

Sabbath School

Date: 1/17/21

WCF 2.1 (2): The Divine Essence & Attributes

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There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

“The Practice of Piety consists first, In knowing the essence of God, and that in respect of, (I.) The diverse manner of being therein, which are three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (II.) The Attributes thereof.” (Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, p. 1)

§1. Exposition of Ex. 33.18-23 & 34.6-7

(1) Moses’ request: “Shew me thy glory.” (Ex. 33.18). In other words, give me an immediate knowledge and enjoyment of the glorious Divine Essence.

(2) God’s reply: First, a twofold answer: “I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee” (Ex. 33.19).

Second, a limitation: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live.” (Ex. 33.20). And again: “thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.” (Ex. 33.23). In other words, an *a priori* knowledge of God in himself is not possible in this life, but only an *a posteriori* knowledge of God in his operations and effects (Rom. 1.20; 1Cor. 13.9-12).

(3) God’s answer to Moses’ prayer: “And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.” (Ex. 34.5). The LORD shews Moses his glory by enumerating his attributes (Ex. 34.6-7), which is the appropriate way to know God in this life.

§2. Doctrine

We cannot know God’s essence directly in this life (Ex. 33.20; 1Cor. 13.9-12); therefore we come to know him through his attributes (Ex. 34.6-7).

Terms Defined

Essence: “The whatness, or *quidditas*, of a being, which makes the being precisely what it is; e.g., the essence of Peter, Paul, and John is their humanity; the essence of God is deity, or divinity.” (Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, p. 110)

Divine Attributes: The Scriptures’ attribution of various perfections unto God accommodating to our consideration of the Divine Essence under various conceptions due to the weakness of our intellect which cannot conceive of God as he is in himself (absolutely one and undivided). Scripture attributes unto God the denial of all imperfections (e.g., he is *not* finite, *not* mortal, etc.); the perfection of all good that is found in creatures; and relative attributes which describe how his perfections relate to creatures (e.g., his goodness relates to the repentant as mercy, and to the wicked as justice).

Virtual Distinction: A distinction that is not merely conceptual, but is grounded in the reality of the *virtue* or rather the effects following the operation of the virtue of a thing, although there is no real distinction in the thing itself. For example, the virtue of heat in the sun has differing effects on different objects of its heat: e.g., it melts ice and hardens clay. From this a *virtual distinction* can be made regarding the heat of the sun, and two things--the power (or virtue) of melting and the power of hardening--can be attributed to the sun. This diversity of attributes reflects only a diversity of effects caused by the sun, and not a diversity within the sun itself, although grounded in the sun in some wise. Such are the positive or communicable attributes of God.

Ten Theses on the Essence and Attributes of God

1. The essence of God is existence itself. *I AM THAT I AM* (Ex. 3.14).
2. The essence of God in itself is imperceptible--both to the bodily senses and to the intellect--to all except God himself, *dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see* (1Tim. 6.16); *the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God* (1Cor. 2.11).
3. No definition can be given of the Essence of God, but rather only a description by way of attribution:

“The Reformed distinguish between a description and definition in this way: a description is a representation of a thing from its attributes or properties, as when, for example, you say that a man is a featherless biped. They willingly acknowledge that descriptions of God are of the same sort, as when, for example, you say that God is the absolutely first being, or Spirit from

himself. But they by no means allow a definition of him, properly speaking, whereby his essence is represented as it exists in itself.” (Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 2: *Faith in the Triune God*, p. 79)

4. Although we cannot know God immediately in his essence in this life (Ex. 33.20; 1Cor. 13.9-12), yet we can and do know him in his attributes observed in nature (Rom. 1.20) or revealed in Scripture.
5. A cause is known by its effects. Therefore God may be known through his effects, namely the works of creation and providence (especially redemption).
6. The attributes of God are not really distinct from his essence or from each other. But because his essence is infinite and incomprehensible, due to the weakness and limitation of our intellects, the only way we can come to know him in this life conceiving his attributes as distinct. This is similar to viewing a beautiful sunset on the horizon. Because the view is too large for us to see all at once, we must glance to the north, west, south, and east, and as it were piece together a complete picture from these partial views. The horizon itself is one, but our view of it is broken into parts.
7. The attributes of God are either incommunicable or communicable.
8. The incommunicable attributes of God have no analogy whatsoever in creatures, and must be stated negatively, since we can have no positive conception of what they are, so we must be content to confess what they are not.
9. The communicable attributes of God are known by drawing an analogy between God and the creatures, ascribing whatever good is found in creatures partially to be in God perfectly as the source and cause thereof. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights* (Jas. 1.17) *He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see?* (Ps. 94.9).
10. The communicable attributes are either absolute, describing God in himself (such as intellect and will), or relative, describing God as he relates to creatures (e.g., his will manifests as goodness which relates to the repentant as mercy, and to the wicked as justice).