

The  
Attributes  
of God:  
*An Introduction*

GERALD BRAY



SHORT STUDIES *in*  
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

*Edited by* Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

“Recently, evangelical theologians have shown a renewed and welcome interest in the biblical, classical doctrine of God; but for laypeople the debates often seem weighed down by technical jargon and historical obscurity. The result is that the practical importance of this theological renaissance for praise, prayer, and everyday life is often missed. In this context, Gerald Bray’s helpful summary of the nature of God’s attributes is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature, offering clear exposition and practical application in the tradition of forebears such as Stephen Charnock. In addition, a helpful appendix lets the reader situate contemporary theological discussion against the backdrop of catholic debates from the early church up until today.”

**Carl R. Trueman**, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

“Christian theology is never more countercultural, or theological, than when it speaks of God’s attributes; they challenge humanity’s puny and often idolatrous ideas of divine perfection. Bray makes a concise yet important contribution to this project by distinguishing God’s essential and relational attributes, and by showing how this distinction preserves the integrity of our relationship to the one true God. Christians can train themselves for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7) and teach in ways that accord with godliness (1 Tim. 6:3) only if they have some idea of what God is like. Indeed, if Calvin is right, we can achieve knowledge of ourselves only by understanding what God is like, for humans are created in his image. For all these reasons, what could have been an abstract discussion of God’s being is anything but that. Highly recommended!”

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“This volume is both clear and deep, concise and packed with insights—a remarkable achievement! Don’t let the size of this volume fool you. Here we have one of evangelicalism’s finest theologians wisely guiding us through difficult but awe-inspiring terrain, the attributes of our God.”

**Christopher W. Morgan**, Dean, School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University

“Those who are familiar with Gerald Bray’s work will not be surprised to find that he negotiates the very complex matter of the attributes of God with considerable skill and finesse, while at the same time having an eye to the nonspecialist. One of the most helpful aspects of the book is the way in which he clearly defines the difference between the ‘essential’ and the ‘relational’ attributes of God and demonstrates that many of the problems that have arisen in theological discussions of the attributes have come about because of confusion between the two. Incidentally, it would be worth buying the book simply for the thirty-five-page appendix in which Bray presents the history of the treatment of God’s attributes in Christian theology!”

**A. T. B. McGowan**, Director, Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology; Professor of Theology, University of the Highlands and Islands

“This wonderful book introduces the attributes of God in a manner that is approachable yet precise and instructive without being pedantic. As to be expected from Gerald Bray, this work is very well balanced, bringing together his deep biblical knowledge and historical perspective along with thoughtful, gentle, and pastoral application for today.”

**T. Scott Manor**, President, Knox Theological Seminary

# The Attributes of God

## SHORT STUDIES IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

*The Attributes of God: An Introduction*, Gerald Bray (2021)

*The Church: An Introduction*, Gregg Allison (2021)

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# The Attributes of God

*An Introduction*

Gerald Bray

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## Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in each of these studies, a theologian addresses the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

## Preface

A century ago it was a commonplace of what was then “modern” theology that Christianity had been corrupted in ancient times by an invasion of Hellenistic thought. It was claimed that pagan philosophical concepts had turned the simple gospel of Jesus into an alien religion that had lost almost all contact with its origins. That thesis is no longer as popular as it once was, and today most scholars reject it. Yet, when it comes to the question of God’s attributes, the case for accepting a significant Greek influence on Christian theology remains strong. This is because it was in the pre-Christian Greek world that philosophers first tried to analyze the universe into different categories of being, to which they assigned attributes by which the various types could be recognized. When the Christian gospel began to spread among the Gentiles, its evangelists had to confront that way of thinking, and they did so by adapting its methods and terminology for Christian use.

That adaptation was by no means simple or straightforward, and it was certainly not a capitulation to an alien way of thinking. Christians quickly realized that God is not a being in the way that a material object is, and they insisted that if the language of physics was to be used for theology, it must be transposed into a different dimension. They believed that this was possible because God exists, although his existence is

totally different from the existence of anything else. For them, the key distinction was between the Creator and the creation. Philosophical terminology was designed to explain what Christians call the created order. If it was to be used of God, it had to be set free from the constraints of time and space that bound created objects. Very often the result was that God could only be described in terms of what he is not, because finite human words are not designed to express concepts of infinity.

