

ANSWERS TO COMMON
QUESTIONS ABOUT

God

Titles in the Answers to Common Questions Series

Answers to Common Questions About Angels & Demons
by H. Wayne House and Timothy J. Demy

Answers to Common Questions About God
by H. Wayne House and Timothy J. Demy

Answers to Common Questions About Heaven & Eternity
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by Timothy J. Demy and Thomas Ice

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H. Wayne House
Timothy J. Demy

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Answers to Common Questions About God

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*To the memory of Carl F. H. Henry,
scholar, teacher, mentor, friend*

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About This Series

The Answers to Common Questions series is designed to provide readers a brief summary and overview of individual topics and issues in Christian theology. For quick reference and ease in studying, the works are written in a question and answer format. The questions follow a logical progression so that those reading straight through a work will receive a greater appreciation for the topic and the issues involved. The volumes are thorough, though not exhaustive, and can be used as a set or as single-volume studies. Each volume is fully documented and contains a recommended reading list for those who want to pursue the subject in greater detail.

The study of theology and the many issues within Christianity is an exciting and rewarding endeavor. For two thousand years, Christians have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ and sought to accurately define and defend the doctrines of their faith as recorded in the Bible. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Christians are exhorted: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” The goal of these books is to help you in your diligence and accuracy as you study God’s Word and its influence in history and thought through the centuries.

Introduction

I [we] believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” So begins the Nicene Creed (known more technically as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), dating back to the fourth century and recited daily by millions of Christians around the world for more than 1,600 years. The first words of the creed can be summarized in one word: *monotheism*. At the core of Christianity lies belief in one God. This does not deny the existence of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That too is a central teaching of orthodox Christianity and will be considered in part in the following pages. However, in these pages it is primarily the person and work of God the Father that we will consider.

Everyone has conceptions (and misconceptions) about God. For some, God is like a divine Teddy Bear; for others, God is a raging monster. For some, God is a personal being who is intimately concerned with every detail in the lives of humans; for others, God is an apathetic, impersonal entity who may as well be dying or dead. Throughout the centuries, Christians have affirmed the biblical teaching that God is a personal being who establishes relationships with individuals created in His image.

God has told us about Himself through general revelation in nature and through specific revelation in the Bible. Those are the only ways we can know about God. “Apart from God’s initiative,

God's act, God's revelation, no confident basis exists for God-talk."¹ Fortunately we have such revelation. Join us as we take a look at the pages of Scripture to see what it tells us about God.

Initial Questions About God

1. How do we know that God exists?¹

The Bible's first verse begins with the assumption that God exists and that He is the creator of the universe. But can we simply make such an assumption? Don't we first need to be able to prove His existence?

Actually, before we can move to the question of God's existence, we must ask some prior questions. First, what do we mean by the question "Does God exist?" One person may be questioning whether an actual being exists, while another may only be asking whether a concept of God is in view and a valid presupposition. For Christians, the issue is whether the God presented in the Bible exists. The Bible is not concerned to prove that some kind of god exists, but to explain what kind of God exists and how to know this God.

Christian theology is mainly interested in understanding the God who has chosen to reveal Himself to us, especially in the Bible. Arguments for God's existence, though interesting and helpful, are not essential to our experience with God. Such arguments, rational in their nature, can only point to the probability, however high, for the existence of a powerful and intelligent higher being. They cannot describe the fullness of the biblical God's nature.

Nevertheless, the arguments for God's existence can reinforce our Christian belief, removing obstacles to faith, and can cause an unbeliever to examine evidence for the Christian God.

There are a number of classic arguments for the existence of God, but we will only deal with three of them: the *cosmological*, the *teleological*, and the *anthropological* (or moral) arguments.

Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument addresses the question of cause. What caused the creation of the world? There are only three options, two of which are impossible. After they are excluded, only one remains: that a creator created the universe.

The first option is that the universe created itself. Some prominent scientists hold this view today. But self-creation is contrary to the law of non-contradiction: "Two opposites cannot both be true in the same way at the same time." For the universe to be uncreated and yet be able to create would require it to simultaneously be and yet not be.

