

# Attributes of God in Christianity

The **attributes of God** are specific characteristics of God discussed in Christian theology.

## 1 Classification

Many Reformed theologians distinguish between the *communicable* attributes (those that human beings can also have) and the *incommunicable* attributes (those that belong to God alone).<sup>[1]</sup> Donald Macleod, however, argues that “All the suggested classifications are artificial and misleading, not least that which has been most favoured by Reformed theologians – the division into communicable and incommunicable attributes.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Many of these attributes only say what God is not – for example, saying he is immutable is saying that he does not change.

The attributes of God may be classified under two main categories:

1. His infinite powers.
2. His personality attributes, like holiness and love.

Millard Erickson calls these categories God’s *greatness* and *goodness* respectively.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2 Enumeration

The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of God is merely an enumeration of his attributes: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”<sup>[4]</sup> The Westminster Larger Catechism adds certain attributes to this description, such as “all-sufficient,” “incomprehensible,” “every where present” and “knowing all things”.<sup>[5]</sup> This answer has been criticised, however, as having “nothing specifically Christian about it.”<sup>[6]</sup>

### 2.1 Aseity

The aseity of God means “God is so independent that he does not need us.”<sup>[7]</sup> It is based on Acts 17:25, where it says that God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything” (NIV). This is often related to God’s *self-existence* and his *self-sufficiency*.

### 2.2 Goodness

The goodness of God means that “God is the final standard of good, and all that God is and does is worthy of approval.”<sup>[8]</sup> Romans 11:22 in the King James Version says “Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God”. Many theologians consider the goodness of God as an overarching attribute - Louis Berkhof, for example, sees it as including *kindness*, *love*, *grace*, *mercy* and *long-suffering*.<sup>[9]</sup> The idea that God is “all good” is called his omnibenevolence.

### 2.3 Graciousness

The graciousness of God is a key tenet of Christianity. In Exodus 34:5-6, it is part of the Name of God, “Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God”. The description of God in this text is, in Jewish tradition, called the “Thirteen Attributes of Mercy”.<sup>[10]</sup>

The word “gracious” is not used often in the New Testament to describe God, although the noun “grace” is used more than 100 times. 1 Peter 2:2-3 in the King James Version says “the Lord is gracious”, but the New International Version has “the Lord is good”.

### 2.4 Holiness

The holiness of God is that he is separate from sin and incorruptible. Noting the refrain of “Holy, holy, holy” in Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8, R. C. Sproul points out that “only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree... The Bible never says that God is love, love, love.”<sup>[11]</sup>

### 2.5 Immanence

The immanence of God refers to him being in the world. It is thus contrasted with his *transcendence*, but Christian theologians usually emphasise that the two attributes are not contradictory. To hold to transcendence but not immanence is deism, while to hold to immanence but not transcendence is pantheism. According to Wayne Grudem, “the God of the Bible is no abstract deity removed from, and uninterested in his creation”.<sup>[12]</sup> Grudem goes on to say that the whole Bible “is the story of God’s involvement with his creation”, but highlights verses such as Acts 17:28, “in him we live and move and have our being”.<sup>[12]</sup>

## 2.6 Immutability

Immutability means God cannot change. James 1:17 refers to the “Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (NIV). Herman Bavinck notes that although the Bible talks about God repenting, changing his purpose, and becoming angry, “Scripture testifies that in all these various relations and experiences God remains ever the same.”<sup>[13]</sup> Millard Erickson calls this attribute God’s *constancy*, arguing that “some interpretations of the doctrine of divine constancy, expressed as immutability, have actually drawn heavily upon the Greek idea of immobility and sterility.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The immutability of God is being increasingly criticized by advocates of open theism,<sup>[15]</sup> which argues that God is open to influence through the prayers, decisions, and actions of people. Prominent adherents of open theism include Clark Pinnock, John E. Sanders and Gregory Boyd.

## 2.7 Impassibility

The doctrine of the impassibility of God is a controversial one.<sup>[16]</sup> It is usually defined as the inability of God to suffer, while recognising that Jesus, who is believed to be God, suffered in his human nature. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that God is “without body, parts, or passions”. Although some take this to mean that God is “without emotions whether of joy, sorrow, pain or grief”, most interpret this as meaning that God is free from all attitudes “which reflect instability or lack of control.”<sup>[17]</sup> Robert Reymond says that “it should be understood to mean that God has no *bodily* passions such as hunger or the human drive for sexual fulfillment.”<sup>[18]</sup>

D. A. Carson argues that “although Aristotle may exercise more than a little scarcely recognized influence upon those who uphold impassibility, at its best impassibility is trying to avoid a picture of God who is changeable, given over to mood swings, dependent on his creatures.”<sup>[19]</sup> In this way, impassibility is connected to the *immutability* of God, which says that God does not change, and to the *aseity* of God, which says that God does not need anything. Carson affirms that God is able to suffer, but argues that if he does so “it is because he chooses to suffer”.<sup>[20]</sup>

## 2.8 Impeccability

The impeccability of God is closely related to his holiness. It means that God is *unable* to sin, which is a stronger statement than merely saying that God *does not sin*.<sup>[21]</sup> Hebrews 6:18 says that “it is impossible for God to lie”. Robert Morey argues that God does not have the “absolute freedom” found in Greek philosophy. Whereas “the Greeks assumed the gods were ‘free’ to become demons if they so chose,” the God of the Bible “is ‘free’ to act only in conformity to His nature.”<sup>[22]</sup>

## 2.9 Incorporeality

The incorporeality or *spirituality* of God refers to him being a spirit. This is derived from Jesus’ statement in John 4:24, “God is spirit.” Robert Reymond suggests that it is the fact of his *spiritual* essence that underlies the second commandment, which prohibits every attempt to fashion an image of him.<sup>[23]</sup>

## 2.10 Incomprehensibility

The incomprehensibility of God means that he is not able to be fully known. Isaiah 40:28 says “his understanding no one can fathom”. Louis Berkhof states that “the consensus of opinion” through most of church history has been that God is the “Incomprehensible One”. Berkhof, however, argues that “in so far as God reveals Himself in His attributes, we also have some knowledge of His Divine Being, though even so our knowledge is subject to human limitations.”<sup>[24]</sup>

## 2.11 Infinity

The infinity of God includes both his *eternity* and his *immensity*. Isaiah 40:28 says that “Yahweh is the everlasting God,” while Solomon acknowledges in 1 Kings 8:27 that “the heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you”. Infinity permeates all other attributes of God: his goodness, love, power, etc. are all considered to be infinite.

The relationship between the infinity of God and mathematical infinity has often been discussed.<sup>[25]</sup> Georg Cantor’s work on infinity in mathematics was accused of undermining God’s infinity, but Cantor argued that God’s infinity is the *Absolute Infinite*, which transcends other forms of infinity.<sup>[26]</sup>

## 2.12 Jealousy

Exodus 20:5-6, of the Decalogue says, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (NIV). J. I. Packer sees God’s jealousy as “zeal to protect a love relationship or to avenge it when broken,” thus making it “an aspect of his covenant love for his own people.”<sup>[27]</sup>

## 2.13 Love

1 John 4:16 says “God is Love.” D. A. Carson speaks of the “difficult doctrine of the love of God,” since “when informed Christians talk about the love of God they mean

something very different from what is meant in the surrounding culture.”<sup>[28]</sup> Carson distinguishes between the love the Father has for the Son, God’s general love for his creation, God’s “salvific stance towards his fallen world,” his “particular, effectual, selecting love toward his elect,” and love that is conditioned on obedience.

The love of God is particularly emphasised by adherents of the social Trinitarian school of theology. Kevin Bidwell argues that this school, which includes Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf, “deliberately advocates self-giving love and freedom at the expense of Lordship and a whole array of other divine attributes.”<sup>[29]</sup>

## 2.14 Mission

While the mission of God is not traditionally included in this list, David Bosch has argued that “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.”<sup>[30]</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright argues for a biblical basis for Mission that goes beyond the Great Commission, and suggests that “missionary texts” may sparkle like gems, but that “simply laying out such gems on a string is not yet what one could call a missiological hermeneutic of the whole Bible itself.”<sup>[31]</sup>

## 2.15 Mystery

Many theologians see mystery as God’s primary attribute because He only reveals certain knowledge to the human race. Karl Barth said “God is ultimate mystery.”<sup>[32]</sup> Karl Rahner views “God” as “mystery” and theology as “the ‘science’ of mystery.”<sup>[33]</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev deems “inexplicable Mystery” as God’s “most profound definition.”<sup>[34]</sup> Ian Ramsey defines God as “permanent mystery.”<sup>[35]</sup>

## 2.16 Omnipotence

The omnipotence of God refers to him being “all powerful”. This is often conveyed with the phrase “Almighty”, as in the Old Testament title “God Almighty” (the conventional translation of the Hebrew title *El Shaddai*) and the title “God the Father Almighty” in the Apostles’ Creed.

Jesus says in Matthew 19:26, “with God all things are possible”. C. S. Lewis clarifies this concept: “His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to his power.”<sup>[36]</sup>

## 2.17 Omnipresence

The omnipresence of God refers to him being present everywhere. Berkhof distinguishes between God’s *immensity* and his *omnipresence*, saying that the former “points to the fact that God transcends all space and is not subject to its limitations,” emphasising his *transcendence*, while the latter denotes that God “fills every part of space with His entire Being,” emphasising his *immanence*.<sup>[37]</sup> In Psalm 139, David says, “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 139:8, NIV).

## 2.18 Omniscience

The omniscience of God refers to him being “all knowing”. Berkhof regards the *wisdom* of God as a “particular aspect of his knowledge.”<sup>[38]</sup> Romans 16:27 speaks about the “only wise God”.

## 2.19 Oneness

The oneness, or *unity* of God refers to his being one and only. This means that Christianity is monotheistic, although the doctrine of the Trinity says that God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed says “we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.”

The most notable biblical affirmation of the unity of God is found in Deuteronomy 6:4. The statement, known as the *Shema Yisrael*, after its first two words in Hebrew, says “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one.” In the New Testament, Jesus upholds the oneness of God by quoting these words in Mark 12:29. The Apostle Paul also affirms the oneness of God in verses like Ephesians 4:6.<sup>[39]</sup>

The oneness of God is also related to his *simplicity*.

## 2.20 Providence

While the providence of God usually refers to his activity in the world, it also implies his care for the universe, and is thus an attribute.<sup>[40]</sup> Although the word is not used in the Bible to refer to God, the concept is found in verses such as Acts 17:25, which says that God “gives all men life and breath and everything else” (NIV).

A distinction is usually made between “general providence,” which refers to God’s continuous upholding the existence and natural order of the universe, and “special providence,” which refers to God’s extraordinary intervention in the life of people.<sup>[41]</sup>

## 2.21 Righteousness

The **righteousness** of God may refer to his holiness, to his justice, or to his saving activity. A notable occurrence of the word is in **Romans 1:17** - “for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed” (NIV). **Martin Luther** grew up believing that this referred to an attribute of God - namely, his distributive justice. Luther’s change of mind and subsequent interpretation of the phrase as referring to the righteousness which God imputes to the believer was a major factor in the **Protestant Reformation**. More recently, however, scholars such as **N. T. Wright** have argued that the verse refers to an attribute of God after all - this time, his covenant faithfulness.<sup>[42]</sup>

## 2.22 Simplicity

The **simplicity** of God means he is not partly this and partly that, but that whatever he is, he is so entirely. It is thus related to the **unity** of God. Grudem notes that this is a less common use of the word “simple” - that is, “not composed of parts”. Grudem distinguishes between God’s “unity of singularity” (in that God is one God) and his “unity of simplicity”.<sup>[43]</sup>

