

CHAPTER 2

GOD IS A SPIRIT

Essence of being a spirit

“God is a Spirit” (John 4:24)—this implies first of all that God exists as personality. A person is defined as a substance that has knowledge, emotion, and will. Others have added other characteristics of personality, such as self-consciousness, simplicity, freedom, purpose, and activity; however, these can be subsumed under the three primary characteristics. God can be shown from Scripture to possess all these qualities. Further study reveals that God exists as three persons, but his unity results in his often being considered as one, possessing personality.

Secondly, spirituality indicates that God exists apart from physical material. He has no body, and can exist even when the universe does not exist.

God as personality

In order to show that God is not a mere force, but possesses personality, we must show that he possesses the characteristics of personality, particularly knowledge, volition or will, and emotion. The Scriptures give abundant evidence that God possesses these characteristics.

General characteristics of personality

“The God of the Bible is a person” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:380; see the rest of the page for a summary of biblical evidence).

1. In the Bible God is always presented as a person. He speaks and is spoken to, using the forms “I” and “you.”
2. He is called a spirit (Zech 4:6; John 4:24; Heb 12:9), and a spirit by definition is a personality.
3. He is called the living God, as opposed to the non-existing gods of the heathen (Deut 5:26; Dan 6:26-27; 1 Tim 4:10; Heb 10:31). Hence, he fills the needs of human hearts (Ps 84:2).

4. As a living God, he is active, an important aspect of being alive. We see the activities of God in creation and providence (Gen 2:2; Ps 19:1; 92:4-5; Deut 11:7; Dan 6:27; John 5:17).

God possesses intelligence

God's knowledge is rational, propositional thinking. This is the nature of "God-knowledge."

God knows, and employs wisdom in his dealings (1 Sam 2:3; Isa 11:2; 29:16; Rom 11:33). Note especially the combination of knowledge, intelligence or understanding, and wisdom evident in the creation:

By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations,
By understanding he set the heavens in place;
By his knowledge the deeps were divided,
And the clouds let drop the dew.

—Prov 3:19-20

God has knowledge of himself, true self-knowledge or self-consciousness (Gen 17:1; Exod 3:14; 34:6-7; Rom 8:27). This assures us that God knows us completely as well (Ps 139:23-24).

Not only does God possess intelligence in the rudimentary sense, but, as all these passages testify, to the greatest degree. This intelligence provides a warning to those who may resist God (Ps 14:1-3), and a comfort to those who are suffering righteously (Ps 14:4-7; Job 23:10).

God possesses volition

Volition = power of moral choice.

God has his own determined purposes and will, which he is free to carry out (Job 23:13; Isa 14:26; Dan 4:35; Eph 1:11; 3:11). This will of God is evident in the plan for Jesus to die for our salvation (Matt 26:39; John 4:34; 6:38).

God possesses emotion

God is said to possess the emotions of jealousy (Deut 5:9), grief (Judg 10:16), hate (Ps 5:5), pity (Ps 103:13), compassion and patience (Ps 145:8), joy (Isa 62:5), love (Isa 63:9; Jer 31:3), and anger (Rom 1:18).

These emotions are attributed to God, not merely as a literary device, but in the contexts of these passages it is clear that he is activated by these very emotions. In humans these emotions are changeable, increasing and decreasing—this is not the case with God, who holds all these in perfection at all times; he does not have changing emotions or "passions." In sinful humans

these emotions also are mixed with sin; this is not the case with God. He hates perfectly and loves perfectly. In him the various complementary emotions do not conflict, but perfectly work together. The emotions do not change over time; that is referred to as passion.

God's personality is revealed in Jesus

When God chose to reveal himself to humans, he did so by becoming a man. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). He is the exact representation of God. Since Jesus is a person, the God he reveals must be a person as well.

Spirituality of God

Jesus said that God is a spirit (John 4:24). The spirit is the essence, center, or heart of personality (cf. Mark 2:8; Luke 1:47; John 4:24b; Acts 19:21; Jas 2:26).

In a negative sense, "spirit" is the opposite of material or physical (Luke 24:39 "a ghost [spirit] does not have flesh and bones"). The Bible clearly presents God as a spirit, without material parts; no one has seen God (John 1:18). Those passages that speak of his "eyes," "nostrils," "hand," "arm," "wings," "feathers," etc., must be understood as poetic, speaking anthropomorphically of God's emotions, knowledge, or actions. Occasionally the Bible reveals an appearance of God (as to Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and John; cf. Gen 3:8; Exod 24:10; Deut 34:10; Judg 13:22); these are manifestations of God adapted to human perception; they do not provide evidence that God has a material body.

Importance of this doctrine

God created us for relationship. We are incomplete and unhappy alone (witness the effectiveness of solitary confinement as a punishment). Primarily, this relationship is to be with him. We cannot have a relationship of this kind unless God himself is a person. Religions which consider God to be a force or the totality of nature or some inexorable principle cannot satisfy this God-given hunger in the human heart, our "God-shaped vacuum." These religions can only strive to help people adapt to some reality outside themselves; they cannot provide the joy of fellowship with God.

On the other hand, this doctrine shows the fallacy of those who make God less than a pure spirit. Various forms of paganism, pantheism, and some cults (as Mormonism), tie God down and make him a part of the material creation. In so doing, they deny his infinity and eternity, and the qualitative distinction there exists between God and his creation.