



'WHAT IS GOD?'

**An investigation of the
Perfections of God's Nature**



ROBERT L. REYMOND





To the distinguished faculty of
Knox Theological Seminary
with whom it is sheer joy to serve Christ

Dr. E. Calvin Beisner
Dr. Warren A. Gage
Dr. D. James Kennedy
Dr. Samuel P. Lamerson
Dr. Lawrence C. Roff
Dr. Collins D. Weeber
Dr. R. Fowler White

who requested that I deliver this series of addresses
on the attributes of God
to the seminary family in the Knox Seminary chapel





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MENTOR





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Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion,
herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem,
herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
'BEHOLD YOUR GOD!'

– Isaiah 40:9





PREFACE


This book contains the eleven addresses on the attributes of God¹ that the faculty of Knox Theological Seminary invited me to deliver to the Knox Seminary student body during the Fall semester of 2003. Using the answer provided by the fourth question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, ‘What is God?’² as my frame of

¹I prefer the word ‘perfections’ over the word ‘attributes’ since their referents in God are intrinsic to him and not ‘items’ that are ‘assigned to’ (*ad* – ‘to’; *tribuō* – ‘assign’) him. However, because the latter is the more common term I will use it in these addresses as long as the term is understood as I define it in the first lecture as ‘ascriptions to God that his *self*-revelation in Holy Scripture declares are intrinsically true of him’.

²‘God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.’ The *Shorter Catechism* ascribes ten attributes to God here. Are there more? Yes, certainly, for we shall see that these ten subsume other attributes of like kind under them. John of Damascus in his classic summary, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1, 8, lists eighteen. Frankly, we do not and cannot know the number of God’s attributes. Being infinite as he is, God must possess countless attributes about which we know nothing beyond the fact that they will all be consistent with the ones about which we do know. Granted the following are poetic expressions but Frederick W. Faber sang of the ‘God of a *thousand* attributes’ while E. Lange (1650–1727), translated by John Wesley, and Charles Wesley, both probably closer to the truth, exclaimed respectively:

O God, thy being who can sound?
Thee to perfection who can know?





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reference I delivered these addresses on consecutive Thursday mornings in the scheduled seminary chapel services (which explains their odd number), and they appear here virtually as I delivered them with little substantive and only minor editorial work having been done on them after they were delivered. I want to express my gratitude to the Knox faculty for their kind invitation to deliver these addresses. I also want to thank both the faculty and the student body (who, I was painfully aware as I delivered them, listened intently to them) for their expressions of appreciation for them.

Naturally, no single address in this series, in isolation from the others, completely and entirely depicts the God of the Bible. But I believe these eleven, taken together, provide an accurate and composite picture of the one living and true God both as he is in himself and as he has revealed himself to us. In these addresses I also applied each divine attribute to the original audience³ to demonstrate the practical value of preaching on God’s attributes but I have hardly exhausted what can be done in regard to their application. And while I recognize that something is always lost when public addresses appear in print I trust that the God who is described in these addresses will bless their publication and by them encourage many pastors, in the words of Isaiah, to ‘lift up [their] voices with strength, fear not, and say to [their people], “Behold your God!”’ For as the Septuagint, the early church’s Bible, suggests in Isaiah 40:9 by twice employing the term ‘herald of good tidings’⁴ to describe

O height immense! No words are found
Thy *countless* attributes to show.

and

Sovereign Father, heavenly King,
Thee we now presume to sing;
Glad thine attributes confess,
Glorious all and *numberless*!

³In a few instances I adapted ideas for application from Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Arthur W. Pink.



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the one who proclaims 'Behold your God!', pastors may be assured that when they preach on the character of God they are proclaiming a necessary aspect of the 'good news' of the gospel itself. While the original audience of these addresses was primarily seminary faculty and seminarians, some of whom sat with open Hebrew Bibles and/or Greek New Testaments before them, I make no apology for urging that pastors need to inform their congregations of the very same truths about God that I brought to the attention of the Knox faculty and students because nothing is more needful for God's people in this day of theological illiteracy than to know what their God is actually like. And I am confident that their congregations will be able to comprehend this material if their pastors will make the effort to digest it and expound it to them. I can guarantee that their congregations will hear surprising and wonderful things about their God in every sermon that their pastors preach about him!

