

## Incommunicable Attributes of God

By Bob Young

The question haunts me. If I could spend only one day with a people group that had no previous knowledge of God, the Bible, and Christian faith, what would I share with them?

Related questions rapidly come to my mind. Where would I begin? How would I describe God? How would I explain what God has done, does, and wants for us? Given a limited time, would I begin with baptism hoping that some few would be willing to be immersed that same day?

Christianity begins with God. We have not learned how to describe God. We have assumed God. Preachers do not preach about God. One result is that we have a warped and limited view of God. How often have you heard, "God is love"? That is a true statement, but it shows a limited awareness of God that ignores other aspects of God such as his purity and his justice.

We have not understood that a primary purpose of the Bible is to reveal God. When I hold up my Bible (in the U.S. or in Latin America) and ask the question, "What is this?" seldom does anyone respond, "The revelation of God." We have not studied the Bible with the purpose of knowing God. God wants to be known; he wants to be known accurately. He wants to be known as he is. If we do not know God as he is, we cannot worship him according to his nature, character, and will. If we do not know God, several things result: whatever religion we follow quickly degenerates into a system of human wants, needs, and desires; our definition of Christianity is based on human factors more than on God's nature; our concepts of worship are more human than divine.

What do we usually think of when we think about God? Quick! Make a list of God's characteristics. Write them down if the list is too long or you cannot remember them.

How many of the characteristics in your list describe aspects of God that we can never duplicate or experience as human beings. This article is about God's "incommunicable" attributes. That means they cannot be shared. (The words incommunicable and communicable are often used in English to describe diseases, indicating whether they can be transmitted or not).

*[In another article, I plan to write about God's communicable attributes—the aspects of God that we can imitate. The communicable attributes that I will describe can and should be developed in our lives in order to be godly. For example, human beings can learn mercy, love, patience, grace, justice, and purpose.]*

When Israel experienced God's deliverance from Egypt, the response was, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11) In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses describes God several times in various ways. Think with me about some attributes of God that describe how God is not like us. These attributes cannot be reproduced by human beings because they describe God's limitlessness. These attributes belong to God alone; they are part of what makes him God. They are true of him; because He is God they cannot be true of any other being. We human beings live in a limited world. God exists in an unlimited dimension and is not himself limited by any external factors.

To make these easier to remember, I think of them in groups.

One group of the incommunicable (unshareable) attributes of God are the "omni" attributes: **omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient**. These simply say that God is everywhere (at the same time), all powerful, and all knowing.

A second group reflects God's name as it was given to Moses. Yahweh is often translated "I am." The meaning is I am because I am, or I am who I am. Always I am; I was, I am, I will be. God is **self-existent** (not caused, or First Cause), **eternally existent** (without time limits), and **self-sufficient** (totally independent, not needing anything from any source outside himself).

A third group of the incommunicable attributes of God helps us to understand him in comparison to our own humanity. He is **immeasurable**—we live in a world of measurements. Another way to say this is that God is infinite. He is **incomprehensible**—beyond our understanding. This does not mean that God cannot be known to the extent he reveals himself; it means that he cannot be perfectly understood by humans in the human realm using human reasoning. He is **immutable**—he does not change, in comparison to human experience which is in a state of constant flux. He is **sovereign**—unlimited, unrestricted, boundless, absolute, supreme. Sovereignty is more than ultimate power. It describes God's ultimate, unconditional totality.

All of these ten things about God are infinitely true.

- He is without limits of power, knowledge, and presence.
- He is beyond the limits of creation, time, and need. He is ultimately self-existent and self-sustaining beyond time boundaries.
- He cannot be measured, cannot be understood, and cannot change.
- He is beyond every limit, restriction, and boundary—absolute and supreme with authority over everything else. God's sovereignty means that there is God, and there is everything else. When these two categories are understood, one begins to grasp the nature of God that is beyond, above, over all else.

We cannot imitate these incommunicable attributes. They are what make God God. Human beings are not to mimic or covet these characteristics. To do so is to assume the place of God. The incommunicable attributes demonstrate the fallibility of our human understanding. God is infinite—we are finite. We are limited. We cannot understand infinity. We can wrestle with the idea, we can develop mathematical approaches to reflect the idea, but our concepts of measurability always ask, "What is Infinity plus one?" By definition, such is impossible. Infinity is the end, but that description does not work either because "end" implies measurement. Such is the human dilemma when it comes to understanding God. Human beings should try to understand God. The incommunicable attributes direct us to the Bible where God reveals himself. In the Bible is all that is necessary for life and godliness. In the Bible is sufficient understanding. This means not only that trying to understand the Bible has value, it suggests that such is a part of God's desire for us as human beings. Human beings should be humbled by God's nature. In learning about God, we learn reliance—the biblical word is faith. We learn what life in this world really looks like; we learn that the God who can do anything and everything has another plan for his human creation beyond the confines of this world. Knowing God is a first step toward right worship. God wants to be worshiped consistent with his divine nature, not according to the desires of our human nature. Acceptable worship depends on God's nature (in spirit, John 4:23-24) and not our human nature.

Studying these incommunicable attributes of God is a first step toward understanding the communicable attributes of God. Here one finds help in understanding unconditional (agape) love, a God-reality that transcends common human nature and experience but that God makes possible in this limited, human realm. Understanding an unlimited God who has penetrated and works in our limited world helps us understand that we do not have to be God—that we cannot be God, and that we do not have to demand that other people be God for us. These and more lessons will be developed in the next article about God's communicable attributes.