

# “Reformed Basics”: 2. God Himself

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Holy, there is no one like You  
There is none beside You  
Open up my eyes in wonder

And I will build my life upon Your love  
It is a firm foundation  
And I will put my trust in You alone  
And I will not be shaken

—*Housefires*

For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.  
(Mal 3:6)

## 1. *Introduction*

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (Ex 3:13–15)

When God calls Moses to stand before Pharaoh and demand Israel’s release, the way God reassures him is to tell him his “name,” his essential character. His essential character is that he is self-existent, depending on nothing outside Himself.

God’s covenant name, YHWH (usually rendered “the LORD”), conveys his absoluteness, self-existence, and independence. In particular, he does not depend on anything in Creation.

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Ex 33:19)

God reassures Moses that he will keep his promises by invoking his name YHWH: His decision to show mercy to Israel is His alone. He is absolute, and nothing will change His mind.

God’s statement in Mal 3:16 comes in the midst of God reciting Israel’s continual failure to live up to the covenant. But, though Israel fails and flails, God is unchanging in his commitment to them.

God’s unity appears in (1) his singularity, and (2) his simplicity.

## 2. *God is singular: there is no one like him*

God's singularity, his necessary uniqueness, is described in various ways in Scripture.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut 6:4)

YHWH is unique; there is no “class” of gods of which he is a member.

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? (Ex 15:11)

To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him? (Isa 40:18)

God cannot be compared to anything else. God has existence in Himself; He causes other things to exist. There cannot be a second “ground of existence.”

## 3. *God is simple: He has no “parts”*

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute... (WCF 2.1)

Not merely that God has no bodily “parts” as we do, but he is One thing.

God *is* love. He is not love because he measures up to a standard outside Himself, or by partaking of some principle of love. He is love simply and absolutely.

God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (Jas 1:17)

All the perfections of God are really one thing. *-Aquinas*

## 4. *God's attributes*

What is God like? What has he revealed about himself? God's essential attribute is *aseity*: he is *a se* (Latin), of himself. He depends on nothing outside himself.

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. (WCF 2.2)

The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increases strength. (Isa 40:28–29)

Because God is “of himself,” depending on nothing outside himself, he never tires. He can give strength to his people.

Our language, indeed our thought, cannot comprehend God as He is in Himself. We must make distinctions in our thinking which are not really true in God. With respect to his effects on creatures, we distinguish attributes:

God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. (WSC 4)

The same sunlight has different effects upon things it hits. It causes plants to grow; it causes corpses to rot. (Turretin)

God’s attributes are not “in balance” or in competition with each other. God is always completely just, completely merciful, completely loving, completely just, at the same time.

The LORD is righteous in all his ways  
and kind in all his works. (Psalm 145:17)

“But God is feeling things all the time in Scripture!”

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” … And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. (1 Sam 15:11, 35)

Interpret the less plain Scriptures by the more plain:

“The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.” (15:28)

God is often portrayed *anthropomorphically*, as if He responded emotionally. Those portrayals must be understood in light of God’s revelation of himself as absolute, independent, unchanging.

## 5. God is the Holy Trinity

The Lord Jesus is fully God. His divinity was not a later invention of the church, but something he claimed for himself.

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” … “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—11 “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home. (Mk 2:5–11)

“Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 27 And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” (Matt 8:26)

So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58–59)

The Holy Spirit is not an “influence” but speaks and commands. He also is God.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)

For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. 9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. (1 John 5:7–9)

So we have God the Father. And the Lord Jesus identifies himself with YHWH of the Old Testament. And the Holy Spirit. How do we describe the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. (WCF 2.3)

The Confession here carefully employs the Church’s technical language from the fifth century. In our understanding of the Trinity we are in complete continuity with the Church through the ages.

God is One: one in substance and being; one in power (all the Persons act together); one in eternity—they always have existed together in love and glory. “Person” is a technical term; not exactly how we use the word today. “Each Person is the one God, in all His fullness.” (Col 1:19)

“The Bible’s Trinitarian discourse consistently distinguishes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, by their mutual relations, which are ‘relations of origin.’” “What distinguishes the persons of the Trinity from each other are their relations to each other, not their relations to us.” [Swain 32]

“These relations are asymmetrical. The Father eternally gets the Son, not vice versa. The Father and the Son eternally breathe forth the Spirit, not vice versa... The Father personally originates from no one. The Son personally originates from the person of the Father. And the Spirit personally originates from the persons of the Father and the Son.” [Swain 33]

The One God acts in Creation and in salvation, according to each Person: the Father originates (plans, wills), the Son accomplishes, the Spirit applies.

Errors to avoid:

- Tri-theism: “there are three Gods”: we say that the Persons have only one essence
- Modalism: “God appears to act in different modes”: we say that the distinctions between Persons are real in God
- Arianism or subordinationism: “the Son is subordinate to the Father”: we say that the Persons have one will. “Relations of origin” not subordination.

## 6. For Further Reading

Our church's subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith, discusses the doctrine of God in its chapter 2. The Confession is available here:

<https://opc.org/wcf.html>

### 6.1 Videos

A brief review of the right way to talk about the Trinity:

<https://youtu.be/0HMryr1ZlxQ>

### 6.2 Articles

Brief review of the Trinity and relations among the Persons:

<http://www.growingchristianresources.com/2024/06/post-47-doctrine-of-god-introduction-to.html>

### 6.3 Books

A very brief pamphlet: Ryan McGraw, *Is the Trinity Practical?*

<https://www.heritagebooks.org/products/ebook-is-the-trinity-practical-cultivating-biblical-godliness-series-mcgraw.html>

A brief but thorough discussion of the Trinity. This is the place to go for some more depth on the Trinity (without drowning!). Scott Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*. Crossway, 2020.

What significance does the idea of the Trinity for our understanding of the world? In the Trinity, love is fundamental. For the implications of this, see Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation*, P&R Publishing, 2017.