Even though publishing one's prayers comes dangerously close to praying at street corners to be seen by men, I decided after some reflection to allow the prayers I prayed at the beginning and end of each address to remain with them – yes, I write out my public prayers, believing that the Holy Spirit can lead me in my composition of them in my study just as certainly as he can lead me in my composition of them from the pulpit – because I hope they will stimulate and encourage pastors to think about and to frame their own public prayers to fit their sermon subjects in a God-honoring way without the repetitive words 'And God' and 'just' before virtually every phrase that one hears so much today in public prayers. Christian pastors should not be afraid of writing their public prayers. After all, most of the biblical psalms are just that – written public prayers.

⁴*ho euangelizomenos* is from the same verb root from which we derive our words 'evangelize' and 'evangel' ('gospel').



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The inserted words from the original languages in transliterated form in some Bible verses cited in these addresses have been provided in this printed version of them for the benefit of the busy preacher. Footnotes have been included, not only because it is simply common courtesy to give credit to sources quoted, but also because I assume that most preachers who will read these addresses will either need or want the information they contain in order to do further research on their own. I made no reference to these footnotes, of course, as I delivered these addresses.

Pastors should feel free to use these addresses in any way that will aid them as they preach on God’s attributes. I only request, if they find anything in them that they decide they can use, that they *not* feel they must credit me for the use of the material. The truth that I have attempted to proclaim belongs not to me but to the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they may use this material freely without obtaining permission from me. I would suggest, if pastors choose to follow my example and read lengthy lists of biblical texts, that in order to save time they should do as I did and simply read the texts without their references, informing their congregations beforehand that they can and will provide chapters and verses to any who desire to have them. I would also suggest, since some of these addresses such as the eleventh on the Trinity obviously are too long to be delivered on one occasion, that they plan ahead and be prepared either to eliminate some material (which is the choice I made) or to preach more than one sermon on a given attribute (which time constraints would not allow me to do).

One last word of explanation: The perceptive reader may have noted from his perusal of the table of contents that I did not deliver an address as such on proving the existence of God. I did not do this for three reasons: first, my assignment was to speak on God’s attributes, and it seemed to me that the nature of my assignment as it





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was explained to me presupposed God's existence just as the Bible presupposes it; second, 'bare existence' *per se* is not an attribute that distinguishes in any way the God said to exist from other things since anything that has meaning exists. Simply to prove that an entity exists is of no value since, as I have said, anything that has any faint meaning at all exists. But it makes a great deal of difference whether this entity is 'a dream, a mirage, the square root of minus one, or the infinite personal triune God of Holy Scripture' (Gordon H. Clark). So the question that needs to be addressed is not, 'Does God exist?' Of course God exists! The far more important question is 'What is God?' It is this question that I attempt to answer by this series, not by drawing on *my* musings about God, but by setting forth as faithfully as I can what God has revealed about himself in Holy Scripture.

My third reason is this: *no one needs to have God's existence proven to him*. Every human being already has a God-created innate knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21) – John Calvin called this knowledge man's *sensus deitatis*, *sensus divinitatis*, and *semen religiosus*⁵ – by virtue of the light of nature within him and general revelation outside of him, and he knows in his heart, because of the requirements of the law that God has written on his heart (Rom. 2:15), that someday God will judge him for his transgressions of that law (Rom. 1:32). Really, then, no actual atheist exists anywhere among mankind; only theists exist,⁶ a very small percentage of whom *claim* to be atheists.⁶ These 'practicing atheists' believe with the greatest leap of the imagination – against both the *sine qua non* ('without which nothing') of all scientific inquiry that 'out of nothing, nothing comes'

⁵'Sense [or perception] of deity' (*Institutes*, 1.3.1), 'sense [or perception] of divinity' (1.3.3), and 'seed of religion' (1.3.1; 1.4.1; 1.4.4).