Another cosmological explanation is that time and chance brought the universe into existence. According to the old cliché, given enough time and chance, anything can happen. This is manifestly false. Even given trillions of years and billions of chances—far more than postulated by people who advocate this perspective—chance and time cannot cause creation because chance and time have no causative capacity to create. Chance is not a thing but a mathematical abstraction, and time is a measurement of motion and change and not a causative thing in itself. Because neither chance nor time is an agent or cause of anything, they cannot create.

Both of these supposed explanations are absurd, like a two-angled triangle or a square circle. By definition, these things are self-contradictions. In the same way, a violation of the law of non-contradiction poses an absurdity. Nothing cannot produce something.

Stephen Hawking, in his book *The Grand Design*, argues that the beginning of the universe was inevitable because of the law of gravity. He writes, "Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can

and will create itself from nothing,”² and, “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.”³ He writes as a former professor of mathematics at Cambridge, occupying the Lucasian Chair, a position that Sir Isaac Newton occupied. Newton believed that the universe could not arise from chaos but demanded a creator.⁴ Hawking, conversely, believes that a theoretical law of how things would work if they existed can somehow bring into existence the things it would govern.

But simply having a theory of something does not mean that the something must exist. For example, if we were to describe how a unicorn would look if it existed, this does not mean that unicorns therefore exist or that describing one can produce one. Only the mind of an infinite, personal being who existed prior to creation can bring into existence something out of nothing (*creation ex nihilo*).⁵

Hawking believes that the first objection to Newton’s view occurred in 1992, when a planet was observed orbiting a star outside of our solar system. He says, “That makes the coincidences of our planetary conditions—the single sun, the lucky combination of Earth-sun distance and solar mass—far less remarkable, and far less compelling as evidence that the Earth was carefully designed just to please us human beings.”⁶

But such an observation in no way disproves that a creator created the universe, nor does it demonstrate that the earth was not carefully designed “just to please us human beings.” The Creator looked at the universe He had created and declared it good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 18, 21, 25) before humans had ever been created, not merely after it had been made useable by humans. He pronounced it *very* good (Gen. 1:31) *after* the creation of the humans for whom He made it.

The fine-tuning of our earth and universe represents the exactitude of an infinite mind who desires order in the universe and solar system He created.⁷ This is the assertion of the anthropic principle. This philosophical perspective maintains that the universe appears

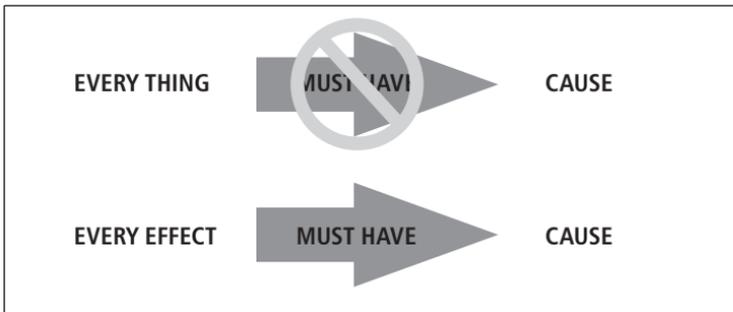
designed to support the life of those who observe its design. But God's purpose in engineering it this way was not simply to please humans; it was to accomplish what was necessary to ensure the furtherance of humanity for His own purposes.⁸

Though Hawking says that "philosophy is dead," Plato is much alive. Even Hawking's views are belied in his book as he grapples with ideas that cannot be physically demonstrated; thus, even if he rebels against the mind, he must use the mind to make his arguments.

What about Hawking's insistence that Newton has been overturned because a planet exists outside our solar system, unconnected to humanity? Hawking incorrectly insinuates that everything the Creator creates must be prepared for human life. But the planets and sun of this solar system, as well as those of other systems, may serve for exploration by humanity (even though such exploration is limited when contrasted with the vastness of the universe), which pleases God, and not merely to please humans. The Creator delights in His creation.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), a major architect of the cosmological argument, rightly argued that every effect has a cause. Not every thing must have a cause but every effect must have a cause.

The Law of Causality¹⁰



Consequently, there must be a first cause because there cannot be an infinite regress of finite causes. This principle only says that every

effect must have a cause, not that every *thing* must have a cause. There is a necessary first cause, an uncaused cause. We call this cause God.

Mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz posed the problem, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”¹¹ One may find the answer only by looking at the something that lies beyond the nothing. In addition, as Ludwig Wittgenstein stated, “Solving the solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time.”¹² Hawking, and others are looking at the universe when the answer lies outside the universe.

Teleology

A second support for the existence of God resides in the subject of design, or *teleology*, from the Greek word *telos* for purpose or goal. Teleological arguments for the existence of God are based on the observation of order and/or design in the universe. Such arguments argue that order is obvious in the universe; therefore there must be an “orderer.”

Theologian Thomas Oden says, “The power of this argument is best seen by taking seriously its opposite hypothesis, that there is no cause of order. For then one is attributing the order to chance, which in the long run still would leave the order unexplained.”¹³ Since this observable order cannot be attributed to the object itself, the observable order argues for an intelligent being who has established the order. This being is God.

Listen to the words of theologian and physicist Stanley L. Jaki: “[The universe] has supreme coherence from the very small to the very large. It is a consistent unity free of debilitating paradoxes. It is beautifully proportioned into layers or dimensions and yet all of them are in perfect interaction.”¹⁴

The design argument contends that non-conscious things have a purpose which cannot be the result of impersonal cause. Intelligent-design scientists attempt to demonstrate that the universe and life show signs of a designer through two primary ways: the studies of *specified complexity* and *irreducible complexity*.

Specified Complexity

A string of letters provides a good example of specified complexity. While some sequences of letters may form a recognizable pattern or provide information, that does not mean the sequences were designed. Moreover, just because something is complex does not make it designed. What is necessary is for both specificity and complexity to be present.

The ARN website supplies a helpful explanation of specified complexity: “When a design theorist says that a string of letters is *specified*, he’s saying that it fits a recognizable pattern. When he says it is complex, he is saying there are so many different ways the object could have turned out that the chance of getting any particular outcome by accident is hopelessly small.”¹⁵

Derived from a combination of four letters that could have been randomly formed, the word *blue* does provide information, a recognizable pattern, but it is not complex. Conversely, a lengthy combination of letters, as seen in the chart below, clearly is complex, but it provides no information. But when something demonstrates a recognizable pattern *and* is complex, we can be sure it has been designed.

Specified Complexity Demonstrates Intelligent Design¹⁶

Specification Does *Not* Demonstrate Intelligent Design

BLUE

Complexity Does *Not* Demonstrate Intelligent Design

ZOEFFNPBINNGQZAMZQPEGOXSYFMRTXRNRYGRRGN
NFVUGUMLMTYQTXTXWORNWBWIGBBCVHPUZMWLON
HATQUGOTFJKZXFHP

Specified Complexity *Does* Demonstrate Intelligent Design

FOURSCOREANDSEVENYEARSAGOOURFATHERSBROU
GHTFORTHONTHISCONTINENTANEWNATIONCONCEI
VEDINLIBERTY

In the chart above, only the last example possesses both specificity and complexity, clearly demonstrating an intelligence behind the formulation. Such a complex informational statement could not have happened by accident.

Irreducible Complexity

Irreducible complexity can be described like this: If a biological system (or “machine”) has interdependent components that are necessary to its operation, without which it would cease to function, then it could not have evolved.¹⁷ Biochemist Michael Behe has been at the forefront of this view. He has identified a number of systems that had to have existed in composition from the start or else they would not be functional. Behe is simply responding to the challenge of Charles Darwin, who said, “If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.”¹⁸

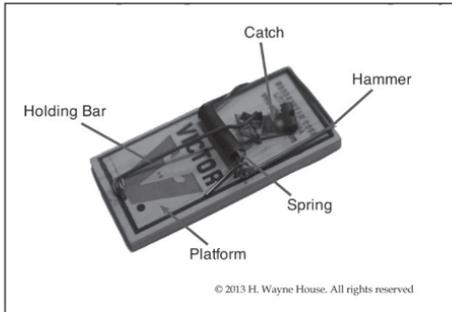
Behe has used the mousetrap and the flagellum as examples. The first is an inanimate machine; the second, a biological system. In order for there to be a mousetrap, certain parts must work in concert and exist simultaneously, namely, the base, the hammer, the spring, the hold-down bar, and the catch. If any of these is missing, the mousetrap will not work to catch mice. In his book, *Only a Theory*, Kenneth R. Miller recounts an experiment of one of his classmates, who

struck upon the brilliant idea of using an old, broken mousetrap as a spitball catapult, and it worked brilliantly. . . . It had worked perfectly as something other than a mousetrap. . . . my rowdy friend had pulled a couple of parts . . . probably the hold-down bar and catch—off the trip to make it easier to conceal and more effective as a catapult. . . . [leaving] the base, the spring, and the hammer. Not

much of a mousetrap. . . . I realized why [Behe's] mousetrap analogy had bothered me. It was wrong. The mousetrap is not irreducibly complex after all.¹⁹

In reality, Miller's friend had not created a mousetrap at all, and so had not disproved Behe's illustration. Once several components were removed—by

Mousetrap Example of Irreducible Complexity

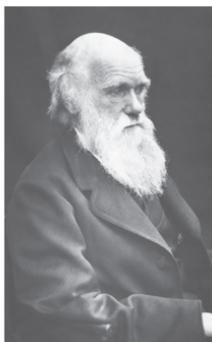


intelligence and not by accident, incidentally—the result was no longer a mousetrap. It was a catapult. The fact that it borrowed some of the common elements of the mousetrap (in the same way that biological machines have some of

the same components as other biological systems) does not turn a catapult into a mousetrap.

When looking at the nature of a thing, its being, it is not only the similarities that define it but also the dissimilarities. In the case at hand, similar components formed a different reality, but the way in which those components were put together and functioned together was dissimilar. That various mechanical and biological machines have similar parts does not prove that they are mechanically or organically related, but that they are framed on a common design.

Darwin understood the absolute imperative of incremental changes in living organisms for his theory to work, but unfortunately, many of his disciples cling needlessly to his flawed theory. That theory may explain variation among species and sometimes genus, but not a vertical move from lower forms of life to more advanced living organisms.

Darwin's Words on What Would Disprove His Theory²⁰

“If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.”

Charles Darwin,
The Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition, p. 189

Moral Argument

The moral argument for the existence of God is based on the concept of conscience. The Darwinian evolutionary perspective has difficulty explaining moral conscience or impulse since it is contrary to the survival of the fittest and would not develop as an aspect of natural selection.

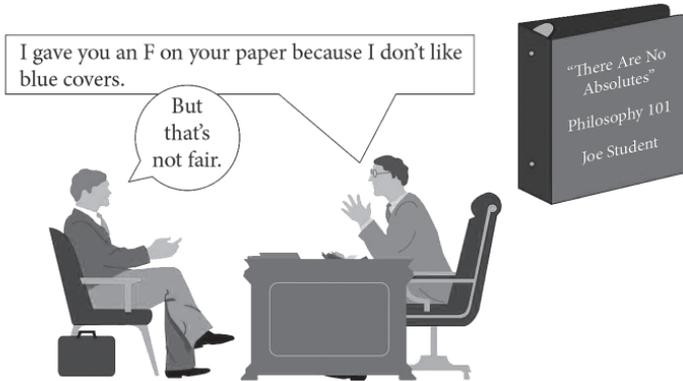
Everyone has a moral impulse—a categorical imperative, to use Immanuel Kant’s expression. According to Kant, since moral decisions are not necessarily rewarded in this life, there must be a basis for moral actions that are beyond this life. This implies the ideas of immortality and ultimate judgment, as well as a God who establishes and demands morality. He does this by rewarding good and punishing evil.

Those who reject the idea of absolute moral causes subscribe to a self-refuting argument (for example, to say there are no absolutes is an absolute statement). Moreover, such a notion leads logically to the inability to distinguish between a Mother Teresa and an Adolf Hitler. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “If no set of moral ideas were truer or better than any other, there would be no sense in preferring civilised morality to savage morality, or Christian morality to Nazi morality.”²¹

How does all of this relate to proving the existence of God?