The beginnings of this development can be found in the New Testament, where God is occasionally described as “immortal” or “invisible,” but this can hardly be regarded as an invasion of Hellenistic ideas into the biblical worldview. Even the most superficial reading of the Old Testament will show that the realities which lie behind these words were fully recognized by the Israelites, even if they expressed them differently. The early Christians were careful to remain as close to the Bible as they could. Only in the Middle Ages did they start saying things like “God possesses invisibility,” instead of “God is invisible,” and the change eventually led to a complete reworking of the church’s theology in order to do better justice to the biblical revelation. The Protestant Reformation focused on the personal relationship that God has established with his people. As a result, qualities like his holiness, righteousness, and goodness came to the fore in a way that they had not previously done, and theology developed in a different direction, though the classical structure of God’s essential attributes was neither denied nor ignored.

In the centuries since the Reformation, the personal or relational attributes of God have become steadily more important, and almost all theologians now separate the divine attributes into two categories—those that belong to God’s incommunicable essence and those that express his relationship with human

beings and are therefore regarded as “communicable.” The terminology used to describe this distinction has varied from one writer to another, as has the classification of the attributes themselves. At the present time it is fair to say that considerable confusion reigns in this area, which has not received the systematic attention that it deserves.

In this book I have attempted to clarify what the attributes of God are and to present them in a way that can command general assent. I have respected the basic division of the divine attributes into two categories, which I have called the *essential* and the *relational*, and have endeavored to present each of these in a systematic and coherent manner. For the essential attributes, I have built on the categorizations made by John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749), though I have changed the order so as to accommodate later thought and added a section dealing with the way these attributes are perceived in God’s action in the world. For the relational attributes, I have had to strike out on my own, to a large extent, and have shown that many of the so-called attributes that are regularly placed in this category have been misunderstood and misinterpreted. But instead of rejecting concepts like holiness and righteousness on the ground that they are not really attributes of God, I have accommodated them within a broader framework that allows us to see how they should be understood.

At every point, I have tried to show how the attributes of God are presented in the Bible and to explain why they matter to us today. Readers interested in pursuing individual attributes should start with the bibliography for further reading and proceed from there. My aim has not been to provide an exhaustive account of everything that is or could be said about God’s attributes but to give readers a framework in which to place and evaluate the questions about them that arise. No one

will go away from these pages knowing all there is to know about them, but readers should take with them the intellectual equipment they will need to navigate the deep waters of theology for themselves. If they can use this book to study the divine attributes and avoid drowning in uncharted seas, it will have served the purpose for which it was written.

# The Being of God and His Attributes

## Defining Our Terms

Few people doubt that God is a being. Jews and Christians both agree that God has revealed his name to us—YHWH (usually pronounced “Yahweh”), which is connected with the Hebrew verb *to be* and is usually translated as “he who is” or as “I AM” (Ex. 3:14).<sup>1</sup> God thus identifies himself as a “being,” but says nothing about his nature or attributes. Whenever the subject is mentioned in the Bible, the emphasis is on God’s distinctiveness—he is completely different from anything we experience in the world. This is because he is the Creator and everything else has been made by him. There may be resemblances between him and some of his creatures, particularly human beings who have been created in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26–27), but ultimately these are relative and not absolute. God has a mind and has given us minds as well, but his thoughts are so

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1. This connection is sometimes disputed, but it has always been accepted by the main theological tradition.

far above and beyond ours that it is hard to say that the two are the same (Isa. 55:8–9).

The difference between us is not merely one of degree but one of kind. As our Creator, God is an absolute and unique being, who cannot be compared with any of his creatures. For example, the eternal life of God has no beginning or end, whereas the eternal life of a Christian is a gift from him that has a beginning and is therefore relatively, and not absolutely, eternal.