⁶This means incidentally that it is not atheists who go to hell; only theists go to hell.



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and its corollary that if something now exists then something (and the biblical God is certainly something!) has always existed – that the entire material universe of which they themselves are a part accidentally ‘decayed’ (Alan Guth’s term) into being *out of nothing* according to established laws of physics and that this universe is therefore the product of an *impersonal* beginning plus time plus chance and is thus the *sole* and *final* reality. Sir James Jeans believed he could assert without fear of refutation that ‘into [the] universe [the human race] has stumbled, if not exactly by mistake, at least as the result of what may properly be described as an accident’;⁷ Sir Arthur Eddington declared in his *New Pathways in Science* that the human race is ‘one of the gruesome results of [Nature’s] occasional failure [to take] antiseptic precautions’;⁸ the National Association of Biology Teachers here in the United States has explicitly declared that all life is the outcome of ‘an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable, and natural process’, that is to say, all life originated by chance; (atheist Quentin Smith asserts: ‘... the most reasonable belief is that we came from nothing, by nothing, and for nothing’);⁹ and Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins states that Darwin’s theory of natural selection ‘makes it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist’.¹⁰ But does it? In my opinion, these assertions are laughable, for Darwinian scientists have to believe, at bottom, that

- ◆ Nothing produced everything
- ◆ Random chance produced this finely tuned universe

⁷James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 4.

⁸Arthur E. Eddington, *New Pathways in Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 310.

⁹William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 135.

¹⁰Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.





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- ◆ Non-life produced life
- ◆ Chaos produced information
- ◆ Mindless matter produced the conscious mind
- ◆ Non-reason produced reason, and
- ◆ Non-Purpose produced humans who are obsessed with purpose.¹¹

Furthermore, does Darwinianism make an unbiased atheist? These Darwinian scientists presume at the outset of their research a *naturalistic* view of reality that is profoundly atheistic.¹² They presuppose as a *matter of first principle* that purposeless *material* processes do all the work of biological creation because, according to their philosophy, *nothing else is available*. They have *pre-defined* their task as biologists to be the discovery of the most plausible – or the least implausible – *naturalistic* or *materialistic* explanation of how biological evolution occurs. This approach, of course, rules out an intelligent Creator, requiring adherence at the outset to the Darwinian worldview that assumes that the material universe is all that exists. This is hardly doing ‘unbiased science’ as it should be done. Rather, this is a prejudicial naturalistic philosophy of science that is biased to the core and dictates the materialistic

¹¹A variation of Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 277.

¹²This presumption is the ‘Achilles’ heel’ of the entire evolutionary enterprise. Evolutionary scientists, acknowledging as they must that they are working with a *naturalistic* philosophy of science, make a fatal admission here. Their acknowledgement patently reveals that the theory of Darwinian evolution does not present to the public value-free data. Philip E. Johnson, in ‘Shouting “Heresy” in the Temple of Darwin,’ *Christianity Today* (Oct 24, 1994), 26, rightly observes: ‘Biologists have authority to tell us facts that they know from the study of biology, but they have no intellectual or moral authority to order us to adopt a particular philosophy that they prefer.’ And once these biologists admit that behind their ‘biological facts’ lies their naturalistic philosophy of science, nonbiologists should understand that they may decide whether they want to believe what the biological evolutionists are saying about origins.



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outcome of all scientific pronouncements before the facts are even known and considered.¹³

The findings of molecular biology, for example, not to mention the recent findings of cosmology, physics, astronomy, and biology, fly in the face of the evolutionary assumption. Darwin wrote in his *The Origin of Species*:

If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would completely break down.¹⁴

Michael J. Behe, in *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996), advances the sustained argument that the countless molecular systems in the simplest living cell are *irreducibly complex* – chemical ‘machines’ made up of finely calibrated interdependent parts – which means they cannot have originated by a gradual step-by-step process. All these parts had to be there in the cell from the start – each doing its specific thing – or life never would have begun. In sum, our stunningly complex living cell systems must have originated already complete in order to function at all, thus suggesting that an intelligent designer is the cell’s originator. The force of this argument has not been lost on octogenarian Antony Flew – for decades the icon and champion of atheism for unbelievers – who recently declared that the intelligent design argument convinced him that he had to abandon his avowed atheism (he is now a deist)!¹⁵ It should also be noted that chance cannot be

¹³For more on this, see Gene Edward Veith, ‘Science’s new heresy trial,’ *World* (February 19, 2005), 26.