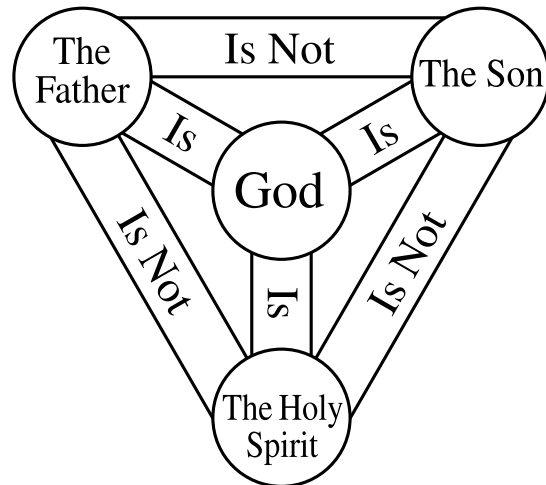
## 2.23 Sovereignty

The **sovereignty** of God is related to his **omnipotence**, **providence**, and **kingship**, yet it also encompasses his **freedom**, and is in keeping with his goodness, righteousness, holiness and impeccability. It refers to God being in complete control as he directs all things — no person, organization, government or any other force can stop God from executing his purpose. This attribute has been particularly emphasized in **Calvinism**. The Calvinist writer **A. W. Pink** appeals to **Isaiah 46:10** (“My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please”) and argues, “Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases always as He pleases.”<sup>[44]</sup>

## 2.24 Transcendence

God’s **transcendence** means that he is outside space and time, and therefore eternal and unable to be changed by forces within the universe.<sup>[45]</sup> It is thus closely related to God’s **immutability**, and is contrasted with his **immanence**. A significant verse which balances God’s transcendence and his immanence is **Isaiah 57:15**:

For this is what the high and exalted One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”



*The Shield of the Trinity diagram symbolising aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity.*

## 2.25 Trinity

The **Trinity** of God refers to him being three in one. God is understood to be a unity of **Father**, **Son**, and the **Holy Spirit**.<sup>[46]</sup> Support for the doctrine of the Trinity comes from such places as the New Testament’s trinitarian formulae, such as the **Great Commission** of **Matthew 28:19**, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. **First John 5:7** (of the **KJV**) reads “...there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one”, but this *Comma Johanneum* is almost universally rejected as a Latin corruption.<sup>[47]</sup>

## 2.26 Veracity

The **veracity** of God means his truth-telling. **Titus 1:2** refers to “God, who does not lie.” Among **evangelicals**, God’s veracity is often regarded as the basis of the doctrine of **biblical inerrancy**. **Greg Bahnsen** says,

Only with an inerrant autograph can we avoid attributing error to the God of truth. An error in the original would be attributable to God Himself, because He, in the pages of Scripture, takes responsibility for the very words of the biblical authors. Errors in copies, however, are the sole responsibility of the scribes involved, in which case God’s veracity is not impugned.<sup>[48]</sup>

## 2.27 Wrath

**Moses** praises the wrath of God in **Exodus 15:7**. Later in **Deuteronomy 9**, after the incident of **The Golden Calf**,

Moses describes how: “I feared the furious anger of the LORD, which turned him against you, would drive him to destroy you. But again he listened to me.” (9:19). In Psalm 69:24, the psalmist begs God to “consume” his enemies “with your burning anger”.

In the New Testament, Jesus says in John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

Wayne Grudem suggests that “if God loves all that is right and good, and all that conforms to his moral character, then it should not be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character.”<sup>[49]</sup>

### 3 See also

- Cataphatic theology
- Catholic Concept of the Divine
- God in Christianity
- Name of God in Christianity — some of the names include attributes, traits, and characteristics
- Open theism
- Theodicy

### 4 References

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- [2] Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 20-21.
- [3] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985.
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## 5 External links

- Divine Immutability entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- Divine Simplicity entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

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