Our notions of being are derived from ancient Greek philosophy, which thought of it as a substance that could be defined and analyzed. The early Christians sought to explain the God of the Bible by using originally pagan concepts, and we have inherited that tradition. Most of them realized that their idea of being was limited by finite perceptions of reality, and that God does not fit into them. They therefore concluded that God is above and beyond definable being, and that nothing we say can truly describe him. Christopher Stead (1913–2008) pointed out that the only real justification for retaining the word “being” or “substance” (*ousia* in Greek) in relation to God is to remind ourselves of his objective existence:

What is the point of stating that God is an *ousia* in the categorical sense, a substance? The statement is general enough; it leaves a number of options open. Its principal function, as I see it, is to claim that God is not limited or prescribed by our experience of him, but exists in his own right; in this respect . . . he is analogous to an unknown physical object, say an undiscovered star. A star does not come into being by being discovered; and God is not brought into being by our human consciousness or metaphysical demands.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 273.

If we call God a “being,” we are using the word in a different sense from the way it is used to define his creatures, and so its attributes must be interpreted accordingly. They often have to be expressed as negatives (“immortal,” “invisible,” etc.) because our finite minds are unable to grasp infinity. Many of God’s attributes are logical deductions based on his actions as they are recorded in the Bible. Thus we say that he is “omnipresent,” “omnipotent,” and “omniscient” because, otherwise, he could not act in the way he does. These words are not used in the Scriptures, but the concepts they represent are everywhere present in them.

God communicates with human beings by means of a shared personhood. This personhood is not an attribute of either the human or the divine nature, partly because those natures are incompatible and partly because personhood transcends them. Human beings can lose their material (“perishable”) nature and acquire a spiritual (“imperishable”) one without becoming different persons (1 Cor. 15:42–49). The attributes of personhood can be applied to both God and human beings, but the fundamental differences between us must be respected. The first of these is rooted in our creatureliness and may be described as the difference between the infinite and the finite. What in God is absolute is (and can only ever be) relative in us. The second difference is caused by human sinfulness, which is not inherent in our created nature but is the result of our disobedience to the will of God. The practical effect of this is that our understanding of God’s attributes, made possible by the fact that we have been created in his image and likeness, is never more than an imperfect and inadequate expression of the divine reality.

### **The God of the Bible**

The Bible does not explain why God made the world, except that he is worthy of all glory, honor, and praise because he

created all things by his will (Rev. 4:11). He was not forced to do it by any inner necessity, nor did he produce it out of his own being. If that had been the case, there would presumably have been no problem in trying to understand God's attributes, since they would be the same as those of the so-called creation. But a moment's thought will show that to be a logical impossibility. How could a visible world be the extension of an invisible being? The biblical God is pictured as being present in a fire or a cloud, but these images were intended to emphasize his inaccessibility—human beings cannot touch fire without being consumed by it, and they lose their bearings when they are enveloped in a cloud (Ex. 13:21). There is no suggestion that God is a fiery cloud by nature. The two images are mutually incompatible, the cloud guiding the people of Israel during the day and the fire guiding them by night. God adopted such forms when he revealed himself, but he was not bound by them, nor do they define his being.

In the Bible's descriptions of God, the emphasis is on how different he is from us or from anything else. He cannot be seen, nor can he be contained or limited. When compared with the gods of other nations, he is powerful and they are not. Did the Israelites consciously believe that God is immortal, invisible, all-powerful, and so on? Were they monotheists in the modern sense, or did they accept that other gods might have existed but were inferior to the God of Israel? Different answers can be (and have been) given to questions like these. The Hebrew Bible does not speak in philosophical terms, so words like "immortal" do not appear in it. Only in the later epistles of the New Testament, addressed to a Greek or at least to a Hellenized audience, do we find such abstractions, and even then only in passing—there is no extended discussion of what they mean.

At the same time, it is hard to read the scriptural texts and conclude that what was later expressed in philosophical language was not implied all along. Is there any evidence that the Israelites thought that God was a mortal being? Or that he was in some way inadequate to meet their needs? If they had thought that, the pressure to adopt some form of polytheism would have been irresistible, because it would then have been necessary to make up for his inadequacies by appealing to other gods who could supply what was missing in him. But the Israelites never did that. The logic of worshiping only one God is that he is sufficient for all our needs, which in turn makes us think of him in a more comprehensive way. The details of this may not be expressed as such in the Old Testament, but the implications are there. The New Testament does not hesitate to build on them and express the attributes of the God of Israel in terms that we still use today.

