

The LORD our God

Essays on the nature and attributes of God



Dr Andrew Aucamp

Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Chapter 1: Re-thinking God's attributes	4
Chapter 2: God is Spirit	12
Chapter 3: The ego of God	20
Chapter 4: God's sovereignty: as exposition of Isaiah 46:9-11	22
Chapter 5: Paradox and the Centrality of the Doctrine of God in Hermeneutics	28

Copyright © 2015, CA Aucamp

Permission is granted for this book to be printed or copied, provided it is done in full, the author is acknowledged, and it is on a non-profit basis.

Foreword

A proper understanding of God is critical for biblical Christianity in any age. It is especially important in this current day and age when theological speculation is rife. Groups, organisations and individuals are writing, preaching and saying things about God; about what He can and cannot do; about who He is and what He is like.

Christianity will rise no higher than its vision of God. If our view of God is diminished, Christianity will become powerless, irrelevant, and offer the world nothing more than what they can find in the many man-made religions of the world. Many Christian authors are starting to describe God in alarming ways that make Him look suspiciously like a being who is just a bit better or higher than a human being.

This work is not comprehensive, and does not cover all of God's attributes. There are many books that do that well. Rather, this book is a selection of essays that deal with various aspects of God's nature and attributes.

Chapter 1

Re-thinking God's attributes

1. Introduction¹

Many systematic theologies approach the topic of the doctrine of God using a number of individual attributes, commonly classified as communicable and incommunicable (see for example Berkhof 1958:57-76; Grudem 1994:156-225; Reymond 1998:161-200). Some of these authors caution that the distinction between communicable and incommunicable attributes is not very helpful, and also that the whole approach can be scholastic in nature (MacLeod 1990:20-21; see also Grudem 1994:156). Their point is that Scripture nowhere attempts to classify God's attributes.

In whatever way these attributes are classified, they are nevertheless usually treated in an isolated fashion in the systematic theologies. A few authors do caution us that God's attributes can never be considered as parts of Him, but rather 'perspectives on His whole being' (Frame 2002:388). Frame (2002:388-389) also reminds us that each attribute is inseparable from each other, as each attribute contains or encapsulates all the attributes of God. For example, God's love is an eternal, holy, wise and just love. God's anger is righteous, infinite, holy and just. According to Frame (2002:388), while this does not mean that all God's attributes are identical (as they do give different perspectives of God's essence), it does mean they ultimately coalesce. Frame (2002:21-35) therefore prefers to treat the attributes of God within the overarching theme of God's lordship.

The isolated fashion in which the attributes are often treated can also lead to an imbalanced view of God. Either the order of the attributes is seen as incorrectly significant, or some attributes are over-emphasised at the expense of others (Grudem 1994:156). MacLeod (1990:8) also notes that treating attributes in an isolated fashion renders them more liable to philosophical bias which can distort our view of God. This is primarily due to the fact that the attributes, when examined in an isolated way, are divorced of their biblical context and proportions. For example, MacLeod (1990:14) notes that God's righteousness, power and omniscience are often discussed without reference to their main context in Scripture, namely their role in redemption.

Another possible objection to studying God's attributes in an isolated fashion is that they can be presented in a dry, academic way that robs God of his majesty and wonder. This point will be elaborated on later.

However, that is not to say the historic treatment of God's attributes has been without value. On the contrary, the reformed and evangelical treatment of God's attributes has contributed

¹ This essay was originally published under the title *A systemic approach to God's Attributes* in *Conspectus*, Vol 15, page 41, 2013.

greatly to our understanding of God. There is also Biblical warrant to consider the being of God according to his individual attributes. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul reflects on God's being in terms of his individual attributes of eternity, immortality and invisibility.

Scripture, however, very often describes God and his characteristics in relational attributes. An attribute is simply a property, quality or feature belonging to a person or thing (Collins 1982:67). This means that any of the qualities or features found in Scripture concerning God could be used or systematised into a list of attributes. A relational attribute is a description or characteristic of God that shows how He relates to his creation. The historical, individual attributes could even be discussed under the relational attributes found in Scripture. The role of the systematic theologian is to present God's attributes in a way that best conveys their Biblical meaning to the current generation.

2. Some insights from systemic thinking

The world of organisations, process re-engineering and business practice has been revolutionised in the last few decades with the advent of systemic thinking (thinking in terms of systems as opposed to individual parts).

The following is a brief description of the insights of R L Ackoff. Ackoff (1994:1-3) makes the point that modern societal ideas of organisations, production and business processes have been based on a particular mindset (originating in medieval Europe and percolating through the industrial revolution) and assumptions which can be described as the process of analysis.

The basic idea of analysis is that we can understand an object when it is broken down into its individual parts (Ackoff, 1994:11). As the individual parts are understood, the whole can be understood. For example, in order to understand a car, it must first be broken down into all its individual parts, such as wheels, cylinders, valves, nuts and bolts. As each part is understood, an accurate idea of what a car is can be determined

However, Ackoff (1994:10-11) notes the limitations of this approach. A process of analysis in itself will never reach the conclusion that a car actually moves (*as it needs a person to drive it*), nor that it can be used to drive a family around and give them enjoyment! It happens rather that as the object of a whole car is observed in its environment (or in its system) that the purpose and function of the car can be determined. This process of systemic thinking is based on synthesis (putting the 'pieces' of a system together to understand their relations with each other and therefore the whole) and the direct opposite of analysis (breaking the objects down into their individual parts).

'Systems thinking' emphasises the interdependence of the parts and how they interact to create the whole in its environment. It stresses the fact that when a system is taken apart (analysis), it loses its defining characteristics. For example, when a car is dismantled it loses its ability to move, which is its defining characteristic. Many popular authors, such as Senge (1990), have taken the basic premise of systemic thinking and applied it to modern business practices.

A few comments need to be made regarding systems thinking. Firstly, while admitting the validity of Ackoff's basic premise and the value of systems thinking, it does not mean that analysis is useless. To the contrary, breaking down a car into its individual parts does help understand how a car works. Both analysis and synthesis have value, a point admitted by Ackoff (1994:12).

Secondly, therefore, analysis in itself must not be seen as the only way to understand an object or 'thing.' There are other approaches that may render equally valuable, if not superior, understanding of objects and 'things.'

Thirdly, and most importantly, the above discussion reminds us that our thinking and approaches to understanding 'things' are in fact framed by assumptions and presuppositions which we may not necessarily even be aware of.

The point of this section is not to motivate to make systemic thinking a 'new' and 'dynamic' approach to revolutionise our understanding of God. Biblical Christianity is, after all, a *divinely revealed* religion (Grudem 1994:149), not a *man-discovered* religion. Many of the systemic thinkers also have assumptions and presuppositions that are alien to Scripture. The point is rather that the process of taking our study of God and breaking it down into isolated attributes, while being of value, is not necessarily the only way to understand who or what God is. It is also as God is seen in relation to his creation (environment) that we discover the wonder of his being² (which is essentially a systems approach). For this reason, Scripture itself often describes God in terms of relational attributes as He interacts with his creation.

This paper therefore approaches the topic of the doctrine of God using some of these relational attributes. Four relational 'attributes' of God are selected to demonstrate the approach and value of the exercise. In essence, as will be shown, these relational 'attributes' assume many of the historic, individual attributes and present them in their *relation* to created beings and things. These individual attributes are clarified and contextualised in the process. This is useful, as Frame reminds us that 'meaning' is drawn out and clarified as truths or concepts are 'applied' to situations (Frame 1987:83-84).

In other words, selecting some of the relational attributes in Scripture to begin our study of God and then noting the individual attributes in the process may be a better way of approaching the subject. The relational attributes of God provide a contextual framework to enable the individual attributes to take on their biblical meanings in their biblical proportions. It will also minimise (but not entirely eliminate) the risk of distorting an individual attribute through academic speculation.

A few clarifications need to be made here before moving on to describe God in some of his relational attributes. Firstly, the list of attributes below is by no means comprehensive. There

² God is therefore finally and most fully revealed to man in his incarnate son (John 1:18; 14:9). However, this does not mean that God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament was so inferior that He was unknowable. A correct study of God and his attributes from the Old Testament enabled the old testament saints to truly, although not fully, know and understand God (Jer 9:23-24)

are no doubt many other ‘relational attributes’ that we can find in, deduce or derive from Scripture. These four attributes are rather used as examples to show the benefit of describing God in these ways.

Secondly, as these attributes are described below, it is hoped that they will immediately commend themselves to God’s people with a freshness that compensates for the all-too-common dryness and scholasticism that can beset a theological discussion of the historic attributes of God.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this paper must not be seen to detract from the value of studying the historically formulated attributes of God. As noted earlier, the approach of studying the individual attributes has biblical warrant (1 Tim. 1:17). These have been of immense value and benefit to God’s people over the years. In this regard, it is equally true that the relational attributes do not provide a complete description of God. After all, God was God (with his essential attributes) before He created the universe and started ‘relating’ to people or things.

3. Examples of relational attributes

There is nothing more important for theology and devotional life than having a clear and correct view of God (Frame 2002:1). Errors (both theological and practical) can often be traced back to incorrect views about God.

Four relational attributes are given below by way of example to demonstrate a systemic approach to God’s attributes.

3.1. The friendliness of God

Friendliness can be defined as someone expressing liking and goodwill towards another. It is also suggestive of a kind disposition to draw alongside someone with help or support (Collins 1982:446).

One of the most striking features of God expressed in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ was His kind disposition and goodwill toward others. It is noteworthy that even His enemies described Him as a *friend* of sinners (Matt. 11:19). In other words, this was a dominant characteristic of his relationships with others. He Himself designated his relationship with His disciples as that of friendship (Matt. 9:15; Luke 12:4; John 15:14-15). This characteristic is not only confined to the life of Christ. In Eden we find God walking in the garden, presumably to have interaction with his creation and Adam and Eve in particular (Gen. 3:8). In other words, it is part of God’s disposition to be friendly towards his creatures. Even after the fall, we find that God’s servants are often designated as His friends, which implies a two-sided relationship (see for example Jas 2:23).