¹⁴Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Sixth edition; New York: University Press, 1998), 154.

¹⁵Antony Flew and Gary R. Habermas, ‘My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew,’ in *Philosophia Christi* (Winter 2005), the journal of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, edited by Craig J. Hazen.





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a cause of anything because chance is not a material thing. It is not being, not energy, not mass, not power, not intelligence. It is only a mathematical concept we employ to calculate possibilities, and in the present instance the mathematical odds that this universe with its complexity created itself is one over infinity or zero. To prefer, then, the notion that ‘nothing’¹⁶ created the universe over the opening words of Genesis, ‘In the beginning God created the universe,’ represents the nadir of theoretical thought and leaps over reason into the sea of absurdity. For it is nothing short of absurdity to personalize nature as, for example, Peter Atkins, a secular physicist, does when he says: ‘Once molecules have learned to compete and to create other molecules in their own image, elephants and things resembling elephants will in due course be found roaming through the countryside.’¹⁷

Nevertheless, these ‘practicing atheists’ insist that the burden of proof lies with acknowledged theists to prove God’s existence to them. But wait: ‘This is *my* Father’s world’; I am not the trespasser here. In reality, it is they who should justify their atheism in this theistic world. The burden of proof is actually theirs to prove that this physical world is the sole and final reality and that *no* supernatural *spiritual* being anywhere exists. Though they strive mightily to do so, this they cannot do since one cannot prove a universal negative. Thus their ‘atheism’ is *their* unproven ‘grand assumption’ – an assumption by the way with which they cannot live consistently,¹⁸ for it often takes, as the English poet Robert Browning says in his poem, *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* (lines

¹⁶I am informed that these theoretical physicists, to hedge their bets here, now propose around fourteen different kinds of ‘nothing’, which would be laughable if it were not so tragic.

¹⁷Cited by Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator. A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38.

¹⁸Francis Schaeffer, as much as any man of his time, made this point again and again in his trilogy, *The God Who Is There, He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, and *Escape from Reason*.



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182-87), little more than ‘a sunset touch, a fancy from a flower-bell, someone’s death, a chorus-ending from Euripides, – and that’s enough for fifty hopes and fears ... to rap and knock and enter in [their] soul,’ and thus to disquiet their avowed atheism. And before Browning John Calvin correctly insisted that their knowledge of God is ineradicable so that ‘willy-nilly they from time to time feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe’.¹⁹ I hope this brief exposition of atheism will suffice as a substitute for an address as such on the existence of God.²⁰

I will affirm here, however, that I believe that the triune God of the Bible is the one living and true God because he has revealed himself to all mankind, first, *generally* by his works of creation – which creation reflects *cosmos* (order) rather than *chaos* (disorder) (Rom. 1:18-23) – and providence (Acts 17:25b-28); second, *propositionally* by the divinely inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21); third, *personally* in his incarnate divine Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died, rose bodily from death on the third day after he was crucified, and showed himself alive by ‘many convincing proofs’ (*pollois tekmeriois*) (Acts 1:3); and fourth, *savingly* – in the case of us who are his elect – by his Word and animating Spirit. And I intend in these several addresses to expound upon the nature of *this* God who has revealed himself to us in Holy Scripture. So if you have come this far with me I invite you to continue to read and to ‘behold your God’ as the incomprehensible supreme Spirit who is

infinite in his being,
eternal in his being,
unchangeable in his being,

¹⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.2.

²⁰I deal with this issue of God’s existence much more fully in my *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Second edition; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 129-52.



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infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his wisdom,
infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his power,
infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his
holiness,
infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his
justice,
infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his
goodness,
infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his
truth, and
triune – God's 'special mark' of
distinction.