Our analysis of God's being and attributes is derived from his self-revelation to us in the Bible and confirmed by our experience of its truth. It is a genuine reflection of our personal relationship with him, but it is not comprehensive or exhaustive. There is much about God that we do not (and cannot) know. The theology of God's attributes is therefore both a confident expression of faith and a humble admission of ignorance in line with the nature and content of God's self-disclosure to us.

It is a paradox of God's self-revelation that although his attributes are fundamental to it, they are seldom mentioned specifically. God's invisibility, for example, is implied from the creation narrative in Genesis onward, yet it is hardly ever mentioned by name in the Bible. That does not mean that it can be ignored though, or (still less) denied. The prohibition against making "a carved image, or any likeness of anything" is the second of the Ten Commandments, which makes it clear that

visible things are not to be worshiped, because they are not—and cannot be—God (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). The substance of the doctrine of divine invisibility is there, but there is no word used to describe it. Neither is there any systematic analysis of the concept comparing it to other divine attributes, like immortality, or even to other manifestations of his being, like his omnipresence. These things are not denied, but they are assumed rather than stated. When the need arose for them, they were picked up and used to reassure the Israelites that the God who was with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was with them still, and present in power wherever they might wander, but no attempt was ever made to systematize such statements as attributes, or to explain what they are and why they matter. For the ancient Israelites, recognition of what we call God's attributes was all part of their faith in God. Those who had that faith were expected to assume the truth of whatever divine attribute was required to meet a particular situation, and that was deemed to be sufficient.

The New Testament reveals a similar approach. God's attributes are taken for granted and pressed into service as and when they are needed, but attention is seldom drawn to them. It is particularly interesting to note that Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to be told what the God of the Bible was like. They did not even want to paint (or sculpt) images of Jesus that they could venerate, though that would happen in later centuries. Their pagan notions of divinity did not survive their conversion to Christianity, and they accepted the Jewish understanding of God's nature without question. The only (partial) exception to this occurs with direct reference to the incarnation of the Word of God. When explaining the significance of this, the apostle John wrote, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18).

John did not say *how* Jesus has made God known but stressed that, because God is invisible, he cannot be known apart from the incarnation of the Word as Jesus Christ. God has not changed, and if Jesus has made him known, he has done so in and through his humanity (Col. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). The attributes of God’s nature remain as hidden and mysterious as ever. It must therefore be the personal, or “communicable,” attributes of God that Jesus reveals, and that is precisely what we find in the Gospels.

That said, some of the abstract terms we now use to describe God’s attributes do appear in the New Testament. A key text is 1 Timothy 1:17, where God is described as “immortal” and “invisible.” Of the two terms, the second is more frequent, occurring as it does in Romans 1:20, Colossians 1:15–16, and Hebrews 11:27 also. His immutability is expressed more indirectly, but it is present nonetheless, as the following example will show:

When God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Heb. 6:17–18)

God’s omnipotence is also a biblical theme that recurs from one end of the Bible to the other. There are at least six occurrences of the word “Almighty” in Genesis and nine in the book of Revelation, but it is most frequently found in Job, where it appears no fewer than thirty-one times. Given that the book of Job is an extended meditation on God’s providential ordering of the universe, that is especially significant. For Job, the omnipotence of God was not just one of his attributes among many but the key to understanding his otherwise mysterious purposes

in a world where the righteous are often called to suffer for no apparent reason.

## **Our Approach**

In examining the attributes of God, we begin with those that are *essential* to his being and that lie beyond our comprehension. We know that they must exist because the way God works depends on them. These operations of the essential divine attributes have often been considered attributes in their own right, and so I shall treat them as a distinct subcategory of their own. Second, there are the *relational* attributes of God. These are descriptions of him as he relates to us, but they remain unique to his being and are shared with us only in terms of analogy. To put it simply, God is holy, righteous, and good in an absolute sense, whereas we can be holy, righteous, and good only within the limits of our finite nature. However much we may manifest these qualities, we can never hope to possess them in the way that God does. Compared with him, “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment,” as the prophet Isaiah said, and no human achievement in this area can take the place of God’s gracious gift of himself to us (Isa. 64:6).

