

God's "omni" Attributes

By Andrew S. Kulikovsky B.App.Sc.(Hons)
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I. INTRODUCTION

Probably the most well known of God's incommunicable attributes are what have become known as the "omni" attributes – omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. However, none of these words are actually mentioned in the scriptures, but are in fact Latin derivatives used to identify the theological constructs pertaining to God's power, knowledge and presence.

It is because of this that these attributes of God have been misunderstood by many people – both Christians and non-Christians. People's understanding of God's power, knowledge and presence seems to be limited to their understanding of the words "omnipotence", "omniscience," and "omnipresence" respectively. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to expound the proper meaning of these words in relation to the attributes of God and the teaching of scripture.

II. OMNIPRESENCE

1. Definition

The term "omnipresence" is borrowed from Latin. It is a compound of *omni*, meaning "all," and *praesens*, meaning "here." Thus, God is always here, close to everything, next to everyone.¹ This means that God is unlimited with respect to space. As Wayne Grudem puts it, "God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places."²

A. W. Tozer posits that fewer truths are so clearly taught in scripture.³ Indeed, the scriptures teach that even though the highest heavens cannot contain God (1 Kings 8:27), He is still nearby when we pray, unlike other Gods, which don't even exist (Deuteronomy 4:7). Yet, God is not just nearby, He is in fact everywhere! He fills heaven and earth and no-one can hide from Him. There are no secret places where He is excluded (Jeremiah 23:23-24). The Psalmist summarises this truth beautifully:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1987) 100.

² W. A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994) 173.

³ Tozer, 100.

the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (Psalm 139:7-10, NIV).

2. Objections

It appears that Colossians 2:9 presents a real problem for this doctrine: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Yet Christ is apparently not omnipresent. Indeed, verses such as Matthew 26:64 and Mark 16:19, which describe Christ as "sitting at the right hand of God," present a similar problem.

On the other hand, John 3:13 contains a variant reading which adds the phrase οὐρανῶν τῶν ἄνω ("who is in heaven") to the end of the verse. The majority of the United Bible Societies committee rejected this variant's authenticity, labeling it as "an interpretive gloss, reflecting later Christological development",⁴ but David Alan Black has pointed out that there is overwhelming evidence (both internal and external) suggesting that the variant is, in fact, original.⁵ If this is the case, John 3:13 teaches that the "Son of Man" was in heaven when Jesus uttered the words of that verse. Yet Jesus Himself is identified as the "Son of Man" throughout the gospels. This implies that the "Son of Man" was not only in heaven but was also living among humans on Earth. Thus, according to John 3:13, it is possible for the "Son of Man" to be in multiple places at the same time.

But how can this be? How can a physical body in time and space be omnipresent? Henry Thiessen resolves the problem by stating that omnipresence is not a necessary part of God's being, but rather, is a free act of His will: "If God should will to destroy the universe, his omnipresence would cease, but he himself would not cease to be."⁶ John Walvoord adds:

To explain a body as omnipresent, however, ends in a concept of a body which has lost all of its distinguishing qualities...For this reason, it is preferable to regard the qualities of the human nature of Christ as finite. The body, soul, and spirit have locality, but do not have the infinite qualities that belong to the divine nature.⁷

In other words, the second person of the Trinity (God, the Son), who was incarnated as Christ Jesus, is omnipresent – even while Christ was living on Earth. The Word, who was with God in the beginning, and who was God in every aspect, became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:1-2, 14). Therefore, the incarnation does not necessarily lead to a falsification of omnipresence.

3. Life Application

The doctrine of omnipresence is extremely comforting and subduing to the believer since God is always available to help (Psalm 46:1). He is near to all those who call on him (Psalm 145:18), and always will be to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20b). On the other hand,

⁴ See B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* 2nd edition (UBS, 1994).

⁵ D. A. Black, "The Text of John 3:13" *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Sep 1985) 49-65.

⁶ H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 80.

⁷ J. F. Walvoord, "The Present Work of Christ – Part VIII: The Present Work of Christ on Earth" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122 (Oct 1965) 292.

the doctrine is also a strong warning and a deterrent, since no-one can escape the presence of God.

III. OMNISCIENCE

1. Definition

Again, the term "omniscience" is borrowed from Latin. It is also a compound of *omni*, meaning "all," and *scientia*, meaning "knowledge." Grudem explains it in this way: "God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and external act."⁸ Or, as Tozer describes it, God knows "every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn."⁹ In other words, God is infinite in regard to knowledge. He knows Himself and all other things perfectly (Job 37:16), whether they be actual or merely possible, throughout all of time (Isaiah 46:10; 1 John 3:20b). He knows things immediately, simultaneously, exhaustively and truly.¹⁰ Since God knows all things perfectly, He knows nothing better than any other thing.¹¹ Tozer adds that God knows instantly and effectively

all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven and hell.¹²

In addition, if God has perfect knowledge, He has no need to learn. Moreover, such perfect knowledge implies that God has never learned and, in fact, cannot learn.¹³ Thus, God does not need to reason toward His conclusions or ponder carefully over His answers.¹⁴ Indeed, Isaiah writes:

Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? (Isaiah 40:13-14, NIV)

Furthermore, the scriptures teach that God's understanding is infinite (Psalm 147:5), and that all persons of the Trinity know each other perfectly (Matthew 11:27; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11). Nothing is hidden from God's sight – everything is uncovered and laid bare before Him (Hebrews 4:13). The Lord watches all of Mankind and considers everything they do (Psalm 33:13-15). His eyes are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good (Proverbs 15:3). Each person's attitudes, behaviour and choices are in full view of God (Proverbs 5:21). No thought, action, desire or motive can be hidden from Him – as the Psalmist explains:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. (Psalm 139:1-4, NIV)

⁸ Grudem, 190.

⁹ Tozer, 77-78.

¹⁰ Thiessen, 81.

¹¹ Tozer, 78.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 76.

¹⁴ Grudem, 191.

He knows even the most minute details about everything (Matthew 10:29-30), and about every person:

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:15-16, NIV)

And, of course, the many prophetic predictions in scripture show that God also knows the future, although it should be noted that, if we assume that God is outside of, and not constrained by, time, then God does not actually know *the* future. He does, however, know events which are future relative to any particular point in the space-time continuum. As Cook rightly points out, "a timeless God does not strictly foreknow anything, he just knows..."¹⁵ Indeed, all knowledge is ever-present in His consciousness,¹⁶ and He is never surprised or amazed.

Not only does God know all actual events throughout time, He apparently also knows all *possible* and *hypothetical* events. For example, In 1 Sam 23:10-13, when David was in Keilah he heard that Saul was plotting against him, so he asked God whether Saul will come down to Keilah in order to capture him, and whether the people of Keilah, whom he had delivered from the Philistines, would hand him over. God revealed to David that Saul would indeed come down to Keilah, and that the people of Keilah would hand him over. Therefore, David left Keilah and Saul's trip to Keilah never eventuated, so the people of Keilah never had the opportunity to hand David over.

In Matthew 11:21, Jesus declares that if the miracles that were performed in Korazin and Bethsaida had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Similarly, in Matthew 11:23 He declares that if the miracles that were performed in Capernaum had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.

In addition, Isaiah 48:18 demonstrates that God knows the potential and universal result of our actions and choices.

Note, however, that omniscience should not be confused with causation. Just because God *knows* that events will happen at a point in time which is in the future by our reckoning does *not* necessarily mean that God *determined* those events – foreknowledge and foreordination are not necessarily the same.¹⁷ Free actions do not take place because they are foreseen, but they are foreseen because they may possibly take place. Thus, the prediction or prophecy of a morally evil event or action does not remove the human perpetrator's ultimate responsibility and accountability for their actions.¹⁸ Indeed, as Cook rightly points out:

a timeless God does not strictly foreknow anything, he just knows, and knowledge of something occurring by no means entails that that which occurs cannot be contingent and autonomous. What God timelessly knows would depend, in part, on what I freely choose. He would infallibly know all my choices without determining them.¹⁹

¹⁵ R. C. Cook, "God, Time and Freedom" *Religious Studies* 23 (1988) 89.