Hasting Rashdall: “A moral ideal can exist nowhere and nohow but in a Mind; an absolute moral ideal can exist only in a Mind from which all Reality is derived. Our moral ideal can only claim objective validity in so far as it can rationally be regarded as the revelation of a moral ideal eternally existing in the mind of God.”²²

Self-Refuting (Moral) Argument



The classical approach to the moral argument is similar to that of the cosmological argument. Within everyone is an awareness of “oughtness.” Where does it come from? It could not come from nothing, so it must have a source. Kant’s idea of oughtness can be described as follows:

1. The greatest good of all persons is to do what is right, an unconditional duty.
2. All persons should strive for the greatest good.
3. Whatever persons ought to do, they are able to do.
4. However, persons are unable to realize the greatest good in this life without God.
5. Therefore we must posit both a future life and God.²³

C. S. Lewis maintained that without a universal moral law, (1) moral disagreements would make no sense; (2) all moral

criticisms would be meaningless; (3) it would be unnecessary to keep promises or treaties; and (4) we would not make excuses for breaking a moral law.²⁴ Lewis says that such a universal moral law requires a universal Moral Law Giver, since the source of the law provides moral commandments and is interested in human behavior. This Moral Law Giver must be absolutely good; otherwise, all moral effort would be futile since we would be dedicating and even sacrificing our lives for what is not ultimately moral. Moreover, the standard of all good must be completely good. Consequently, there must be an absolutely good Moral Law Giver.

Another part of the moral argument, conceived by Blaise Pascal and known as the Wager Argument for God's existence, is based on the concept of *risk*. As the argument illustrates, one makes a risk based on gain versus loss. At life's end, a Christian, if correct, gains heaven; the non-Christian, if correct, simply ceases to exist. If the Christian is wrong, he or she will become nonexistent. But the non-Christian, if wrong, will incur hell.

The first part of the Wager Argument cannot be avoided. Pascal continues that if God does not exist, the believer has nothing to lose; that person is still able to live a good life. The Christian has no possibility of being disappointed nor the non-Christian of being rewarded. If the Christian is wrong, he or she will never know it. But if the unbeliever is right, he will never have the pleasure of knowing it; however, if he is wrong, he will know it for eternity.

In the words of Pascal, "I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing."²⁵

What Do the Arguments for God's Existence Prove?

These arguments may encourage the believer and function as testimonies or aids in pondering the massive truth of God's existence. Norman Geisler and Paul Feinberg sum it up well: "Faith in

God is not based on evidence but on the authority of God Himself through His revelation. . . . Even though one cannot reason to belief in God, he can find reasons for it. In fact faith may be defined as ‘the ability to reason with assent’²⁶

2. How are we able to know about God?

God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity in two ways: first, in nature; and second, through special revelation. *Natural revelation* is given by God to all and intended for all, whereas *special revelation* is given to a few but also intended for all. Natural revelation declares God’s greatness. Special revelation declares God’s grace.

Natural Revelation

God has revealed Himself in several interactions with humanity. The natural world around us shows His glory. According to Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of His hands” (HCSB). The psalm continues with a description of the revelation of God in nature. Daily He reveals Himself without speaking audible words. The message goes throughout the world. The physical expression of God’s revelation may be seen in the Sun’s course across the skies from one end of the earth to the other.

But God has not only made Himself known in the larger working of the solar system and the universe. He also reveals Himself through the beauty and wonder of nature in its order and design, and also in the way that He cares for us. The words of Jesus say as much: God brings the rain on the just and unjust alike (Matt 5:45).

Another way in which God has made Himself known is by His imprint on human moral consciousness. As was argued in question one regarding the existence of God, our moral nature arises from God’s moral nature. This is another way in which we learn about God, in that we are similar to Him in some respects.

Lastly, within each of us is an innate religious impulse. St. Augustine said, “You encourage [humans] to delight to praise you,

for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²⁷ Humans are incurably religious, a fact borne out by the existence of religions from the beginning of mankind’s existence. While this religious yearning displays many forms, nonetheless it testifies to an inward call from God in nature. Even atheists profess their belief in a religious manner; they still seek for ultimate purpose in the world.

Unfortunately, as Paul tells us in Roman 1:18–32, this religious impulse does not lead people to the true God but to idolatry. God must reveal Himself in a special manner, through the work of the gospel and the Holy Spirit in the heart of the unbeliever, if a person is to be saved.

Special Revelation

God has not only spoken in nature but also by special revelation, in which the Creator-Savior enters in among humanity to do a special act of grace. God’s revelation is intended for all people but is received only by some. Whereas natural revelation is sufficient for condemnation, special revelation is sufficient for salvation. Natural revelation declares God’s greatness, but special revelation declares God’s grace.