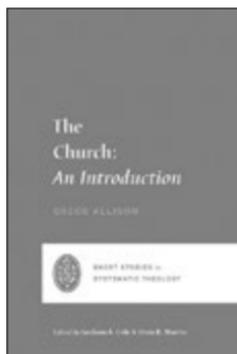
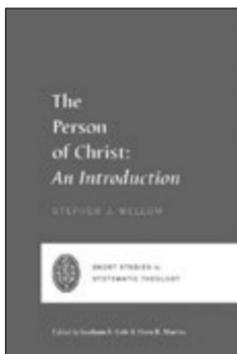
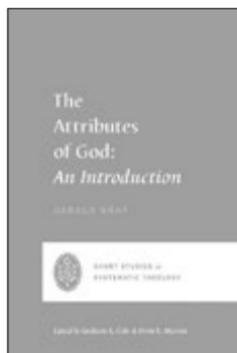
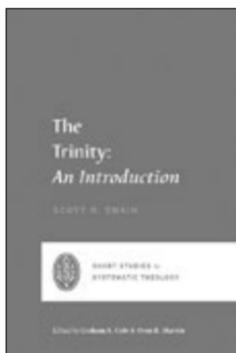
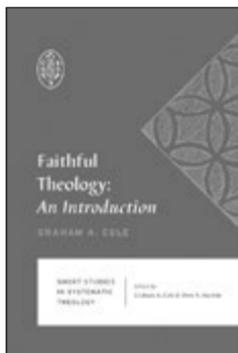
The resulting scheme of the next two chapters is as follows:

2. God’s Essential Attributes
  - A. God’s Essential Attributes as They Are in Themselves
    - (1) Attributes Describing What God Is
    - (2) Attributes Describing What God Is Like
    - (3) Attributes Contrasted with Time
    - (4) Attributes Contrasted with Space
  - B. God’s Essential Attributes as We Perceive Them
    - (1) Omnipresence
    - (2) Omnipotence

- (3) Omniscience
- 3. God's Relational Attributes
  - A. God's Relational Attributes as They Are in Themselves
    - (1) God as a Personal Being
    - (2) God as a Rational Being
  - B. God's Relational Attributes as We Perceive Them
    - (1) Holiness
    - (2) Righteousness
    - (3) Goodness

My hope is that this scheme will provide a comprehensive overview of God's attributes, arranged in a logical way, that will do justice to the evidence of the Bible, the witness of the mainstream Christian tradition, and the concerns of the present time.

# Short Studies in Systematic Theology



The Short Studies in Systematic Theology series aims to equip readers to understand, teach, love, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics, with each volume introducing a major systematic doctrine.

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## *How can we (created beings) know God (the Creator)?*

Throughout history, the church has recognized the importance of studying and understanding God's attributes. As the Creator of all things, God is unique and cannot be compared to any of his creatures, so to know him, believers turn to the pages of Scripture. In *The Attributes of God*, renowned theologian Gerald Bray leads us on an exploration of God's being, his essential attributes, his relational attributes, and the relevance of his attributes to our thinking, lives, and worship. As we better understand God's attributes, we will learn to delight in who God is and how he has made himself known to us in Scripture.

"Here we have one of evangelicalism's finest theologians wisely guiding us through difficult but awe-inspiring terrain, the attributes of our God."

**Christopher W. Morgan**  
Dean, School of Christian Ministries,  
California Baptist University

"As to be expected from Gerald Bray, this work is very well balanced, bringing together his deep biblical knowledge and historical perspective along with thoughtful, gentle, and pastoral application for today."

**T. Scott Manor**  
President, Knox Theological Seminary

**GERALD BRAY** (DLitt, University of Paris-Sorbonne) is research professor at Beeson Divinity School and director of research for the Latimer Trust. He is a prolific writer and has authored or edited numerous books, including *The Doctrine of God*; *Biblical Interpretation*; *God Is Love*; and *God Has Spoken*.



The Short Studies in Systematic Theology series is designed to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of theological topics.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY