

## **God: The Lord is One**

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

**By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)**

We have previously mentioned that this study of God will, at times, be provocative and counter-intuitive. Today is one of those times. Some of you will sit here and find yourself saying: No. No. No. That can't be true. That doesn't seem right. I don't believe that. But the Bible says this.

Three brief words of advice when coming across something new...like this is bound to be for some of us.

First, remember GK Chesterton's fence. Here's the illustration in Chesterton's own words:

There exists a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, "I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away."

To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: "If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back, and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it."

You may not like what the church has said about the unity of God. But don't react and tear it down, until you've gone away, thought long and hard, and understand what work it is doing: In other words, ask: why is the fence there?

Second piece of advice is this. If your God never shocks you, never says or does, or IS in his being, anything counterintuitive or scandalous, or offensive, or elusive, or intellectually perplexing, then you are probably worshipping a figment of your own imagination and not the biblical God. The god whose opinions are identical with yours is surely an idol. We would do well to remember that, as John Owen put it, all our notions of God are childish in respect of his infinite perfections. We lisp and we babble, we see but his back parts, we know little of him.

Third, I can assure you, that what we will see today – new as it will be to some of you – is, in fact, the dominant, mainstream Christian view of God. Protestant and Catholic, north and south, east and west, down through the centuries. In other words, what I will defend, and try to unpack, just a little today, is what is known as Classical Theism. The classical, historical view of the church on the oneness of God.

With that, we will make three points. The One God, The God Who Is One, and Loving the Lord your God.

## **I. The One God**

First, the One God. Now this is the easy part. We will be using as our basic text, the famous Shema of Israel, from Deuteronomy 6, especially v.4 which says:

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”*

The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Now, when we speak of God being one I want us to think of two senses in which we can take the word one.

First, it could mean numerical oneness. That is, there is only one God. That’s our first point here. Alternatively, it could be focused on the nature of God’s unity, his undivided essence. And that will be our second point. But for now, the simpler matter. The One God. It’s an affirmation of monotheism. But even here, there is more than meets the eye.

When we affirm the numerically one God of the Bible, implied in that numerical oneness is his incomparable uniqueness, his singularity (which we looked at a few weeks ago). We are not affirming one relatively uninteresting being, for whom there might potentially be rivals. There can not possibly be another God than the One God.

He ALONE is the Lord. Dt. 32:39: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me.” Isaiah 44:8: Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” This is a comprehensive, unrivalled oneness. Zechariah 14:9: And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day, the Lord will be one (acknowledged as the only God) and his name one.

The New Testament, while it unveils with more clarity the Triune being of God, does so without in any way abandoning monotheism. Here’s Paul in 1 Corinthians 8. Against the notion of many so-called gods and lords, he says: Yet, for us, there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist.

So far, so good, I hope. There is One God.

## **II. The God Who is One**

Our second point is the God who is One. There is One God, and He IS one. The Lord your God IS one. Even the demons, James tells us, tremble and believe God IS One. Here we are talking about the nature of God's unity, what is known as Divine simplicity, which, it turns out, is not very simple. Let's start with some basic truths about God's unity, his essence. God has one will, one power, one glory, one justice, one goodness, one intellect, one knowledge.

The three persons of the Trinity – and I will mostly leave the question of the three-ness of God aside today – but the three persons all share the same divine nature.

Even here, we are beyond analogies in our experience (which we should expect at some point if God is not a figment of our imaginations). We are not asserting that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit share the divine nature the way 3 people share in human nature. That would be three distinct gods. It's more like three people sharing the exact same body, or, as a professor of mine used to say, to say: the three persons sharing the same nature is something like 3 balloons all sharing the exact same air molecules. The nature, the essence of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit is the numerically identical essence. There is one divine nature and thus one set of divine attributes, such as will and knowledge.

Despite the idolatrous way in which we often talk, the unity between the Father and the Son (for example) is not a mere moral unity, an agreement of will, as if they decided to work together on a joint project. (one will not three). That would lead to tritheism. But we talk this way because we tend to project human notions of personhood or unity back onto God. So we are working with a strong notion of unity, not a mere social contract between the persons of the Godhead. This has been traditionally expressed by affirming that God is simple. And by simple we mean God is not composed of parts – not only physical parts, but metaphysical (immaterial) parts (potential).

Here's Augustine: the nature of God is simple and immutable and undisturbed.

Here's our Westminster Confession: 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.

Here's the Belgic Confession, Article I (Dutch Reformed): We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God.

So simple is being used here the way you might use it in chemistry: God is not in any way a compound. Not even of being and existence. There are no things which, when mixed, yield God. Nothing is prior to God, either in time or even logically (conceptually). So here we can see what this idea is trying to protect – this is the reason for Chesterton's fence in this case – simplicity protects the ultimacy, the unity, the perfection, the coherence, the harmony, the absoluteness, the indivisibility of God.

Nothing is in back of God. Nothing is prior to God. So, and here is where the fun starts, what does this mean for the attributes of God? Traditionally the church has said – I hope you are ready – God doesn't have attributes. Attributes are things WE attribute to God. Attributes, as we instinctively speak of them are properties, or qualities, features, so if you somehow mix up goodness and love and light and righteousness, and integrate them together, you get God. But God does not have any parts. He's not a bundle of properties like a human being is. He is One, indivisible, simple, uncompounded being. Goodness and love and light are not distinct in God. God is love. God is good. God is powerful. (All)

Strictly speaking then, God does not have his attributes, he is his attributes. Thus, all we say about God IS God. In Augustine's words (paraphrase): What God is and has-- are not two things. Augustine is always saying things like: God's goodness is God. God's wisdom is God. Strange and counterintuitive. But think about what it would mean if this were not true.

You would have the property of goodness, which is not God, so it's something other than God (created thing or a thing which exists independent of God), and it and other properties, like love, which are also not equivalent to God... and somehow these things which are NOT God would be pieces or qualities of God. Such a being is not the one simple God of the Bible or our confessions.

Which is why David Bentley Hart in a recent book on God said: A denial of divine simplicity is tantamount to atheism. You end up with a so-called god made up of parts that are not god. Sometimes your instincts are wrong. And they are probably wrong about God's attributes. Another way to put this is to say: that whatever we say about God, applies to all of God, to the totality that he is. Here is Irenaeus, the great 2<sup>nd</sup> century church father:

He is a simple, uncompounded being, without diverse members, altogether like and equal to himself, since he is wholly (not holy, but wholly, completely) understanding, wholly spirit, wholly thought, wholly intelligence, wholly, reason, wholly seeing, wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good.

This is why all of God can be wholly present at every point. He is indivisible. He isn't spread out like a gas, he doesn't show up in parts, with some attributes here and others over there. What he is, he is wholly. He is not 97% love and 3%

justice. He's 100 percent just and 100% loving and 100% of everything he is. There is no development or potential or flux or change in God, he is a fully actualized being. And that means he has no parts --- and that means we need some cognitive overhauling to be done in our thinking about him.

Let's me stop and briefly help with what might be the obvious objection to all this. Namely, then why does the Bible speak of God as if he has parts or properties or attributes like we have attributes? The short reply here is as follows:

The Bible speaks of God in a lot of ways, that we know are accommodations to our weakness and are not, strictly speaking, true of God in himself. It speaks of God as having eyes and arms and hands and wings. Its speaks of him standing and sitting. It speaks of him learning, or not knowing certain things, of being surprised, exasperated, of overflowing in anger, of suffering, of changing his mind.

We all know, upon reflection, that these expressions are how the simple unchanging God appears to us, when we behave a certain way. But it would be absurd to assume all this language should be taken literally of God in himself. There are too many other texts which speak of his infinite, unchangeable, eternal spiritual perfections. So, it really isn't odd that the simple God is spoken of as having a variety of distinct attributes.

And that brings me to the second thing which may help here, by way of illustration:

If God is undivided light, simple and uncomposed, then we can think of his relations to his creatures as that light being diffused through a prism. What appears diverse to us, is in some mysterious and beautiful way united and utterly one in the source. Or one can think of sitting in different seats at a baseball game – the game is the same, unchanged game, but it looks different to US depending on where we sit.

As Herman Bavinck the great Dutch Reformed theologian puts it:

Just as a child cannot picture the worth of a coin of great value, but only gains some sense of it when it is counted out in a number of smaller coins, so we too cannot possibly form a picture of the infinite fulness of God's essence, unless it is displayed to us, now in one relationship, then in another, now from one angle, then from another.

### **III. Love the Lord Your God.**

Finally, our third point: Love the Lord Your God. What does this mean and why does it matter? It turns out that the Christian life depends on the deep, deep,

mysterious unity of God. Out of that unity, the Son comes, displaying simplicity of devotion to the uttermost, and sending the Spirit who produces in us the FRUIT – singular--- of the Spirit. All the fruits of the Spirit are profoundly interconnected--- as are all the beatitudes. You cannot have one without the other—and they interpenetrate each other.

This is a faint creaturely image of our simple unified God. Our love is to be peaceful, joyful, patient, kind etc. And our joy is to be loving, peaceful, gentle, faithful. And so on. All the various fruits of the Spirit trace themselves back to the singular presence of the Spirit, the simple God breathed into our souls. And thus they are profoundly one, the fruit of the Spirit.

Finally, remember the Shema, our text. It connects the nature of God's unity with our response – in an immediate and startling way:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. OK? God is a unified being. Now what? Next words: <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."*

And, we saw in the gospel that Jesus, in whom this simplicity of integrated unity of being is on display in human flesh, calls this – including the part that God IS one – he calls all this the greatest commandment:

*And one of the scribes came up and asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

There is then an analogy between God's being and our response of love. God is simple, integrated, harmonious, undivided, wholly unified and one. He is this by nature. And we are to offer, by grace, simple, pure, wholly united, undivided hearts, total love in response. The unity and integrity of God calls forth a creaturely imitation, whereby we love God with the full unity and integrity of our being.

The *Shema* — "The Lord your GOD is One" — means your being is to be united in love of this God. Simplicity and purity in God, is to evoke simplicity (sincerity) and purity of devotion in us. Hear, then, O Israel. The Lord you God is One. Be One in your love and devotion. Amen.

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