacy of Christ as the firstborn is seen in that angels worship Him. Since only God is to be worshiped, what is the conclusion? That Jesus is indeed God! **Psalm 89:27** actually gives us the clearest explanations of what this term means. This is an example of synthetic poetry in Hebrew in which the second line explains the first. In this Messianic Psalm God affirms that Messiah will be the firstborn, that is, the highest of the kings of the earth.