Friendliness assumes a number of individual divine attributes such as personality, kindness, love, benevolence, emotivity, grace and goodwill. In other words, God’s personality, kindness,

love, benevolence, emotivity, grace and goodwill come together and present themselves to us in broader, relational attribute or quality of divine friendliness.

This means that the current enmity between God and man is a direct result of the fall of man into sin. It is not as a result of any anti-social tendency or a capricious nature within God. The fault for the disruption in friendship lies at the feet of man and his sin, not God.

This attribute of God has immediate devotional implications in the life of the unbeliever and believer. For the unbeliever, it speaks of grace and goodwill toward him, and an encouragement to be restored into a genuine friendship through Christ with the living God. There is a willingness within God to forgive the sinner through the provisions of sacrifice and atonement in Christ, and to enter into a relationship with the creature which can be described as friendship.

For the believer, there is every encouragement to enjoy fellowship with this God whose disposition is towards friendship with his creation. It speaks of a restored intimacy that can and ought to be the experience of every believer.

The advantage of this approach hardly needs to be pointed out. By delineating “friendliness” as a basic attribute of God, it provides a context for understanding the grace, kindness, love, personality and emotivity of God. It is not merely an academic consideration of individual attributes, but a devotional consideration of these individual attributes as God relates to his creation. Obviously, each of these individual attributes could be expanded on within this context. For example, the attribute of ‘friendliness’ immediately settles the question about the ‘knowability’ of God (see Grudem 1994:151-152). Friendship is impossible without some degree of mutual knowing and being known, and yet does not require comprehensive knowledge. Friendship implies that God can be truly known, though not necessarily comprehensively.

3.2. The vengeance of God

Another striking, consistently biblical theme in Scripture is God’s indignation against sin and sinners (Gen. 6:5-6; Rom. 1:18). God’s wrath is always portrayed in relationship to sin and sinners, never in isolation as if God has a naturally angry, irritable or grumpy nature. This indignation against sin and the sinner is then expressed as vengeance (Rom. 12:19).

God’s indignation and vengeance assumes and contextualises a number of individual attributes such as emotivity, personality, anger, righteousness and holiness in relation to sin and sinners. Indignation also gives some insight into the nature of sin. Firstly, it indicates that sin, primarily, is against God (Ps. 51:4). God takes sin personally, even when the actual sin is seemingly only against another creature (2 Sam 11; Ps. 51:4). Secondly, it speaks of the strong emotional response in God towards sin. Sin is not a light issue with God, but a violation of His very person. His reaction to sin is indignation culminating in vengeance against those who have not been redeemed and drawn into a relationship with Himself.

This attribute of vengeance decisively deals with the erroneous expression found today that ‘God loves the sinner but hates the sin.’ While there is a sense in which this expression is true, the Bible is equally emphatic that God hates sinners (Ps. 5:5). Vengeance, by definition, is against a person, not just an abstract principle. Sin is the acting of a sinful person, and makes that person an enemy of God (Jer. 46:10).

The attribute of vengeance also has immediate devotional and emotional content. It shatters any notion that God’s anger is either mild or only directed against some abstract principle. It is directed against sinners who have become God’s enemy and stresses the urgency of reconciliation with a vengeful God before the day of vengeance (Luke 21:22). Vengeance implies an active, personal pursuit of an enemy, not a mere abstract principle of sinners receiving the natural consequences of their actions. It therefore ought to stir unbelievers to pursue reconciliation with God.

3.3. The artistry of God

Any casual observer of creation cannot miss the diverse beauty of creation. God could easily have created a single type of bird, plant, fish and animal. These could have been bland in appearance and functional in design. Yet in creation we find an astounding variety of design, colour, sound and taste. This points to God’s intrinsic artistry, where He delights to give vent to his creativity and power. The artistry of God therefore draws together individual attributes such as power, personality, ingenuity and omniscience. All the wonders of human creativity are a faint reflection of the creator’s artistry and creativity, and aid our understanding of man being created in God’s image.

There is neither a blandness nor lack of variety in God’s creativity. There should therefore be a corresponding enjoyment in all the aspects of God’s creative beauty and variety that our senses can perceive. This attribute comments directly on asceticism. It means that religions that emphasise ascetic lifestyles for the mere sake of it are contrary to God’s nature and will (see for example 1 Tim. 4:1-4; Col. 2:20-23). God has created variety and beauty of all shapes, sizes, colours and tastes to delight the senses of the creature and resound to the Creator’s glory. The biblical forms of temporal self-deprivation such as fasting and self-denial are due to the fallenness of creation and to aid our striving within that context (Matt. 9:14-15).

The devotional quality of this attribute is manifold. For example, it must heighten the desire of believers to experience God’s new heavens and new earth, where the results of his artistic creativity will not be marred by the fall. Randy Acorn has highlighted the continuity between the old earth and new earth (Acorn 2004:49-51). If this earth displays the magnificence of God’s creativity, the new heavens and new earth are sure to be beyond description!

3.4. The abundance of God

The Scriptures often depict God as the provider (Ps. 104:27-28) and sustainer of all things (Ps. 104:19-23). His provision extends to all of creation, and it consists of a vast variety, from physical needs (Ps. 104:21) to spiritual salvation (Deut. 32:43). The scope of God’s sustaining

influence is no less varied. The quality of this provision and sustenance leads us to conclude that there is an infinite abundance in God. It is not meagre, but bountiful (2 Cor. 9:8). God's provision for sinners in Christ speaks of unimaginable lavishness on the undeserving (Rom. 8:32). There is grace upon grace. Numerous biblical images of God's abundance are given. For example, God is described as a fountain, indicating his consistent and abundant provision (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13).

This attribute draws together individual attributes of God's infinity, grace, kindness, wisdom and power. Some qualifications need to be noted. Firstly, this does not mean that at times God does not let people experience need. He often sends famine or deprivation. But these are invariably to warn people of sin and to turn them back to Himself, the fountain of living water (Jer. 2:13, 30). Also, those material and earthly deprivations that He does send are to accomplish spiritual good in his people (Jas 1:2-5) and earn for them immeasurably greater rewards in heaven (Matt. 5:11).

Secondly, hell is a place of total deprivation. In hell unbelievers receive no good thing from God. Nevertheless, for His children, God has an overabundant abundance. Having lavished his grace on them through the gift of his son, how will He not give them all things (Rom. 8:32)? The pictures of heaven depict immense abundance for redeemed sinners. Even the streets are made of gold (Rev 21:21)! While hell is the total removal of all abundance and provision, in heaven is the removal of any want or influence that can diminish joy and gladness.

There are times when believers reflect on their lives and experience the state of blessedness and contentment (Ps. 23:1). God's spiritual and temporal blessings satisfy their souls. However, there is still no need to be shy or feel guilty for asking God for more blessings. It is not as if God is depleted in any way in blessing and providing for His people. This again does not mean that we must expect God will provide every material need we ask for. After all, God's purpose is to make us holy and Christ-like. This is often accomplished through trials, difficulties and deprivation (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-8).

4. The abuse of God's attributes

All statements of Scripture can be twisted and misrepresented (2 Pet. 3:16). As with the individual attributes of God, the above relational attributes of God can also be misunderstood or misrepresented. In other words, a systemic approach to God's attributes does not entirely remove the potential deficiencies the historic approach often suffered from. For example, an isolated, narrow emphasis on God's friendliness can lead to loss of fear of God and flippant, superficial Christianity. An isolated emphasis on God's indignation and vengeance can diminish the enjoyment on intimacy with God through Christ. An unbiblical understanding of God's abundance can lead to the destructive 'health and wealth' teachings which are prominent in some Christian circles today. However, this paper argues for the fact that when God is considered according to His relational attributes, the potential deficiencies of the historic approach are lessened, as the individual attributes are given a broader context within which they can be correctly interpreted.

Any consideration of God's attributes must always take into account all that God reveals himself to be. For this reason, our view of God must be based on all the revelation of who He is and what He does to have a complete picture of our glorious God.

5. Conclusions

There is nothing more important than having a correct view of God. While the historic approach of defining and examining God according to isolated attributes does have value and biblical warrant, there are other relational attributes that provide equally valuable insights into who and what God is. These broader, relational attributes assume and often contextualise these individual attributes, and therefore diminish the risk of the individual attributes being distorted through scholasticism and philosophical speculation outside the intent of Scripture.

Chapter 2

God is Spirit

1. Introduction

When we discuss and investigate the spiritual nature of God, we are gaining insight into the very being of God. We are seeking to understand the question “What is God?”

If we were to ask a similar question about people, we would be confronted with medical facts about the physical composition of a human being. This would include cells, nerves, muscles, sinews, vital organs. We would understand (partly, at least) about how all these integrate to allow man to live and function. We would understand how the heart pumps blood, carries nutrients, feeds muscles and organs. We would understand how the brain controls the body, functions, and allows us to retain memory.

The Bible gives us some additional information about the make-up of man. The fact that he is both body and spirit, and that the spirit continues to live after the body has died³.

But what about God? What is He made up of? Does He have any physical parts? What type of a being is He?

In order to help us understand the nature and being of God, it will be helpful to contrast Him with a human. While we may never fully and clearly understand the essential make-up of God’s being, we will at least then know what He is not like. The Bible follows this approach to a certain extent when it describes what God is like⁴.

The way we will introduce this comparison between God and people, is by considering the rather macabre topic of planning the assassination of a person. The reason for this will hopefully become apparent later.

2. How to assassinate a person

The objectives of an assassination are generally as follows:

- (i) Bring the physical life a person to an end
- (ii) To do this in such a manner that the assassin does not get caught

In order to plan an assassination, it would seem the following general steps, not necessarily in strict order, need to be contemplated.

³ This work assumes the dichotomous nature of man. In Matthew 10:28, “body and soul” describes the whole of man. Spirit and soul are used interchangeably in Scripture (see for example John 12:27 and John 13:21).

⁴ See for example Hosea 11:9 and Isaiah 31:3.

Firstly, the various ways in we could orchestrate the physical demise of someone needs to be listed and understood. We need to get one or more of the critical organs, such as the heart, brain or lungs, to stop functioning. There are, no doubt, a variety of methods we could use. We could think about trauma to one of these organs by means of a bullet, arrow, or knife blade, for example. We could think of something more subtle, such as introducing poison into their system. There are other means of producing death, such as cutting off oxygen supply using drowning or suffocation. And so we could go on. There are hundreds of different ways in which we could kill someone.

If we reflect for a short while on why these many ways exist, we would realise it is because of the way we have been physically made. In other words, it relates back to the nature of our being. We are, at least in part, physical beings. In order to live, we depend on certain things to maintain our bodies. We need food (nutrients) and water to keep our organs functioning. In order to get the nutrients to our organs, we need blood to take it there. In order to move the blood, we need our heart to pump it.

All this means is that we are extremely frail and dependent creatures. Remove our oxygen for a few minutes, and we die. Remove our food and water for a few days, and we die. Stop our hearts, and we die. Introduce poison into our bodies, and we die. The whole project of assassinating someone is only possible because, as human beings, we depend on so many things for our physical life.

Now to get back to planning our assassination. We now have a whole variety of ways to end someone's life. We now need to select which one to use. In order to do this, we need to focus on the particular individual we want to eliminate. We need to study and know their personal circumstances, because we want to administer one of these lethal methods in a manner that we can go undetected for at least a short period of time so we do not get caught.

The important point is that these different methods of assassination require different periods of time to administer and different degrees of physical proximity to the victim. If the person has body guards, for example, physical closeness to administer poison or use a knife would be problematic, unless some form of disguise or deception can be used. Long range rifles are therefore a popular means of assassination, as they allow the assassin to deliver the trauma to the heart or brain from a distance. Of course, then, the assassin needs to be able to predict the movement of the victim based on specialised information of their past behavioural patterns or future schedule.

As it then turns out, there are in fact a complex set of decisions that need to be made in order to assassinate someone. All these relate to the essential make-up of a person's being (how to stop their physical life), and their location (so one can have access to them) and behavioural habits (so one can predict where they may be at a specific point in time).

We are now going to use the idea of trying to assassinate God to gain an understanding of the implications of what the Bible teaches on the nature of God's being. We will then be able to

contrast it to the above considerations to hopefully drive the main biblical points home of how different God is from us, and how untouchable He is.

The idea of an assassination attempt on God may seem absurd at first glance. But consider Psalm 2:1-3. These people and nations wish to remove God from His throne, and break out from under His rule. One of the main ways people do this at a human level is by assassinating the ruler. They want to destroy the ruler and remove him from his political position. That then is essentially what these people want to do against God.

Yet God laughs at this possible assassination attempt. It is doomed to utter failure. The following sections will progressively demonstrate why.

3. What is “spirit?”

In John 4:24 we are simply told that God is spirit (note, not *a* spirit, but spirit). If we have to investigate further, we find that “spirit” denotes a non-material being (Lk 24:39). The great confessions of old all held to this understanding of God’s being. For example, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith describes God as “*a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts...*”⁵. This means that God, as spirit, has no physical substance. He is not comprised of atoms, molecules or cells.

Scripture therefore consistently contrasts God (or His spirit) with man or animal’s flesh and blood (Gen. 6:3; Ps. 78:39; Isa. 31:3; Mat. 16:17).

We are also not permitted, however, to think of God as merely a force, or mere energy. He is a living being (Rev 20:4), with personality, self-awareness, and faculties of will (Mat. 26:41), mind (Ps. 77:6) and emotion⁶ (Lk 1:47). He is moral, which gives rise to His role as law-giver for all creation (Deut. 32:4).

God is not the only non-material, spiritual being. Scripture indicates that angels are spiritual beings (Heb. 1:14), and also the human spirit can exist independently from the human body (Eccl. 12:7). However, these spirits are created by God, while He is uncreated Spirit. It would seem God created these spirits to dimly reflect His spiritual nature (in the same manner that man is made in the image of God and dimly reflects some of God’s attributes). We must, therefore, still draw a distinction between God, the uncreated Spirit, and other spiritual beings.

Scripture provides no further insights into the make-up of God’s essential being. There are, however, a number of important implications for our understanding of God from the data that we do have.

⁵ Chapter 2, paragraph 1.

⁶ The topic of the impossibility of God will not be discussed in this work.

4. Implications for divine self-existence

Because God is pure spirit, He must therefore be, by definition, self-existent. In other words, He is reliant on nothing else but Himself for His continual existence. He does not need food or nutrients to sustain His being. He does not need oxygen to continue living. He has no vital organs that need to be maintained in any way.

This means that there is no way to kill God, simply because there is nothing that He can be deprived of that will cause Him to die. This is the first, insurmountable obstacle in any assassination attempt on God. There is simply no mechanism available to kill Him. The pure, uncreated spiritual nature of God sets Him apart from all creation. He is untouchable, invincible.

It is noteworthy that the first assassination attempt on God only came after the Son became flesh (Mat. 2:7-14). The incarnation is an unfathomable mystery, as the eternal Son took on human flesh. Now, suddenly, for the first time, God's enemies were provided with a mechanism to put God to death, as it were. The God-man, Jesus Christ, therefore drew the attention of both man and devil. Attempts on His life were numerous, until He willingly allowed Himself to be put to death by the devil-inspired betrayer and rulers. Then, no doubt, the spiritual forces watched and waited with bated breath to see what would happen when this unique being, the God-man, was assassinated. Their victory was short lived (three days in fact!), after which the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead and defeated His enemies for ever more (Col. 2:13-15).

However, the point is that God, in His essence, is a being that cannot be destroyed.

5. Implications for divine knowledge

It is amazing to consider that God thinks, and has all knowledge, yet has no physical organ such as a brain. The human brain is integrated with the human spirit, and knowledge or memory is, partly at least, related to chemical and electrical process. It is a most amazing organ, the depths of which have not yet been fully explored or contemplated.

Yet God has none of this physical make-up. He thinks, understands, and retains all knowledge, yet without any physical organs or processes to facilitate this.

God's attainment of knowledge must therefore not be thought of as sequential. No chemical or electrical processes are required to build on previous chemical or electrical processes. God's knowledge is instantaneous, comprehensive.

God's knowledge is therefore also unlimited. There is no physical organ that can run out of "capacity", to limit His knowledge. It cannot be measured in terabytes, as there is no physical limitation to His knowledge and memory. He will never require an "upgrade" to increase His memory capabilities.

This raises the second, insurmountable obstacle in any assassination attempt on God. His staggering knowledge so outweighs that of His enemies that there is no way they can devise anything against God that He has not had knowledge of before. Indeed, God even has comprehensive knowledge of the thoughts of His enemies (Gen. 6:5). There is no plan or intent of the heart that can be hidden from God.

Most assassination attempts on people succeed because the victims are not aware of the plot. And if they are aware of the plot, they almost always do not know the “who, where and when” of the attempt. God would know the complete “who, where and when” of any attempt on His life and reign, as Psalm 2:1-3 indicates. He knows exactly what all His enemies are plotting all the time.

6. Implications for divine presence

It is crucial not to interpret God’s spiritual nature as a form of “gas” that can spread out across the universe. If this were so, then a part of God would be at one end of the Universe, and another part of Him at the other end. This is not how Scripture portrays the omnipresence of God. God’s being is non-material. He is completely present everywhere at once, because He is spirit. He is present in the smallest atom, and observes the spins and twirls of electrons (if our model of the atom is completely correct), and at the same time holds the entire universe in the palm of His hands. Because His presence is non-physical, He can, if He so chooses, be present without affecting in the least the physical properties of the object He is present with. He can be present without disturbing the laws of nature or affecting the interactions between molecules and planets. In other words, God’s presence can be completely undetectable.

This is why Scripture describes God as invisible (Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17). Because He is non-material, there is no device that man can make to detect the presence of God. The displays we see in Scripture of God more properly describe the radiance of His glory than a sight of His direct, spiritual nature⁷.

These considerations present two further, insurmountable obstacles to an attempt to assassinate God. Firstly, assassins need to be able to locate their targets, and predict where they will be at some future point in time. There is simply no way of doing this with God, who is pure Spirit. He could, if He so chose, presence Himself in every moment of history and in every part of the universe without anyone even being aware that He was there.

Secondly, even though we may be able to predict God’s presence at a particular location at a particular time because of His self-disclosure, there is no way to even “lay our hands” on God, because He is truly non-physical. For example, the Lord Jesus has promised to gather together with His people (Mat. 18:20). Due to this self-disclosure, then, we can predict the very real

⁷ I agree with John Owen that even in heaven, believers do not see the direct being of God (based on John 6:46). If it were not for the incarnation, we would not be able to “see” God, only the radiance / manifestations of His glory. See also Grudem (1994:188) where he indicates that we will never be able to see God’s total essence, only outward manifestations of God.

presence of Christ at any true local church on any given Sunday morning. If an attempt was made to assassinate God by detonating a nuclear bomb at a selected local church while they were worshipping, God Himself would remain completely and utterly untouched⁸. He has no cells, molecules or atoms that could be physically impacted by the blast. He is completely and utterly untouchable, even when His presence is known and can be felt.

7. Implications for divine power

The spiritual nature of God indicates that His power is limitless. He has no batteries or generator that needs replenishing when He has expended energy. After creation, He did not rest because His energy had been depleted and He was “breathing hard” from the effort! He could have created another ten billion galaxies without feeling any drain on His power, simply because there is no physical source to His power, and it is limitless. He rested on the seventh day because He had finished creating all that needed to be created.

It is a simple but profound statement that with God nothing will be impossible⁹ (Lk. 1:37). He can do so much more that we can ever think or imagine. A being who has absolutely no limits to His power staggers and overwhelms the human mind.

This again, provides another insurmountable obstacle to any attempt to assassinate God or to remove Him from His throne. There is no power in the universe, no army that man or demon can muster, that can withstand or even be remotely compared to the infinite power of God. There is simply no contest!

8. Implications for divine Sovereignty

The spiritual nature of God would then indicate to us that God is completely sovereign. No one can escape from His presence (Ps. 139:7-10). No plan can be devised without Him knowing it. No secret can be hidden from Him. No one can even come close to harming Him, or laying hold of Him. He is invincible and untouchable.

From the rest of Scripture, we see that His purposes cannot be thwarted in any way (Isa. 14:27). His will cannot be resisted (Rom. 9:21-23). His enemies merely end up fulfilling His eternal decrees (Acts 4:27-28).

In short, God is truly God. He is infinite in all His ways, invisible, all-powerful, all-present, and all-seeing. He is someone who is worthy of our worship. He is enthroned on high, and cannot be touched by His enemies.

⁸ With no comment being made on His emotional state, as our tears are kept by Him (Ps. 56:8) and the blood of the saints is precious in His sight (Ps. 72:14).

⁹ Apart from the obvious impossibilities that God cannot lie and be tempted with evil (Tit. 1:2; Jam. 1:13). Far from detracting from God’s power, this displays His infinite power, because no one can make Him do something He does not want to do.

It has hopefully now become apparent why God laughs and mocks at attempts to remove Him from His throne:

*He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure:*

*“Yet I have set My King
On My holy hill of Zion.” (NKJV: Ps. 2:4-6)*

The above considerations regarding the unique, uncreated spiritual nature of God stand in stark contrast to the claim of the open theists¹⁰. Open theism, in order to protect human autonomy and liberty, downgrades God to a Being:

- Who does not know all things, especially not the future as it is dependent on the free will of man;
- Who can therefore be taken by surprise; and
- Who has to take certain risks in the Universe.

Surely God must laugh and scoff at such claims in the same manner He laughs and scoffs at those who attempt to remove Him from His throne (Ps. 2:4-6).

9. Conclusion: Implications for worship

Any contemplation of the being and nature of God must end in worship. That is the reason why God has revealed Himself to us in all His majesty. God’s attributes and sovereignty should inspire our awe and confidence in Him. God’s self-revelation should humble man and angel, as nothing can compare to God’s power and greatness.

Three final, brief points need to be made as they relate to worship. Firstly, this work is by no means comprehensive, as indicated in the beginning. God’s love, mercy, wrath, compassion, righteousness, holiness and other attributes also need to be considered to ensure we have a full picture of who God is, so that we can worship Him acceptably and as He is, and not as we think He should be. Any distortion in the doctrine of God invariable leads to distortions in our worship and lives.

Secondly, the spiritual nature of God must always steer us away from seeking to worship God with the use of images. There are serious warnings against making any likeness of God from creation, and worshipping Him with these images (Exod. 20:4-6). Those who use images may argue the benefit of these images for the worshipper, but at the end of day they diminish God’s

¹⁰ I recommend John Frame’s *No Other God*, as a very helpful response and refutation of the claims of open theism.

being and detract from His glory. A human, animal or any other image to depict God is always a severe downgrade!

Thirdly, we must constantly marvel at the fact that God became flesh for us. What a humiliation for the Son of God. To be pure spirit, untouchable, invincible and free from any physical constraints, and then to willingly take on frail flesh with its limitations for all eternity¹¹ is true love and condescension (Phil. 2:5-11). What a mystery!

¹¹ Even though the Lord Jesus now has a glorified human body in heaven, it is still a physical body.

Chapter 3

The ego of God

1. Introduction

Nichols has an almost unique treatment of the ego of God in his lectures on the doctrine of God¹². An ego can be described as the ‘self’ of a person (Collins 1982:356), and is closely related to one’s image of oneself. It can be roughly equated to self-esteem.

Isaiah 46:5-11 gives us an insight into God’s estimate of Himself, or into His “self-esteem.” God says that when He considers Himself, and then looks over all creation, there is no one as great as He is. Nothing can even be remotely compared to Him. It needs to be emphasised that Isaiah 46:5 expresses God’s estimate of Himself. There is no ‘third-party’ doing an evaluation and comparing God to the universe. This is God Himself, reflecting on His own being, and then declaring to people that He is so great and glorious that nothing at all can ever be compared to Him. In this text we see God’s ego on full display. Other texts could also be cited (see for example Jer. 9:24-25; Isa. 48:9-11). Conversely, there is no verse in Scripture where God ever indicates to His creation that they are over-esteeming Him. Fallen creation invariably under-esteems Him. There is therefore no false humility or coyness on God’s part regarding His glory and majesty. One of the basic truths of Scripture is that God does all things for His glory (Eph. 1:5-6). This includes making sure that His person and works are displayed before His creation. It should also be noted that God’s ego or self-esteem is based on His contemplation of His attributes, and His knowledge of Himself.

2. How to understand this attribute

Such egocentricity is the height of sin in the creature, and utterly repulsive. Scripture forbids us from singing our own praises (see example Prov. 27:2; Matt. 23:5-7). This attribute in God may therefore seem to create some problems. Firstly, God judges and humbles his creatures when they seek to glorify themselves (Isa. 5:15; Matt. 23:12). Secondly, Scripture indicates that pride and self-glorification are sinful (Prov. 16:18; Hos. 5:5). Is God therefore not guilty of sin in singing His own praises? Is He not unjust in judging His creatures for attempting to glorify themselves, while He constantly and relentlessly glorifies His own name?

This problem vanishes when we consider the greatness of God. His divine attributes of infinity, omniscience, omnipotence, self-sufficiency, majesty and wisdom mean that He is worthy of praise and admiration, and that it is in fact altogether righteous and just that He should esteem Himself to be worthy of such praise. There are many attitudes or actions that, while being sinful for the creature to perform, are entirely legitimate for God to perform. For example, while it is wrong for man to take revenge, God can legitimately take revenge on His enemies (Lev. 19:18;

¹² Greg Nichols, *The Doctrine of God*, Lecture 21, Fall 1994.

Rom. 12:19). It is the same with God's self-glorification. It is sinful for man to parade himself and seek his own glory since he is a limited creature entirely dependent on his creator. This is even truer after the fall. Man has in fact nothing to boast of within himself (Eph. 2:8-9). This is not true of God, however. He alone is self-sufficient and eternal. In fact, it would be wrong and unrighteous for God *not* to esteem Himself so highly, because he is worthy of that high estimation.

3. The basis of this attribute

A closer look at Isaiah 46:5-11 provides some valuable insights into the basis of God's estimation of Himself. In verse nine, God contemplates His own being and declares Himself to be utterly glorious and the unique God. Verse ten gives the immediate attribute that God is contemplating, namely His sovereign rule over all creation. *In other words, in this passage, God's ego or self-esteem is based on His contemplation of His sovereignty. His sense of His own deity is tied closely to His awareness of His supreme sovereignty*¹³. A denial of God's sovereignty must therefore substantively detract from God's glory, and rob Him of an essential aspect of His glorious deity. Scripture reveals that the will of the creature (human or otherwise) never thwarts God's decree, predetermination and ruling providence over all events, including the salvation of man. He controls and determines random events (Prov. 16:33). He controls all aspects of nature (Ps. 104:14, 17, 21, 27-30). He raises and brings down rulers and empires (Dan. 2:20-21; 4:35). He has complete control over evil (Acts 4:27-28), and even chooses who will be saved out of a depraved humanity (Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:3-6, 11). The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (and the Westminster Confession of Faith) ably expounds the biblical testimony to God's sovereignty (see for example Waldron, 1989:60-73).

The man-centeredness of much modern Christianity and prevalence of Arminianism (which is closely aligned with the prevailing world view centred on man's autonomy) seriously undermines God's glory and essential deity. God certainly has no doubt about His sovereign rule and authority. The following chapter is therefore devoted to the attribute of God's sovereignty.

¹³ God's sovereignty is dealt with in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

God's Sovereignty: an exposition of Isaiah 46:9-11

1. Introduction

A true understanding of God's sovereignty cannot be derived from mere contemplation of the natural world around us, nor can it be derived from human intuition. God's sovereignty is so astounding that we would scarcely believe it unless the Bible clearly portrayed it. Our thoughts and understanding of God's sovereignty must therefore be guided by a careful study of the word of God. Isaiah 46:9-11 is a useful framework to display the main categories of God's sovereignty, and other texts will then be brought to bear on the subject.

2. God's decree and providence

Isaiah 46:9-11 introduces two very important concepts to understand the subject of God's sovereignty. In the first instance, we are told by God Himself that He has "counsel" regarding the future. On the basis of this "counsel" He declares what will happen. Very importantly, this "counsel" is described as His "pleasure," a word which conveys the very strong idea that God's "counsel" is not thrust upon Him in any way, but it is actually what He truly wants to happen.

Theologians label this aspect of God's sovereignty as His decree. Simply put, God's decree equates to His plan for the future, and as we will see later, His plan for all of history. He declares what will come to pass on the basis on what He has planned and decreed to come to pass.

In the second instance, we are told that God will bring this plan of His to pass. He will be active in ensuring that His pleasure will in fact be done. This activity of God is called his providence. He works in history to accomplish His plan.

Very importantly, Isaiah 46 establishes a very close connection between God's decree and God's providence. God *brings to pass* what He *planned* to happen. His *providence* is based on His *decree*. This means that God never acts in history in an arbitrary fashion, or merely as a response to human activity in the world. Rather, God is actively bringing His plans and purposes to pass.

This should not surprise us. Man, in the image of God, also plans, and seeks to bring his plans to pass. In fact, we hardly do anything without first planning (however informal or brief the planning may be). All of our basic activities, such as getting married, going on a holiday, or pursuing a career require some form of planning. After the plan has been finalised, we then start to act to bring the plan to pass. Due to our very real limitations, we have different degrees of success in bringing these plans to pass. Nevertheless, we still display some of God's sovereignty as divine image bearers in that we plan, and act on those plans.

Some important questions arise in our minds as we consider the two aspects of God's sovereignty. These questions will be used to unfold God's sovereignty.

2.1 What does God's decree and providence extend to?

We may be tempted to speculate as to what God's decree and providence extends to. Does God's plan, and His execution of that plan, extend to only the big or significant events in history? Is He just concerned with the decision and actions of influential men and women, such as the Chief Executive Officers and state presidents of the world? Or is He mainly concerned with the events in history that have a spiritual bearing on his people? As much as some of these notions may initially seem appealing, a quick contemplation of them would make us realise that they are woefully deficient. For one thing, very small events (such as spiders re-making webs that are continually being broken) have inspired leaders to renew their efforts and achieve great things. There is simply no way to classify what is a "small" or a "great" event. As another example, seemingly insignificant people have risen to great positions of power, and their lives in obscurity have shaped them into the leaders they became. There is simply no way of differentiating between "great" and "ordinary" men.

We have to turn to the pages of Scripture to answer these types of questions. Isaiah 46:10 tells us that God declares "the end from the beginning" (a rather sweeping statement that one is tempted to, at face value, take as "all of history") and "from ancient times things that are not yet done." Verse eleven introduces specific events and a person that God's decree and providence extend to, namely Cyrus, and his subsequent activities that bring about God's plans (Young, 1972:227-228).

From the rest of scripture, we can build up a rather comprehensive picture of what these "things" extend to.

God controls the destiny of nations and kings (Dan. 2:21 and Dan 4:35). He controls the small, seemingly random events that occur all around us every day (Prov. 16:33 and Matt. 10:29-30). Psalm 104 is fascinating in its depiction of God's active control over nature. He causes the grass to grow (vs 14), and delivers prey to the lions (vs 21). The animal's fullness or deprivation is as a direct result of God opening or closing His hands (vs 27-29). This is not the language of a God who created the world and set it in motion like a clock, and then stood back and watched what would happen according to the laws of nature. This is a God who is actively in control of all that happens in nature.

God is even in control of sinful actions. Acts 4:27-28 clearly depicts the sinful actions of men as being part of God's decree. He decreed these events to take place, and brought them to pass. God hardened Pharaoh in his sin in order to glorify his name and power (Rom. 9:17-18). This decree and control of God even extends to the sins of believers. An example of this can be seen in 2 Samuel 24:1-10. We are told that God moved David to number Israel (vs 1). The rest of Scripture gives us other perspectives on this incident. The author of Samuel is quick to tell us that David acknowledged his personal guilt in doing this (2 Sam. 24:10). We are also told that

Satan moved David to count Israel (1 Chr. 1:21). God's sovereign relationship to sin is therefore complex, but at the very least, from this incident, we can conclude:

- God decreed and moved David to sin
- Satan was involved as possibly a more immediate cause of the sin
- David's will was not violated in the matter, and he took full responsibility for his own sin.

A later section deals with the difficulty of God's relationship to evil in more detail.

God also decrees and controls those who will be saved. Ephesians 1:3-8 very clearly teaches that God chose certain people before the foundation of the earth to be holy and without blame before him. These people were predestined to be adopted as sons. This doctrine of election is taught in many other passages (see for example Acts 13:48; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Rom. 9:10-24). From this selection of passages, we see that God *chose* and *determined* who would be saved from eternity past (i.e. this is His decree – Eph. 1:4), and then at a point in history He calls these people to Christ through the gospel (i.e. this is God's providence - Acts 13:48, 2 Thess. 2:13-14). God brings to pass what He has decreed to take place.

We can conclude then that God's decree and providence extends to every single thing that happens in all history (Eph. 1:11). This is staggering. God directs the raindrops, the leaves that fall, the waves of the ocean, the birds that die. All their movements are planned and controlled by God. All the natural disasters, the sinful events and the salvation of the elect fall within God's decree and providence. All this includes second causes, and takes into account the free choices of men, so that their wills are not violated. How infinite is God's intellect! What infinite wisdom and power!

2.2 Will God's plans come to pass?

The language of Isaiah 46:9-11 is definite. God will do all His pleasure, and will bring to pass all He has spoken. The rest of Scripture also uses this definite language. It never suggests that some of God's purposes will not be established. For example, Ephesians 1:11 is emphatic that all things work out according to God's counsel. Isaiah 14:24-27 is a close parallel with our main text. As God has thought and purposed, so it shall come to pass. Verse twenty seven concludes that God's purposes cannot be annulled and His hand cannot be turned back.

God's sovereignty must therefore be understood to mean that all He has planned and purposed to take place will most definitely take place. He will bring all his decrees to pass.

2.3 What is the basis of God's plan?

In order to circumvent the very clear teaching on God's sovereignty (or its implications on human autonomy), it has become popular to postulate that God's decrees are based on his foresight of what will happen in history, and what choices people will make in their lives.

Such a view of God's sovereignty has no support from Scripture¹⁴. In the first instance, if this were the case, then the language of Scripture is diabolically deceptive. Note that Isaiah 46:9-11 describes whatever comes to pass as *God's* counsel as *His pleasure*. If He were to look into the future and see what would take place, and then ordain that, it could hardly be described as *His* counsel (as He is merely adopting what something or someone else has chosen to do) or *His pleasure* (as He is merely doing what someone else has been pleased to do). It would mean that God is secondary, and man and his will primary. Scripture never indicates that this is ever the case. Indeed, when God has purposed something, and has stretched out his hand to bring it to pass, no human activity can prevent it (Isa. 14:26-27). God's counsel always overrules the plans man may have for himself (Prov. 19:21).

3. Some objections answered

The Reformed view of God's sovereignty, as outlined above, has been articulated in many of the historic confessions of faith of the seventeenth century¹⁵. This means these doctrines are not new, but were in fact the dominant, mainstream beliefs of many of the denominations. However, since then, many objections have been raised. Only three will be briefly mentioned here.

3.1 God's sovereignty makes man a robot or puppet

Within the framework of God's sovereignty, man is still portrayed as making real choices.¹⁶ For example, those who put John the Baptist to death did to him whatever they *wished* (Mk. 9:13). They clearly acted according to their very real desires. When people sin, it is because they are drawn away and enticed by their *own* desires (Jam. 1:14). God's decrees and providence do not violate the will of the creature. God's sovereignty does not make man into a robot. Man makes real choices, and acts according to his will. Yet God remains sovereign, and brings His purposes to pass in such a manner that man's will is not violated.

3.2 God's sovereignty removes human responsibility

The Bible teaches that while God decrees all things, and makes them come to pass, man is still responsible for his actions, and his sin in particular. In 2 Samuel 24:10 David acknowledges his responsibility for what he has done. He was conscious that he had made a deliberate choice

¹⁴ Romans 8:29 does not teach that God's predestinating purposes are based on his foreknowledge of people's faith. In the first instance, the verse does not say "whom God foreknew *would believe*..." In the second instance, people cannot believe unless God grants it to them (Jn. 6:43-44, 65; 2 Tim. 2:24-25). See discussion by Grudem (1994:676-679).

¹⁵ See for example the Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

¹⁶ This is the basis for human responsibility. It should also be noted that although man makes real choices, this must not be construed to mean that man has a free will. The bible teaches that man's heart and nature has been so contaminated by sin that he now cannot do any true, spiritual good of himself. He is dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-3), a slave to sin (Jn. 8:34) and at enmity to God (Rom. 8:7). See Grudem (1994:330-331, 496-498).

to sin, even though we are told that it was God who had moved him. This confirms the fact that God's providence does not violate human will, nor diminishes human responsibility.

Romans 9:10-24 sheds light on the subject. In this passage the basis of God's election is explicitly said to be independent of the future actions or works of Jacob or Esau. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before they were born or had done any good or evil (vs 11). This is confirmed and clarified by verse sixteen. Neither man's *will* nor his *actions* are the basis of God's choice. This contradicts the view that God elected people on the basis of foresight of their faith. Rather, God's electing act is based on His free and sovereign choice, so that His purposes are established (vs 11). If God simply *responds* to faith that He sees people will exercise, how can God's purposes be established? He would then simply be responding to *man's* purposes!

Election is therefore a matter of God's sovereign grace, and He bestows this grace on whomever He chooses (Rom. 9:15). This truth is again confirmed and clarified by verses nineteen to twenty four. In these verses Paul raises the natural question of the fairness of God in holding people responsible for their actions (verse 19). If God has chosen people based on His sovereign choice, and no one can resist His will, how can He find fault with people?

It must be emphasized that if God's election was simply based on foresight of man's actions, then Paul would have introduced the thought here to get rid of the difficulty. The whole process would then be entirely "fair," as man in fact determines his own destiny and God responds. It would all be "fair" and "understandable" from a purely human perspective.

Paul however, while affirming that God does hold men responsible for their sin, supplies a two-fold answer to this difficulty. Firstly, he rebukes man's attitude in judging and questioning God (verse 20). Secondly, Paul insists that the potter has power to make from the same lump of clay some vessels to honour and some to dishonour. Paul does not resolve the difficulty of how a sovereign God can still hold people responsible for their sins, but rather insists on God's power and right to do as He pleases (verses 21-23). This confirms the fact that ultimately, election is based on God's sovereign choice. At the same time, man is responsible for his actions and sins.

