I. Introduction


[2] God’s incommunicable attributes: how God is wondrously different from his creation.

II. Identification

A. Biblical Foundation

[3] Scripture affirms the fact that God is incomparable — matchless, without equal, supreme (1 Kings 8:23; Psalm 71:19, 86:8, 89:6).

[4] In 2 Samuel 7:22, David revealed that God’s incomparability is essential to what makes God, God (also Isaiah 40–46; Job 40–41).

[5] Scripture consistently reveals God’s incomparability, calling us to learn all we can about how God is different from his creation.

B. Theological Variety

[6] Scripture doesn’t give a complete, authoritative list of God’s incommunicable attributes.

[7] Evangelicals have created different lists of God’s incommunicable attributes.
1. Augsburg Confession

[8] “There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness” (Article 1).

[9] Incommunicable attributes identified in the Augsburg Confession:

• eternal

• without body

• without parts

• infinite

2. Belgic Confession

[10] “There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ... he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good” (Article 1).

[11] Incommunicable attributes identified in the Belgic Confession:

• Simple (not divided into parts)

• Eternal

• Incomprehensible (cannot be understood completely)

• Invisible

• Immutable (unchangeable)
• Infinite

3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (12:07)

[12] “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (Question 4).

[13] Incommunicable attributes identified in the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

• infinite

• eternal

• unchangeable

[14] More often than not, differences in our lists of God’s incommunicable attributes represent little more than variety in terminology.

[15] Because our concepts of God aren’t significantly different, we should look beyond particular terms and focus on the concepts that they signify.

[16] Other terms for God’s attributes commonly referred to by evangelicals:

• omnipresence – God is everywhere.

• omniscience – God knows everything.

• omnipotence – God is all-powerful.
• aseity – God is self-sufficient and independent from his creation.

• sovereignty – God is in total control of creation.

C. Biblical Perspectives

[17] We must take into account a broad range of biblical perspectives about God to avoid serious misunderstandings of his incommunicable attributes.

1. Divine Transcendence

[18] Divine transcendence – God is above and beyond creation.

[19] The Westminster Shorter Catechism speaks of divine transcendence by listing three incommunicable perfections:

Infinite – God’s perfections are without limits.

Biblical passages that proclaim God’s infinity:

• 1 Kings 8:27 – God cannot be limited by space.

• Romans 11:33 – God’s knowledge and wisdom can’t be measured.

• Psalm 139:6 – knowledge of God is “too wonderful ... too lofty ... to attain.”

Eternal – God’s perfections are not subject to time.

Biblical passages that proclaim God’s eternality:

• 1 Timothy 1:17 – God is the eternal Ruler.
• Revelation 4:8 – God is the one “who was, and is, and is to come.”

• 2 Peter 3:8 – God transcends all of history.

Unchangeable – God’s perfections cannot change.

Biblical passages that proclaim that God is unchangeable:

• Malachi 3:6 – God himself said he is unchangeable.

• Numbers 23:19 – God does not change his mind.

• James 1:17 – God “does not change like shifting shadows.”

Some argue that God’s incommunicable attributes form an impenetrable barrier between God and his creation:

• Because God is infinite, he never investigates circumstances. But in Genesis 18:20-21, God sent angelic spies to investigate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

• Because God is eternal, he never waits to react to human obedience and disobedience. But Deuteronomy 8:2 tells us that God waited to judge Israel until after they had failed their tests of obedience.

• Because God is unchangeable, he never responds to prayers. But in Exodus 32:14, God responded to Moses’ prayer and refrained from destroying his people.

Scripture is clear that God is fully and genuinely engaged with his finite, temporal and changing creation.
2. Divine Immanence

[22] *Divine immanence* – God’s involvement with his creation

[23] Scripture reports God’s historical manifestations – the ways God involved himself in biblical history – using:

- Descriptions
- Names and titles
- Metaphors and similes
- Actions

[24] Some Christians stress divine immanence to such a degree that they reject God’s incommunicable attributes:

- God must be finite because he asks questions, expresses frustration, and doesn’t immediately overcome evil.

- God is not eternal because he waits to act until after he tests his people, he offers salvation, and he threatens judgment.

- God is changeable because he answers prayer, relents, and revises guiding principles.

[25] But to deny that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in these ways is to strike at the heart of biblical faith.

[26] The Scriptures call us to embrace both God’s transcendence and his immanence (Psalm 115:3):

- Because God is infinite, he can fully enter the realm of the finite as he wishes.
• Because God is eternal, he can participate within time in any way he chooses.

• Because God is unchangeable in all of his perfections, he engages his changing creation as he pleases.

[27] We must embrace the full breadth of biblical teachings on God’s transcendence and immanence to gain a proper understanding of God’s incommunicable attributes.

III. Integration

[28] Biblical authors treated all divine attributes as closely interconnected.

A. Biblical Foundation

[29] “Simplicity of God” – God’s essence is not a composite.

• “Without parts” – Augsburg Confession

• “One … simple and spiritual Being” – Belgic Confession

[30] Scripture supports belief in God’s simplicity: “the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

[31] Unlike the gods of other nations, God could not be divided into parts between one place and another (James 2:19).

[32] God’s perfections are not different parts of God; they are fully unified, interconnected qualities of his one essence.

B. Theological Variety
[33] To one degree or another, evangelicals have affirmed the value of integrating God’s communicable and incommunicable attributes.

1. Augsburg Confession

[34] God is: “eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.”