¹⁶ Grudem, 191.

¹⁷ Thiessen, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cook, 89.

2. Objections

If God is perfect in knowledge and knows everything that can be known throughout all of time, then He must know evil things. But how can a holy and righteous God know evil? Indeed, such objections were raised long ago in the days of Thomas Aquinas:

Further, what is known through another and not through itself, is imperfectly known. But evil is not known by God; for the thing known must be in the knower. Therefore if evil is known through another, namely, through good, it would be known by Him imperfectly; which cannot be, for the knowledge of God is not imperfect. Therefore God does not know evil things.

However, such objections were also answered long ago. Aquinas responds:

To know a thing by something else only, belongs to imperfect knowledge, if that thing is of itself knowable; but evil is not of itself knowable, forasmuch as the very nature of evil means the privation of good; therefore evil can neither be defined nor known except by good.

God's statement in Isaiah 43:25 also seems to present a problem for omniscience: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." How can an omniscient God erase something from His memory, and yet still be regarded as being perfect in knowledge? The Hebrew word translated "remember" is זָכַר (ʿēzkōr) carries the idea of recalling past events and experiences such that they effect present thought, feeling and actions. Therefore, in Isaiah 43:25, God is declaring that He will *not* let past events effect His present thought and actions. Thus, the use of זָכַר does not mean or imply that the past events and experiences have been completely erased from the memory.

Grudem points out that another possible objection is based on Jeremiah 7:31: "They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind."²⁰ This verse gives the impression that God was surprised by these actions and caught unprepared. However, looking back over history reveals that burning children had occurred centuries before (2 Kings 16:3; 17:17), and God Himself forbid the practice 800 years earlier in Leviticus 18:21. Thus, Grudem suggests that the clause "nor did it enter my mind" would be better rendered such that endorsement for the practice had never entered His heart, in the sense of Him willing or desiring it. i.e. "...nor did I wish/desire it."²¹

Grudem also points out that some theologians have concluded that God does not know the future – at least with any certainty – because, according to them, such knowledge would take away our freedom to act.²² Indeed, Francis Beckwith also points this out. He notes that some theologians and philosophers

have tried to resolve the supposed conflict by denying that God knows the future, although they believe that he is nevertheless omniscient. What they mean by this is that God knows everything that can be known, but since the future is not actual and hence not a thing his not knowing it does not count against his omniscience.²³

However, Beckwith concludes that

the limited omniscience position is inconsistent with the Biblical test for a prophet, for when they are juxtaposed the following conclusion is drawn: God is not God. But this is absurd. Furthermore the five

²⁰ Also in Jeremiah 19:5.

²¹ Grudem, 192.

²² Ibid.

²³ F. J. Beckwith, "Limited Omniscience And The Test For A Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (Sep 1993) 357.

possible ways of avoiding this conclusion do not seem to work. Hence unless one wants to give up a high view of Scripture the limited omniscience position is logically untenable and ought to be rejected.²⁴

Brian Leftow raises another objection. He argues that a propositionally omniscient being is impossible and therefore, God is not propositionally omniscient. He reasons that for each person there is a truth that that person alone knows. An example of such a truth statement is a man named Herman saying "I am Herman." While others may know that Herman is indeed Herman, only Herman knows what it is to *be* Herman. Therefore, there are some things which God does not know which makes Him less than omniscient.²⁵ However, this objection appears to be defining omniscience in terms which are far too narrow. God does indeed know Herman, and, as a result of the incarnation, knows what it is *like* to be Herman.

3. Application to life

The doctrine of omniscience is truly frightening to those who have something to hide, since nothing can be hidden from God's sight – God knows it all! On the other hand, God's omniscience is comforting to those who are open to God's conviction. It is also comforting to know that God knows what it is like to live as a human being, what it is like to have needs and wants, what it is like to be tempted, and what it is like to suffer (Hebrews 4:15). Furthermore, it is comforting to know that God knows our needs before we even ask for His assistance (Matthew 6.8)

IV. OMNIPOTENCE

1. Definition

As with the other *omni* terms, "omnipotence" is a Latin compound of *omni*, meaning "all," and *potens*, meaning "power." Grudem defines it in this way: "God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will."²⁶

Omnipotence implies the possession of all power, and unlimited power. An omniscient God can do anything He pleases (Job 42:2) and is never exhausted. His power is unlimited in regard to both its extent and its magnitude. What is impossible for man *is* possible for God (Matthew 19:26). Nothing is too hard for Him (Jeremiah 32:17). Furthermore, anything can be done as easily as anything else, and all acts are done effortlessly.²⁷

Note also that the possession of omnipotence does not demand its exercise: "God can do what he wills to do, but he does not necessarily will to do anything." In other words, God has power over His power.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid. 362.

²⁵ B. Leftow, "Time, Actuality and Omniscience" Religious Studies 26 (1990) 310.

²⁶ Grudem, 216.

²⁷ Tozer, 92.

²⁸ Thiessen, 82.

2. Objections

It is important to note that omnipotence also includes the power of self-limitation. For example, God created other beings which have free will, and His Son voluntarily took on the form of humanity (the incarnation). Because of this self-limitation, God does not keep sin out by force, or force people to repent and believe (that power lies solely with each individual person).

When describing the doctrine of omnipotence, it is not entirely accurate to say that God can do "anything," for God *cannot* do anything that would deny His own nature and/or character.²⁹ Indeed, Thomas Aquinas writes:

All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word 'all' when we say that God can do all things.³⁰

God is able to do whatever He wills, but His will is limited by His nature. In other words, God cannot contradict His own nature.³¹ God cannot sin, because sinning means that God does evil, and evil is something which is outside of the will of God. So if God sins He is going against His own will, which is absurd. Therefore, it is legitimate to say that God cannot sin, yet also maintain that God is omnipotent.

Indeed, God cannot do anything that is absurd or self-contradictory. For example, God cannot make a boulder so heavy that He cannot lift it, or create a square circle. In any case, these are not objects of power and so "denote no limitation of God's omnipotence."³²

Aquinas, on the other hand, raises the question of power and effect. Power is made known by its effect, otherwise it would be ineffectual, but if the power of God is infinite then it must produce an infinite effect, which is impossible. However, Aquinas also offers a solution to this problem. The power of a univocal agent is wholly manifested in its effect, but it is clear that God is not a univocal agent, since nothing compares with Him either in species or in genus. Therefore, it follows that His effect is always less than His power.³³

3. Life Application

The doctrine of omnipotence is also a great source of comfort and hope to those who seek God, since there is no-one God cannot save, no situation where God is unable to intervene, and no circumstances which are too harsh or difficult for God to handle. He is able to do even more than we can possibly imagine (Ephesians 3:20). On the other hand, the doctrine of omnipotence is a warning and source of fear to the unbeliever, since they have no excuse for rejecting God (Romans 1:20) and will ultimately endure God's wrath.

²⁹ Grudem, 217.

³⁰ T. Aquinas, *Suma Theologica* I.25.3.

³¹ Thiessen, 82.

³² Ibid.

³³ Aquinas, I.25.2.

V. CONCLUSION

The "omni" attributes of God must be understood correctly if they are to be considered as coherent doctrines. When they are understood correctly, they are a source of great comfort to Christians, and provoke us to worship our awesome God. However, to those who are running and/or hiding from God, they are a source of great fear and distress.