3.3 God's sovereignty makes God the author of sin

We have seen that God's decree and control of sin does not violate the wills of those committing the sins, and therefore does not diminish human and demonic responsibility for that sin. Yet it is also true that God never tempts anyone to sin (Jam. 1:13-15). James 1:13-15 is the classic passage that theologians use to prove that God is not the author of sin. However, it may be more precise to say that while God is the *decretive* author of sin¹⁷, in that He decrees all things to come to pass, yet He Himself does not sin, He is not to be blamed for sin, and He holds his creatures responsible for their sin.

¹⁷ See the good discussions of Grudem (1994:322-331, 492-493) and Frame (2002:174-176), where Frame cautiously acknowledges that God "causes" evil in the sense that He has decreed evil to come to pass, but is never to be blamed for evil.

This language and discussion may seem confusing and mildly contradictory. The problem of God's relationship to evil is extremely complex, and the inadequacy of human language is evident as theologians grapple with what may indeed be, according to Frame, one of the most difficult issues in Scripture (see Frame, 2002:160). According to Scripture, however, we can insist that God ordained evil to come to pass in such a way that man and Satan are responsible for that evil.

4. The importance of the doctrine of God's sovereignty

In the last century, the doctrine of God's sovereignty has been much debated. It is true to say that the majority of churches today reject most, if not all, the teaching on God's sovereignty. One may be tempted to then conclude that it is a difficult doctrine, not very clearly taught in Scripture, and hence we should not make much of it.

Two considerations indicate that such a conclusion is dangerously defective. Firstly, the language of scripture on the sovereignty of God is in fact clear. The teaching is straightforward, and the texts are abundant. The opposition to God's sovereignty is not on the basis of the lack of clarity in scripture, but rather on the basis that it contradicts modern notions of man's absolute freedom of will and autonomy, which are considered as inviolate. In other words, God's sovereignty has become unpopular because our culture is strongly man-centred, and not because scripture is unclear on the subject. This man-centeredness has unfortunately infiltrated the church.

Secondly, and most importantly, God makes much of His sovereignty. Consider our main text again (Isa. 46:9-11). Note that in verse nine God is declaring his exclusive *deity*. In verse ten, we are given the basis of God's exclusive deity, namely, his sovereign declaration of the end from the beginning, and his sovereign ability to do all his pleasure. In other words, God is telling us that an important aspect of His deity is His sovereignty. Or, to put it differently, to deny God's sovereignty is to deny an essential aspect of His deity. A god who is not sovereign is not a god at all! It is therefore extremely important to defend and uphold the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in our current man-centred culture.

Chapter 5

Paradox and the Centrality of the Doctrine of God in Hermeneutics¹⁸

1. Introduction¹⁹

There are two distinct camps in the theological debate on the validity of paradox as a legitimate hermeneutical category. On the one hand, a number of theologians, such as Packer (1961:18–25), Grounds (1978), Kuiper and van Till affirm the presence of paradoxes in scripture (see Reymond 1998:103–104) (hereafter referred to as the ‘pro-paradox group’). These paradoxes seem to represent two contradictory statements (called ‘antinomies’ by Packer); statements that appear irreconcilable to human logic. According to them the only resolution is to live with the apparent contradiction and deny that it is real (Packer 1961:21; Grounds 1978:4). Examples of doctrinal antinomies include God’s sovereignty and human freedom (Packer 1961:21), and unconditional election and the free offer of the gospel (Waldron 1989:122, 145).

On the other hand, a second group of theologians deny the validity of such a category of hermeneutics (hereafter referred to as the ‘anti-paradox’ group). Basinger (1987:213), for example, concludes from his analysis that self-contradiction is not a category into which biblical truth can be fitted. Reymond (1998:104–106) agrees, and raises a number of problems with holding to a pro-paradox position (noted in a later section). Reymond (1998:108–109, 692–693) then applies this principle in a number of important areas, including the doctrine of the Trinity, and whether God desires the salvation of all men or the elect only.

After reading Reymond’s application of his anti-paradox position to the Trinity and the question of God’s desire for the salvation of all men, however, some serious and problematic questions arise. Therefore, this paper critiques Reymond’s *application* of his anti-paradox principle on the issues/doctrines of the Trinity and God’s desire for all men to be saved, thus hopefully providing insight into the debate on the legitimacy of paradox as a category for hermeneutics.

¹⁸ This essay was originally published in *Conspectus*, Vol 12, page 39, 2011

¹⁹ Two disclaimers are in order. Firstly, this chapter is not an attempt to reconcile every opposing doctrinal system on the basis that ‘seeming contradictions’ are true but are soluble somewhere in God’s mind. Some doctrinal systems are simply wrong, on the basis of poor exegesis and reasoning. Seeming contradictions need to be shown to have their basis in the word of God.

Secondly, the criticism of Reymond in this chapter is not a large scale rejection of his works. His publications are largely good and would greatly benefit his readers.

2. Definitions

Definitions are crucial in this discussion, especially as contributors to the debate tend to use terms interchangeably (Basinger 1987:205). Grounds (1978:3–4), for example, uses ‘paradox’ and ‘mystery’ interchangeably, as does Waldron (1989:122, 145).

The definitions of Basinger (1987:205–206) are adopted in this paper. Accordingly,

- A ‘verbal puzzle’ refers to seemingly incomprehensible statements that can be resolved by clarifying the meaning of the terms therein.
- A ‘mystery’ refers to concepts that may never be open to human explanation, but nevertheless are logically possible. A miracle is an example of a mystery, as we are unable to explain how God performs them.
- A ‘paradox’ refers to concepts that appear to be self-contradictory to human logic.

3. Reymond’s Approach and Methodology

This section is a critique of Reymond’s application of his anti-paradox position to two important doctrines, namely, the Trinity and God’s desire for the salvation of all men. While acknowledging the strength of his position, this segment of the article exposts and evaluates his application of his method to these two areas of doctrine.

3.1. The strength of his position

The anti-paradox position has some inherent strengths. The primary consideration that makes this position compelling to its adherents, is the claim that if paradoxes are permitted to exist in the Word of God, then Christians will have no basis on which to separate truth from error (Reymond 1998:106). The anti-paradox group argues that an apparent contradiction, because it cannot be reconciled by human logic, looks like a real contradiction to us. Therefore, there is no basis to distinguish between true and apparent contradictions, and hence, there is no basis for us to establish truth.

The implications of the pro-paradox position are therefore far reaching. One of the profoundest implications is in canonicity. For example, rejections of letters or documents are made on the basis that they contradict accepted scripture (Grudem 1994:66). However, a consistent pro-paradox position can never exclude a document on this basis, as the contradiction may only be apparent, after all. Since, accord to the pro-paradox group, scripture contains other apparent contradictions, exclusion of any document therefore is not possible. This is clearly unacceptable.

Reymond (1998:105–106) also notes other problems with the pro-paradox position, such as frustrating all attempts at systematising theology. The very nature of systematic theology is to

harmonise and systematise doctrines in a coherent manner. Another problem pertains to meaning. For example, the paradoxical concept of a square circle has no meaning.

On this basis, it is an inevitable conclusion that the anti-paradox position is correct, *in principle*. However, the evaluation that follows shows that Reymond's application *modus operandi* is also problematic, and therefore, some refinement is required.

3.2. An exposition of Reymond's method

In order to test the consistency of Reymond's application of the anti-paradox position, it is important to elucidate his method by examining his classification of a miracle as a 'mystery' (Reymond 1998:107). This will require some discussion, since Reymond does not fully justify this categorisation, nor make his reasoning explicit.

A miracle in scripture approaches human reason initially as a paradox. For example, it is simply impossible for the weight of any person (distributed over the surface area of their feet) to be sustained by the surface tension of water. This is another way of stating that it is impossible for a man to walk on water. However, the scriptures assert this miracle. A number of options present themselves as to the interpretation of such biblical statements:

- The statement is a mistake or a lie. The author either is trying to deceive us or was mistaken.
- The statement is not literal, and thus such passages require an allegorical or spiritual interpretation.
- The statement is some form of idiom, and a literal interpretation is erroneous.

The above list is obviously not exhaustive. The three examples merely represent a secular, atheistic, anti-supernatural assumption; an epistemological framework which excludes the possibility of miracles—it is impossible for a human to walk on water. The root of such preferences is the common experience (people do not walk on water) and scientific research (the surface tension of water is too minimal to support the tension created by two feet). Therefore, the declaration that a literal man walked on literal water is, in the first instance, paradoxical, for it contradicts human experience.

However, the evangelical epistemology permits the acceptance of Peter's account of Jesus walking on water as literally true. The basis of this epistemological acceptance is the concept of an omnipotent creator who established the laws of nature and science (and can therefore suspend them), making the possibility of a man walking on water rational, even though the mechanism of how this was done by God is inscrutable. Thus, Reymond (1998:107) has labelled a miracle a 'mystery', not a 'paradox'.

The main point of this brief analysis is that the doctrine of God (His nature, being and attributes) is central to hermeneutics and understanding paradox. Our understanding of who God is, what he is, and what he is like, turns a seemingly paradoxical and impossible statement into a

rationally acceptable and reasonable statement, even though there are still some unexplained aspects to the statement. It is important to note that the truth statement (i.e. that Jesus walked on water) is not modified in order to remove the ‘paradox’. The meaning of ‘man’, ‘walking’, or ‘water’ are not spiritualised or modified, for they are accepted as literally true. Simply, the paradox receives acceptance in light of an omnipotent God who has complete control over the laws of nature and is able to do the impossible.