[35] The Latin text indicates that God is infinite (“immensus”) in his power, infinite in his wisdom, and infinite in his goodness.

[36] The Confession acknowledges that God’s incommunicable attribute of infinity should be fully integrated with his communicable attributes.

2. Belgic Confession


[38] The original French indicates that God is perfectly (“tout”) mighty, perfectly wise, perfectly just, and perfectly good.

[39] Like the Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession views God’s communicable attributes in the light of his infinity.

3. Westminster Shorter Catechism

[40] “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

[41] The Catechism answers how God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable by looking through these attributes to his communicable attributes.
The Shorter Catechism provides a systematic way of integrating God’s incommuni-
cable and communicable attributes.

C. Biblical Perspectives

The Westminster Shorter Catechism notes that God is infinite, eternal and unchange-
able in each of the communicable attributes it identifies:

1. Being

Our being is finite, temporal and changeable, and God’s being is infinite, eternal
and unchangeable.

Traditional systematic theology highlights the difference between God’s being and
creation in two main ways:

Immensity – God’s infinite, eternal and unchangeable existence beyond creation.

- 1 Kings 8:27

God is different from his creation in that his existence is in no way limited to the
realm of his creation.

Omnipresence – God’s existence everywhere within creation.

- Jeremiah 23:24
- Acts 17:28
- Psalm 139:7-10
• Isaiah 66:1

• Acts 7:48-49

Unlike any facet of the finite, time-bound, changeable creation, God’s being is in all places.

2. Wisdom

Two incommunicable dimensions of God’s wisdom:

Omniscience – God possesses knowledge of all things.

• Job 37:16

• Hebrews 4:13

• Psalm 33:15

• Jeremiah 23:24

Incomprehensibility – God’s thoughts cannot be fully known.

• Romans 11:33

• Job 11:7

• Psalm 139:1-4, 6

• 1 Samuel 16:7

• 1 Chronicles 28:9
• Jeremiah 17:10

3. Power

[50] Two ways that God’s power is incommunicable

Omnipotence – God is all-powerful.

- Job 42:2
- Psalm 115:3
- Jeremiah 32:17
- Matthew 19:26

God’s power is always true to his other attributes. God cannot lie, sin, change, nor deny himself (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; 2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; James 1:13, 17).

Sovereignty – God’s absolute control over creation.

- 2 Chronicles 20:6
- Job 42:2
- Daniel 4:35
- Ephesians 1:11
- Romans 8:28
4. Holiness

[51] The biblical adjectives (qadosh in Hebrew or hagios in Greek) translated “holy,” “sacred,” or “sanctified” mean “separate” or “set apart.”

[52] The holiness of creatures is finite, temporal and changeable; God’s holiness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

[53] Two ways systematic theology approaches God’s holiness:

Moral – God is separate from all evil.

• Psalm 92:15

• Habakkuk 1:12-13

• James 1:13

Majestic – God is separate from all creation.

• Isaiah 6:3

• Exodus 15:11

• 1 Samuel 2:2

• Isaiah 57:15

• Hosea 11:9
5. Justice

[54] Human justice is limited, temporal and changing, but God’s righteousness or justice (from tsaddiq in Hebrew or dikaiosuné in Greek) is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

[55] God’s justice is most often associated in Scripture with the judgments of his heavenly court.

- 1 Peter 1:17
- Romans 2:5-6
- Romans 9:14
- Deuteronomy 32:4
- John 17:25

[56] Systematic theologians focus on two main areas of God’s justice:

*Rewards* – God grants just rewards for righteousness.

- Psalm 58:11
- 2 Timothy 4:8

*Punishments* – God grants just punishments for evil.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8
- Acts 17:31
- Romans 3:26
6. Goodness

[57] The goodness of creation is limited, temporal and changeable, but God’s goodness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

[58] Two main categories of God’s goodness in systematic theology:

Direct – God’s goodness shown in his benevolence, mercy, love and patience toward his creatures.

- Psalm 34:8
- Exodus 33:19
- Psalm 25:7
- Psalms 23:6; 73:1; 145:9,15-16
- Mark 10:18

The most direct display of God’s goodness is his eternal love for Christ and for all those who are in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-6).

Indirect – God will bring about good even through troubles and trials.

Biblical authors insisted that the perfection of God’s goodness will cause good to result from evil.

- James 1:17
• Romans 8:28

7. Truth

Terms used for the concept of God's truth:

• Hebrew: aman (to be sure, confirmed, true) and chesed (faithfulness, lovingkindness).

• Greek: alétheia and pistis (veracity, truthfulness, reliability, faithfulness).

God’s creatures can exhibit these qualities, but only God’s truth is infinite, eternal and unchangeable (Romans 3:4).

Two ways systematic theologians highlight the truth of God:

Faithful source – God is the faithful source of truth

• Psalm 119:43,142

• Psalm 25:5

• John 8:32

• John 16:13

• John 17:17

When God discloses truth, it is fully reliable because it is his very nature to be faithful and true.

Faithful to promises – God can be relied upon to fulfill all of his promises.
• Many times, what appears to be a promise from God is actually an offer or a threat with implicit conditions.

• If God makes a promise, he will fulfill it (Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19; Psalm 33:4; Hebrews 6:18; Revelation 3:14).

• Scripture presents God as infinite, eternal and unchangeable in every way. In this sense, every attribute of God is an incommunicable attribute.

IV. Conclusion