

THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

- We come to study an attribute of God which most Christians have never heard of and few Christians have ever thought about...the simplicity of God
- Yet, it is a perfection of God held by the vast majority of Christian theologians through the ages (though it is hotly debated among Christians today)
- Even though the word to describe this attribute of God is not used in Scripture (similar to “Trinity”), it is a quality that he possesses
- Ironically, the simplicity of God is one of the most mind-boggling attributes of God and therefore one of the most difficult to understand

WHAT IS DIVINE SIMPLICITY?

Definition

- To say that God is “simple” is not to say that he is easy understand or able to be fully comprehended by man
- Nor does it mean that God is slow or dim-witted
- Nor is it the exhortation for Christians to follow the KISS (“keep it simple, stupid”) principle
- Nor is it the insight that God often speaks in simple terms throughout Scripture
- To call God “simple” may even sound wrong since to call a person simple in today’s culture is to insult them
- “We tend to deem simple things among the least awe-inspiring, the nearest to nonbeing. Surely, complex things are more impressive and more capable of performing powerful acts than simple things are—like the difference between a Boeing 747 and a grain of sand, say. And if God is the Creator of all things, then would He not need to be the most complex of all?”¹
- However, to call God simple is not to insult him, but rather to glorify him
- God’s simplicity means that God is not composed of parts...he is a single essence...and therefore is indivisible
- He is not compound in nature...he has no sections in his essence...simple, as a divine attribute, is the opposite of composite...he has no parts
- He is not like a Lego tower (made up of many pieces) or a pecan pie (made up of many ingredients)
- “The perfections of God are not like a pie, as if we sliced up the pie into different pieces, love being ten percent, holiness fifteen percent, omnipotence seven percent, and so on. Unfortunately, this is how many Christians talk about God today, as if love, holiness, omnipotence were all different parts of God, God being evenly divided among his various attributes.”²
- God is not a collection of attributes...thinking of God this way makes it sound like God is one thing and his attributes are another, as if his attributes are attached to him
- Not only does this approach divide up the essence of God, but it potentially risks setting one part of God against another (i.e. love vs. wrath)

¹ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/05/the-simplicity-of-god/>

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/divine-simplicity/>

- When we say God is simple, we mean that he is a perfect unity, without composition or division
- If something is compounded, it means it has more than one part to it, each part being separate from the other
- By contrast, God, being simple, is an “uncompounded Being”
- He is not made up of various compartments like goodness, love, mercy, power, and justice that combine to form a whole...that would make God the sum of his attributes, where each attribute would be a percentage of God
- When we study God’s attributes they are not parts of God; rather, the various attributes by which we describe him are one indivisible essence
- Although we understand the attributes of God differently, they are all one in him
- God must be simple because complex or compound things depend on the parts that are more fundamental in being than themselves
- “A part is anything in a subject that is less than the whole and without which the subject would be really different than it is. In short, composite beings need their parts in order to exist as they do. Moreover, the parts in an integrated whole require a composer distinct from themselves to unify them, an extrinsic source of unity.”³
- “[N]othing is more primary in being than God. Parts are really so many causes giving some form of actuality to those entities in which they are integrated, and enabling them to operate as they do, like the six million parts of a Boeing 747. Composite beings are doubly dependent: first, upon their various component parts, and second, upon whatever agent or power acts to unify their parts in them. But if this were how God had His being, then He could not be the absolute Creator and source of all things. There would be causes of God’s own being more primitive and foundational than Himself.”⁴
- God alone is the reason for his existence...so, he cannot derive his being from another
- He cannot depend on what is not God in order to be God
- Furthermore, there are not three persons in the Trinity which are three parts that make up the totality of God
- “God’s simplicity does not contradict the doctrine of the Trinity. God’s essence is not composed of three persons. Rather, the uncompounded, undivided divine essence exists in each of the three persons. The various personal properties unique to each person are not things added to the divine essence but are only distinctions of personal subsistence and of relationship. In all the external works of the Trinity, each person acts without dividing the divine essence.”⁵
- “To illustrate, a mousetrap has parts that together comprise the whole mechanism. Without one of the parts, it won’t work. Each part can be differentiated from another part and each part is different in substance and function. Not so with God. Instead, imagine a single metal sphere. It is one thing, one substance without parts. Its attribute of ‘sphereness’ is part of the essence of the sphere. God is like that. He is one essence from which we observe his attributes (i.e., love, justice, mercy, patience) as revealed in scripture.”⁶



³ James Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*, 40.

⁴ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/05/the-simplicity-of-god/>

⁵ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, 174.

⁶ <https://carm.org/doctrine-and-theology/what-is-divine-simplicity-and-is-it-biblical/>

- This means that there are no distinctions between God’s attributes and his essence
- His attributes cannot be separated or altered since they are part of his nature
- Accordingly, God’s attribute of goodness cannot be distinguished from his nature any more than his attribute of omnipresence could be distinguished from his nature
- “The simplicity is of great importance, nevertheless, for our understanding of God. It is not only taught in Scripture (where God is called “light,” “life,” and “love”) but also automatically follows from the idea of God and is necessarily implied in other attributes. Simplicity here is the antonym of ‘compounded.’ If God is composed of parts, like a body, or composed of genus (class) and differentiae (attributes of different species belonging to the same genus), substance and accidents, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, essence and existence, then his perfection, oneness, independence, and immutability cannot be maintained.”⁷

Scriptural Support

His Independence

- Creatures are composed of both existence and essence...they are not the same
- Each person’s act of existence is something they possess in addition to their essence
- All of God’s creatures possess existence as a gift that is distinct from their essence

Acts 17:28 ~ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’

Revelation 4:11 ~ Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.

- In other words, the human spirit is not truly simple, because it possesses a combination of **changeable** qualities (i.e. faithfulness, wisdom, fear, joy, sorrow, etc.)
- These qualities are not essential to a human spirit because they are subject to change
- However, such is not the case with God...he simply is his own essence
- He does not have existence or essence as principles that are distinct from His being as God because he derives nothing from his creation
- He is the giver of being not the receiver of it; therefore, he is indebted to no one
- He receives nothing whatsoever from outside of himself

Exodus 3:14 ~ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”

- “The simplicity of God also correlates with his independence and self-existence as ‘I AM’...Beings essentially composed of parts derive those parts from something outside of themselves and must be assembled by another being. However, God exists of and in himself. He is not defined by or derived from anything else. Stephen Charnock said, ‘If he had distinct parts, he would depend on them; those parts would be before him; his essence would be the effect of those distinct parts, and so he would not be absolutely and entirely the first being...God is not bound by a standard outside of himself, but simply acts consistently with himself.’”⁸

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 176.

⁸ Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Revelation and God*, vol. 1, 627-628.

Isaiah 40:14 ~ With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding?

Acts 17:25 ~ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things

Romans 11:35 ~ Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?

- God derives nothing of himself from another being
- “The implications of God’s independence for divine simplicity should be clear. If God possesses His existence, essence, or attributes as so many determinations of being – which they would be if they were in Him as distinct parts and constituents – then in fact, He is indebted to that which is not God for the fullness of His being. As for our trust in Him, if God is composed of parts – which, as parts, must necessarily be distinct from the fullness of God’s being as God – then our confidence in Him just look to some source of being prior to Him, a reality more fundamental than Himself. This is what divine aseity and independence proscribes. Thus, all that is in God must be God.”⁹

His Oneness

- We often think of God’s oneness in terms of him being the only God and therefore truly unique
- It is true, there are not many gods...there is only one God to whom we are accountable and whom we must worship, serve, and love
- But there is more to his oneness than his singularity and solitariness...there is also a unity of simplicity
- God is simple because He is perfect unity

Deuteronomy 6:4 ~ Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, **the LORD is one!**

1 Kings 8:60 ~ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; **there is no one else.**

1 Corinthians 8:4, 6 ~ Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that **there is no God but one.**...6 yet for us there is but **one God,** the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

Mark 12:29 ~ Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! **THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD;**

1 Timothy 2:5 ~ For **there is one God,** and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

- “[S]ince God is singular in his eternal divinity, his perfections must be God himself. Otherwise, God would coexist with eternal realities distinct from himself (goodness, wisdom, power, etc.)...God’s oneness involves more than his uniqueness, for if he were divided in his own being, then all unity would be shattered...One divine purpose might be set against another divine purpose, and one divine power against another divine power...divinity is not fragmented, either into multiple gods or by division in the one God.”¹⁰
- This means that God is knowledgably powerful, morally perfect in his knowledge, and powerfully good

Equality in Attributes and Essence

- A creature’s essence is clearly distinguishable from its attributes in that, while a person may be wise and just, they are not identical with wisdom and justice in their essence

⁹ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 47.

¹⁰ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 627.

- “Consider the many humans who do not exhibit any of these attributes and yet are possessed of the same human essence. Thus, in humans these attributes are realities that add some quality of being in addition to the substantial form of humanity.”¹¹
- Each of these qualities is a part that contributes to his being...and each is distinct from the person as a whole
- As such, they depend upon these qualities to be as they are
- But the same is not true for God...the Scriptures speak of God’s attributes as being indistinguishable from his essence
- Because he is an undivided whole, there is no real distinction between God’s essence (what God is) and existence (that God is).
- He does not depend on qualities that are distinct from his essence in order to exist as he does
- His existence and essence cannot be constituent components in him; rather, God must be identical with his existence and essence and they must be identical with each other
- To say it another way, God does **not** have wisdom, justice, grace, wrath, etc. as if they were attributes distinct from his being...he is not **made up** of these qualities...he does not merely **possess** them
- Rather God **IS** each of these attributes...he is the wisdom by which he is wise...he is the justice by which he is just...he is the goodness by which he is good, etc.
- God’s existence is not what he **has**, but what he **is**; He does not have certain attributes...he is what he has
- His attributes and essence are all one in him...because each of and all his perfections are identical with his essence

Leviticus 19:2 ~ Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for **I the LORD your God am holy.**

Jeremiah 10:10 ~ But **the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King.** At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation.

Jeremiah 23:6 ~ In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, ‘**The LORD our righteousness.**’

John 1:4-5 ~ **In Him was life,** and the life was the Light of men. 5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John 1:9 ~ **There was the true Light** which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

John 4:24 ~ **God is spirit,** and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 14:6 ~ Jesus said to him, “**I am the way, and the truth, and the life;** no one comes to the Father but through Me.

1 Corinthians 1:9 ~ **God is faithful,** through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:30 ~ But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us **wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.**

1 John 1:5 ~ This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that **God is Light,** and in Him there is no darkness at all.

1 John 4:8, 16 ~ The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love...**¹⁶ We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. **God is love,** and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Hebrews 12:29 ~ for our God is a consuming fire.

¹¹ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 42.

- These passages demonstrate that God is the complete fullness of each quality
- He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to Himself, since he is wholly understanding, and wholly spirit, and wholly thought, and wholly intelligence, and wholly reason...wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good
- “This does not deify human affection and confuse God with his creation. However, it goes beyond asserting that God loves people...God’s essential act of love is himself, for to love is to will good for someone, and the good that he wills for himself, is no other than himself...God’s attributes are God.”¹²
- To say it another way, every attribute of God is indistinguishable from his essence
- All that is in God is God...his attributes do not stick to him...they do not attach to him like a barnacle on a ship
- He is not a jigsaw puzzle of divine properties...each piece making up another part of God’s essence
- Rather, God is what they are...and everything about God is essential to being God
- That means he does not possess attributes, as if his attributes are one thing and his essence another
- Rather, his essence is his attributes and his attributes his essence...God is his attributes
- God is identical with all that he is in and of himself
- “God’s faithfulness is God. God’s kindness is God. God’s justice is God. Furthermore, the Scriptures do not say that God is partly spirit, partly light, and partly love, but God is spirit, God is light, and God is love – implying that each of these words summarizes the whole of God’s being. God’s attributes, then, unite in his being.”¹³
- “He is not an abstract Absolute Idea who happens to have love, wisdom, and holiness, as if we first conceive of a being called God and then relate qualities to him. Rather, God in his very essence, within himself and by himself, is love, wisdom, and holiness. God is whatever he has, for he has nothing that he is not.”¹⁴
- Simplicity is important because it distinguishes between the infinite, eternal, and immutable Creator and the finite, temporal, and mutable creature
- Why then do we speak about God’s distinct attributes? → because God has revealed himself this way in the Scriptures due to human finitude

Attributes Which are Identical to Each Other

- “It would seem that if we know anything about God, then we know that His power is not His wisdom, and His wisdom is not His goodness, and His goodness is not His eternity, and so on. But if He is simple, and if His being is not dependent on component parts that are ontologically more basic than the fullness of His being, then all these things we say about Him would have to be identical in Him.”¹⁵
- In other words, God’s justice is his mercy and his wisdom and his patience...his knowledge is his faithfulness...his mercy is his justice, etc.
- “God’s essence is not simply a bundle of contiguous properties or attributes, each existing alongside the others as an integrated whole. His divinity is not a sublime set of great-making properties all splendidly arranged together in Him. In His essence, it is not one thing to be good, another to be wise, another to be powerful, and so on. Rather, the reality in virtue of which all these things are truly said of God is nothing but His own simple divinity. Properly speaking, God is good by virtue of God, not goodness. He is wise by virtue of God, not wisdom. He is powerful by virtue of God, not power. He is love by virtue of God, not love. And when we say that God is goodness itself, wisdom itself, power itself, and love itself, we do not

¹² Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 625-626.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 626.

¹⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-simplicity-of-god/>

¹⁵ Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 42.

mean that these are so many really distinct parts or forms of God, but simply that He is all that is involved in these terms by virtue of His own divine essence as such.”¹⁶

THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING DIVINE SIMPLICITY

- While divine simplicity has been held as orthodox for most of church history, recently some have challenged it
- Two distinctly different groups have arisen:
 1. Classical theists – believe that God does not derive any aspect of his being from outside himself
 2. Theistic mutualism/theistic personalism – believe that God is in a give-and-take relationship with his creatures
- Theistic mutualists desire to portray God as more relatable to his creation, interacting with the world in a way that is similar to how humans do
- They think that God is in a reciprocal relationship with humankind where God shows love to man, and God receives love or other feelings from the creature that produces new states of being within Him
- As a result, they believe that God is capable of being moved by his creatures
- “They maintain that God neither learns nor depends on creation for His knowledge and that His will is not changed by the actions of creatures. Nevertheless, they do allow for a measure of ontological becoming and process in God. This is to the extent that they...insist that God undergoes changes in relation and in those alleged intellectual and emotive states of His that are thought to correlate to His change relations with creatures. This ontological openness to being changed by creatures, whether initiated by God or by creatures themselves, is the common denominator in all forms of theistic mutualism... They think that if God cannot change or be affected by the world in any way, then our relationship to Him seems overly one-sided and thus rather impersonal and nondynamic.”¹⁷
- One of the primary issues with this position is that a change in God requires the introducing of something new that was not there before
- If God changes for the better, then he was not perfect; if he changes for the worse, he is no longer God after that change
- “Without simplicity God must be dependent on something other than His divinity for some aspects of His being... Without simplicity, God is open to the acquisition of being in addition to His essence and thus is not immutable.”¹⁸

IMPLICATIONS OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY¹⁹

- Some have suggested that this attribute has little practical application to our lives; however, such is not true

We Must be Balanced in Our Worship of God

- Often Christians elevate one attribute of God over another...they say things like “God may have justice and wrath, but he is love”

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷ Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 135-136.

¹⁹ Adapted from Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 634-636.

- The implication: love is more central to the nature of God
- But God is a simple being, not a composite being...so he is righteousness in the same way he is love
- There is no aspect of his being which is above or more significant than any other
- Thus, we must not rank certain attributes of God higher than others but must practice balance in adoring his attributes
- He is equally perfect in all his qualities...equally loving, just, compassionate, wrathful, and good
- There is perfect balance and harmony in all of God's characteristics...and our worship of him must reflect the full spectrum of divine perfections
- Failure to do so will result in worshipping a false god instead of the one true and living God
- It is at the cross of Christ where the simplicity of God is most evident because it is there, at the climax of Christ's redemptive work, where a glorious and balanced display of God's attributes occurs
- Rather than God's attributes being at odds with one another (i.e. love vs. wrath...mercy vs. justice...power vs. gentleness), the cross magnifies the whole glory of God in perfect harmony
- "Redemption through the incarnate Son magnifies the unity of all God is."²⁰

We Must be Assured That God is Fully Present with All His Attributes

- Since God's perfections are not separated from one another, we constantly dwell in the presence of God in the fullness of his attributes
- All of God is with us wherever we are and we can always call on him with complete confidence that he is with us for our good
- Since his divine essence is indivisible, God is entirely present everywhere, a truth which brings us great comfort and hope

We Must Live Godly, Holy Lives

- The texts which demonstrate God's simplicity are often found in the contexts of practical Christian living
- So, they are not simply theoretical realities, but rather are meant to stimulate a life of personal sanctification

1 John 1:5-7 ~ This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that **God is Light**, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 4:7-8 ~ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**.

- We demonstrate that we know and love our simple God by walking with him and becoming like him
- "God is so completely identified with his light and love that it is impossible to know him without walking in light and love."²¹

We Must Pursue Holistic Godliness

- God's simplicity calls for a response of holy simplicity from us
- We should serve and worship the Lord with a pure, wholehearted fervency that is without hypocrisy or being double-minded

²⁰ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 628.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 635.

2 Corinthians 1:12 ~ For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.

- “There is profound unity in holiness, for it faintly reflects the simplicity of God.”²²
- A life of holiness, in which all the fruit of the Spirit are demonstrated, is a reflection of God’s simplicity

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 ~ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Proverbs 16:32 ~ He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.

Galatians 5:22-23 ~ But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Philippians 1:9 ~ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,

²² Ibid., 635-636.