Based on this analysis, then, Reymond’s categorisation of a miracle as a ‘mystery’, rather than a ‘paradox’ is sound and acceptable. However, the application of this anti-paradox principle to the doctrine of the Trinity requires careful examination.

3.3. Reymond and the doctrine of the Trinity

Reymond (1998:108–109) makes the rather remarkable statement that the doctrine of the Trinity is not paradoxical, and that the historical confessions have so defined the doctrine of the Trinity to avoid any contradiction. His main argument is that the historic confessions (such as the Westminster Confession) have applied the terms ‘God’ or ‘Godhead’ to the ‘one’, and ‘person’ to the ‘three’. By doing this, a direct contradiction is avoided.

Although a full evaluation of this is beyond the scope of this paper, a few comments are in order. Irrespective of how the church and their confessions have grappled with and articulated the doctrine of the Trinity, a neat and precise statement of the Trinity using terms that eliminate all paradox, is problematic, for the simple reason that the biblical data is more complex than that.

For example, Isaiah 45:22c states: ‘I am God, and there is no other’ (NKJV). Reymond (1998:109) is correct when he contends that the title ‘God’ refers either to the Godhead in their unitary wholeness, or to one of the persons of the Trinity. Whichever way one interprets the term ‘God’, however, a paradox of some degree is inevitable. For example, if one of the persons of the Trinity was speaking in this passage, it would introduce a seeming paradox as it would imply that this person is unique and no other divine persons exists. We know this not to be true, as each person of the Trinity is fully divine. However, if it is the ‘single Godhead’ who was speaking, this is also paradoxical, because the personal pronoun ‘I’ is used and not ‘we’. In scripture, the pronoun ‘I’ refers to a single *person*, not a plurality of persons. An attempt to avoid the paradox may be made by theologians by using terms such as a ‘singular, personal being’ instead of a ‘single person’ to denoted the ‘I’. Unfortunately, in the normal usage of language a ‘singular, personal being’ is a ‘single person.’ It is for this reason that many ‘lay people’ and ‘good theologians’ do employ language that denotes a level of paradox when describing the Trinity, although Reymond (1998:108) criticises this.

One may accept the seemingly paradoxical language of passages such as Isaiah 45:22, however, without squeezing the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity into neat, non-paradoxical language, as Reymond’s methodology seems to suggest. The paradox of the Trinity becomes acceptable in our minds in the same manner the paradox of a miracle does. The concept and contemplation of a being who is ‘spirit’ allows for the *logical possibility* that such a ‘non-material’ being can

have triune properties that defy our human conceptions of what a 'person' is when referring to God. The 'properties' of such a 'spirit' allow for the possibility of a singular, personal God, (or a single person; I don't think we can really distinguish between these concepts), to also consist of three distinct persons. The point is this: inasmuch as one may try to define the doctrine of the Trinity in human language and concepts (in order to remove a paradox), *some degree of paradox seems to reside in scripture*. The seeming paradox is rendered acceptable, however, not by changing the statements of scripture, but by introducing the concept of a being who is 'spirit,' the properties of which are beyond us, and allow for the possibility of a single, personal being to also be three persons. Following this methodology, then, one may render or classify the doctrine of the Trinity a 'mystery' (according to the earlier definition) in the same way that one may render a miracle a 'mystery'.

Two qualifications are in order. Firstly, this article does not advocate a modification of the historic confessional statements. Rather, this article is, partly, an objection to theologians like Reymond, who do not permit the use of 'paradoxical language' to describe the Trinity. After all, some of the language of scripture does have a semblance of paradox.

In addition, Reymond should also acknowledge the limitations of confessional statements, especially in the light of the complexity of the biblical data pertaining to some doctrines. The Confessions are not inspired, and some of their statements may substantively (but still not perfectly) represent scripture.

Secondly, as discussed more fully in a later section, it is more appropriate to introduce a new category of paradox into the debate, as the definition of a 'mystery' does not give adequate recognition to the paradoxical language sometimes found in scripture.

This discussion of paradox in relation to the Trinity points to another important conclusion in the paradox debate. The idea of what exactly constitutes a 'paradox' (with regard to the relationship of the 'one' and 'three') when referring to a being whose exact nature is incomprehensible to us is not immediately self-evident. After all, God is not an apple, and the three persons of the Trinity are not apples either (see the rather simplistic example of Reymond [1978:108]). The physical properties of apples can be defined and are apparent to us, and it is therefore logically impossible for three apples to equal one apple. The Godhead, however, is a non-material being, and each of the three persons are non-material beings (except for Christ after the incarnation). Their 'non-material properties' are not apparent to us. This means that as humans we need to be cautious when trying to establish what constitutes a real contradiction when speaking of the persons of the Trinity. An example from the world of physics can illustrate the point. The fact that light can exhibit both particle and wave properties is still puzzling to scientists, and does seem to pose an apparent contradiction. However, this apparent contradiction is accepted in the scientific world as it has been proven to exist, and also scientists admit that there are unknown factors regarding the properties of light. In other words, even science has a category of 'apparent contradiction.' It is an acceptable category because scientists acknowledge that don't know all there is to know about the universe. Is it then totally unacceptable for theologians to have a category of 'apparent contradiction' when trying to understand the self-revelation of a being whose non-material properties are inscrutable to us?

This is a possible explanation (in part, at least) for some of the theological statements of the pro-paradox group with regard to the Trinity. The language of scripture seems paradoxical, as noted earlier. This ‘Trinitarian paradox’ cannot be completely eliminated using neat confessional categories. The pro-paradox theologians therefore attempt to express this seeming paradox in their statements.

It is possible to make a similar point from the declaration that the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father (John 14:10). From a human and material perspective, this is strictly a logical paradox. How can the Son be in the Father if the Father is already in the Son? Stated differently, if the Father is already in the Son, how can the Son ‘occupy’ the Father? The paradox is rendered acceptable, however, on the basis that God is ‘spirit,’ and ‘spirit’ has properties that are beyond our scrutiny and comprehension. It is not necessary to try and remove the paradox by re-defining the meaning of the word ‘in’. Rather, the problem is soluble and rendered logically acceptable when an immaterial, divine being is part of the equation. The debate on the Trinitarian relations, of course, is further complicated by the incarnation, which provides the divine Son with a material body and human nature.

Importantly, then, the application of Reymond’s anti-paradox principle has missed some of the richness (and paradoxical language) of the biblical data on the doctrine of the Trinity. There seems to be an eagerness on Reymond’s part to reduce complex, seemingly paradoxical language into neat and tight definitions or terms that eliminate any suggestion of paradox. This is largely the problem with his approach.

It is perhaps important to stress again that this paper is not advocating rewriting historic doctrinal formulations on the doctrine of the Trinity into largely ambiguous and completely paradoxical language. Rather, this paper is essentially a plea, firstly to recognise that such doctrinal formulations may have limitations, and secondly, to avoid hastily criticising theologians who include paradoxical language in their exegetical explanations. After all, the scriptures do have a semblance of paradox.

3.4. Reymond and God’s desire for the lost

Reymond (1978:692–693) criticises the view that God desires the salvation of all men, including the non-elect, for such notions seem to impute irrationality to God—what God desires to happen, he would have decreed to happen. This is, again, an application of the anti-paradox principle, for irrationality in God is a contradiction.

Reymond (1978:693), therefore, resolves the alleged paradox by denying that God desires the salvation of all men. This highlights the centrality of the doctrine of God in hermeneutics and resolving apparent contradictions. The theologian’s concept of God is a key determining factor

in resolving paradox. Since the question of whether or not God desires the salvation of all men has a direct impact on the free offer of the gospel, it requires *brief* discussion.²⁰

The scriptural teachings regarding the desire of God for all men to be saved are numerous and compelling, and it is not possible to interpret such passages any other way.²¹ Christ weeping over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37–39) is a case in point. Christ’s desire to gather them under his wings must certainly include spiritual blessings and salvific intent (Henry, 1991:1737). The desire of Christ cannot be relegated to his ‘human nature’. His human nature exclusively, void of the attributes of omniscience and omnipotence, would not make it possible for him to gather and watch over millions of people post-incarnation. Rather, it was an expression of the divine Son of God, weeping over a people going to physical and spiritual destruction. Therefore, it seems that in the light of a sovereign God, a semblance of paradox is present. The illustration below is helpful.

A lady makes it known that she enjoys eating chocolate. Yet, when someone offers to her some chocolate, she declines. Is there an inconsistency between her desire and her action? Is this paradoxical, to the extent that we must either deny that she enjoys chocolate, or believe that she was somehow unable to eat the chocolate? It has a semblance of a paradox, but another solution presents itself. If we had insight into her dispositional complex (a term used by Murray [1984:61] to denote the whole complex of desires, motives and propensities), one may find that she has many desires, one of them being to stay thin and healthy. She has a number of options available to her when presented with the chocolate. She can eat some of it, and exercise to remain slim and healthy. She could also decline the chocolate, on the basis that her desire to stay thin and healthy is greater than her desire to eat the chocolate. This would not mean that she does not desire the chocolate, but that the desire to eat the chocolate is subordinate to other desires. One may never know why she did not choose to eat the chocolate *and* exercise, especially if we also discover that she enjoys exercise. Her decisions are her own, and they are resolved in her dispositional complex. One could also make the mistake of assuming, that because she did not eat the chocolate (although she did stay thin and healthy), she was left with a sense of frustration for not having had any chocolate. To the contrary, she may have had a sense of accomplishment and joy for not eating the chocolate, and achieved her primary goal.

Granted, the above illustration has its limitations. The main character is not divine, or sovereign. However, the illustration points out that even at a human level, to impute irrationality to a person from seeming inconsistencies between statements, desires, and actions is dangerous, especially without a thorough understanding of inner dispositions. Therefore, that which may appear inconsistent and paradoxical initially may, in fact, be fully comprehended and resolved. So, it is not correct to solve the seeming paradox between God’s desire to save all men, and his choice not to decree the fulfilment of that desire, by denying God’s desire for the salvation of the lost, or, negating his sovereignty altogether. Rather, the solving of such a

²⁰ The main purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the issue of paradox in hermeneutics, and not to defend in detail the subject of God’s desire for all men to be saved. A fuller discussion would require the inclusion of the more complex subject of the impassibility of God.

²¹ See discussion by Waldron (1989:121-122).

seeming paradox requires cognisance of the following: God is perfectly holy and sovereign, yet, he is an emotionally complex personal being who exercises his will for the ultimate end of his glory.

At the very least, Reymond should have explored this position more thoroughly before discarding it so easily. Therefore, Reymond's solution to this seeming paradox is unsatisfactory and, once again, demonstrates a quickness to resolve potentially paradoxical concepts in the scriptures by placing them into neat and tight compartments, in order to reduce all semblance of paradox.

From the discussion so far, it is desirable to further subdivide the category of paradox defined earlier in the article.

A direct and strict self-contradiction. For example, the statement, 'one apple equals three apples' falls into this category.

A semblance of contradiction on the level of purely human categories, knowledge and experience. While some biblical truths seem to have a semblance of contradiction, they are not contradictions *per se*. If the term 'apparent contradiction' is retained for this category, then, it is important to state that the pro-paradox group's description of this category (of contradiction) is problematic. The following section will comment on the pro-paradox group's statements, and clarify the exact nature of this problem.

It is tempting to classify this semblance of contradiction as a 'mystery'. With only a few minor qualifications, this would be conceivable. However, the definition of 'mystery', cited earlier in the article, does not give sufficient recognition to the degree of contradiction based on purely human knowledge, categories, and experience found in the scriptures. It is therefore advantageous to introduce a range of terms that permit graded levels of contradiction.

Frame (1987:131) adopts a similar approach in his discussion of circularity in epistemology, noting that, while Christian arguments are circular (as all systems of thought are), the circularity is 'broadened' by introducing other biblical and extra-biblical evidences. This broadening of the circular arguments makes it more compelling and acceptable to our mind and sense of logic. It is critical to this discussion to allow for both a strict, logical self-contradiction, and a semblance of contradiction. A semblance of contradiction allows for the *logical* possibility of resolution in view of the infinite nature and being of God, although the exact nature of the resolution has not been revealed to us. This is developed in the next section.

4. Comments on the pro-paradox position

The preceding analysis shows that there is a category of truth in scripture that has a semblance of contradiction to it. These types of contradictions are not direct, self-contradictions, but rather, tend to present themselves as contradictions by implication, logical extension, or by the limitations of our 'humanness.' To resolve such apparent contradictions, it is not necessary to change the meaning of concepts, or deny one truth at the expense of the other. Rather, the

seeming contradictions can find their partial (but still adequate) resolution in the doctrine of God. God's nature, being and attributes introduce options that make what seems contradictory on a strictly human sensory level, logically possible on the divine level. A miracle, discussed earlier is a case in point. In this regard, then, while the *intent* of the pro-paradox group is correct (i.e. it does reflect some of the semblance of paradox in the scriptures), their actual statements on this semblance of paradox are problematic. They express their sense of seemingly contradictory biblical data in a way that, in principle, destroys the possibility of knowing truth from error.

It is misleading for the pro-paradox group to assert that these apparent contradictions are insoluble by human logic. Such sentiments do not acknowledge that the apparent contradictions are resolved in their minds (to *some extent* and to *some degree*) within the framework of a divine, infinite being. Moreover, such sentiments erroneously imply that the pro-paradox group sacrifices reason, logic, and the possibility of coherence. As rational beings, the pro-paradox group accepts statements that seem *to have a semblance of contradiction*, but, in fact, they are not essentially contradictory—their concept of a divine being has introduced the *possibility of resolution*. This remains the case even if the nature of the harmonisation is not explicit to them.

The next segment is a refined presentation of the notion of *apparent contradictions*.

Some scriptural truths give the impression of paradox or contradiction. However, such *seeming* paradoxes are not directly self-contradictory, but find some degree of harmony in our minds and hearts, especially in light of the epistemological framework of an omnipotent, divine, sovereign, and perfect being. It is in the triune God that the resolution and explanation of such truths exist, even though the manner of the resolution is not perceivable or obvious. Ultimately, there can be no self-contradictory truth in the scriptures, and therefore, any ideas that contradict the scriptures are erroneous.

With regard to the much-discussed doctrine of divine sovereignty and human freedom or responsibility, three points merit mention.

Firstly, divine sovereignty and human freedom do have a semblance of paradox, if viewed from a purely human knowledge and experience perspective. Importantly, however, these two concepts are not strictly self-contradictory. They are not on the same level of contradiction as three apples equal one apple, and one apple equals three apples.

Secondly, this seeming paradox is reconciled in our minds, not by denying human freedom (as defined by Reformed theology), nor by denying God's sovereignty. It is resolved in the presence of a divine being with limitless wisdom and power. The 'mechanisms' of how God achieves his will are largely unknown to us. For example, we do not know how it is possible for a being to simply speak, and that spoken word to automatically and immediately comes to pass without any apparent 'exertion' from God. This is beyond the limits of our humanness and experience. In the face of such a divine being, then, it is entirely plausible that he is able to produce creatures who exercise their wills according to their dispositional complexes, and at the same time, they accomplish exactly what God has ordained. The pro-paradox group are

therefore incorrect to say that these truths are irreconcilable to human logic. The above statement has just 'reconciled' these truths in the face of the divine being, although the 'mechanics' of how God achieves both remains unknown to us. It is therefore appropriate for the pro-paradox group to express some of this paradox, but faulty to claim it is irreconcilable in our minds.

Thirdly, both human freedom (responsibility) and God's sovereignty is taught in the scriptures. Multiple verses and considerations establish both. Philippians 2:12-13 is the classic text in this regard, bringing human responsibility and divine sovereignty into the closest possible relationship. Acts 4:25-28 describes people sinfully plotting against God and endeavouring to destroy his work, yet completely fulfilling his plans and purposes. This semblance of paradox has therefore not been created by faulty exegesis or systems of theology. Both human freedom and God's sovereignty can therefore be accepted as being true, as they are not strictly self-contradictory, and they find a degree of resolution in the presence of a divine being.

5. Conclusions

This paper argues that the position of the anti-paradox is correct *in principle*. They are correct in arguing that there can be no direct, self-contradictions in scripture. They are also correct in arguing that there cannot be apparent contradictions that are irresolvable by human logic either. This would destroy any basis for holding to truth and identifying error.

However, Reymond's application of the anti-paradox principle in the areas of the doctrine of the Trinity, and God's desire to save all men, is problematic. It is problematic in the sense that it endeavours to resolve some of the apparent contradictions of the scriptures in a mechanistic or rigid way, at the expense of the complexity of the biblical data. Reymond does not adequately explore the resolution of these seeming contradictions in the face of the divine being, his attributes and nature.

This paper also argues that, while the *intent* of the pro-paradox group is correct (i.e. they seek to reflect some of the semblance of contradiction found in the scriptures), their actual statements are problematic and seem to imply they have completely sacrificed logic and coherence. Their statements on these paradoxes overstate the case and seem to destroy the basis for differentiating truth from error.

This paper therefore proposes that the debate on paradox in hermeneutics will be furthered by differentiating between a strict, logical contradiction and a semblance of contradiction. A semblance of contradiction allows for the logical possibility of resolving two seemingly contradictory positions in view of the infinite nature and being of God, although the exact nature of the resolution has not been revealed to us.

It is also apparent from the preceding discussion that more research is required on categorising and then developing the resolution of apparent contradictions. For example, some of the categories include:

- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's power, such as miracles. However, miracles are equally classifiable as a mystery, as they are not a point of contention in this debate (their resolution in a miracle working God is rather obvious).
- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's nature and being, such as the Trinitarian relations.
- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's inner emotional and volitional being, such as his decrees, acts, and desires.

The doctrine of God is central to ones hermeneutics in resolving apparent contradictions. As evangelicals, it is imperative that we worshipfully and prayerfully labour in God's Word to know him as comprehensively and accurately as possible.

Works Cited

Ackoff RL 1994. *From mechanistic to social systemic thinking*. Paper delivered at Systems Thinking in Action Conference. Available: <http://acasa.upenn.edu/socsysthngk.pdf>

Alcorn R 2004. *Heaven*. Lagos: Oasis International

Basinger D 1987. Biblical Paradox: Does revelation challenge logic? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30/2:205-213.

Berkhof L 1988. *Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth

Collins Concise English Dictionary 1982. "attribute". Glasgow: William Collins Sons.

Collins Concise English Dictionary 1982. "ego". Glasgow: William Collins Sons.

Collins Concise English Dictionary 1982. "friendly". Glasgow: William Collins Sons.

Frame J 2002. *The doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed.

Frame J 2001. *No other God*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed

Frame J 1987. *The doctrine of the knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed.

Grounds VC 1978. The postulate of paradox. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7/1:3-21.

Grudem W 1994. *Systematic Theology*. Leicester: IVP.

Henry M 1991. *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson.

MacLeod D 1990. *Behold your God*. Edinburgh: Christian Focus Publications

Murray J 1984. *Collected writings of John Murray. Volume 2: Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust.

Nichols G 1994. *The doctrine of God, Lecture 21*. Trinity Ministerial Academy.

Packer JI 1961. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity

Reymond RL 1998. *A new systematic theology of the Christian faith*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Senge PM 1990. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of learning organisations*. New York: Doubleday

Waldron SE 1989. *A modern exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. Darlington: Evangelical Press.

Young EJ 1972. *The book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company