The author of Hebrews begins his book as follows: “Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:1–2 HCSB). The Creator of all has demonstrated His character throughout His historical interaction with mankind. From the time that He walked and talked with Adam and Eve, to His subsequent revelation to Noah, the patriarchs, Moses, and Israel, He has shown Himself to be an infinite yet personal Deity through His words and works. He gave a promise to our first parents in Genesis 3:15, one of final victory over sin. He rescued a family from the flood after every thought of sinful mankind had become evil. He came to Abraham with a promise that through him, God would bring blessing to the entire earth. Finally, He came in human form

and nature to offer Himself and fulfill His commitment to His people and all mankind.

We may know God, but only in the way He desires and according to the timing He established in eternity. By responding to His revelation, we can come to truth and salvation. As the apostle John said, “This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and the One You have sent—Jesus Christ” (John 17:3 HCSB).

3. In what sense is God knowable and unknowable?

The God of the universe cannot be known through human effort. Only by His own effort to communicate with His creation can He be seen in earthly terms. At least four millennia ago, a friend of Job’s named Zophar spoke these words:

Can you fathom the depths of God
 or discover the limits of the Almighty?
 They are higher than the heavens—what can you do?
 They are deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
 Their measure is longer than the earth
 and wider than the sea. (Job 11:7–9 HCSB)

Note that this passage does not say God cannot be known, only that a human being cannot penetrate the infinite Deity. Being finite, each of us has limited abilities to learn about God. We can know Him only to the degree that He reveals Himself to us. Moreover, were He to reveal a great amount of His infinite being, our finite minds could not contain the truth.

The apostle Paul says in Romans 1:18–24 that God is both knowable and known by people, for aspects of His divine being—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen since the creation of the world. Consequently, people are without excuse. The apostle continues, “For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude” (v. 21 HCSB). The result of what

people know about God does not bring gratitude to God for all He has done, but rejection of the revelation and the replacement of this knowledge with foolishness, even of worshipping the creation and not the Creator.

Only those who by faith fully embrace God can truly (though not fully) know Him or rightly appreciate His general revelation in nature. Jesus said that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no person can come to the Father except through the Son. To know the Son is to know the Father (John 14:6–7).

The apostle Paul puts all of this into perspective as we finite beings praise a God whom we can only know through His own self-revelation:

Oh, the depth of the riches
both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable His judgments
and untraceable His ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been His counselor?
Or who has ever first given to Him,
and has to be repaid?
For from Him and through Him
and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

(Rom. 11:33–36 HCSB)

4. Where did God come from, if anywhere? (Aseity)

One of the early questions of many children is, “Where did God come from?” It is a natural question. Everything we know of—a car, ice cream, a Christmas toy, even a baby brother—has a beginning. When we considered arguments for the existence of God, we learned that every effect has a cause. But there is one uncaused cause: God.

So the answer to the above question is, “God came from nowhere,” or, “There never was a time when God was not.”

In theology, we use the term *aseity*, meaning that the source of God’s existence is wholly within Himself. This is a hard concept to grasp since every other thing in our experience is contrary to it. There is no possibility that there is an infinite regress of matter that never had a beginning under any laws known to humans. All matter had a beginning. But an infinite, non-material, non-temporal, and non-spatial being has no such restrictions, and His uncreated existence violates none of the basic laws of logic. A God who has always been is the most likely source of everything that is not Himself.

5. Is human language truly capable of talking about God?

Try to describe anything to anyone without using words. It’s impossible. Words are the means by which we form and communicate ideas. It should be no surprise, then, that language about God is a necessary part of acquiring our knowledge about God. Some claim to know Him through mystical experience, and there is no doubt that believers have a spiritual experience with God. But whenever we speak about truth, knowledge, faith (which is legitimate only when based on fact), and consequently, God, we depend on language.

The word *God* means something to us. Those who hold to a realist theology believe the word refers to something or someone real. Others may refer to God as a means to speak of human existence, whether or not the theological language even refers to an existing God, somewhat like speaking of elves or Santa Claus.

Some world religions, such as Buddhism, speak of God as an abstract, impersonal being or concept. Others, such as Hinduism, see God as a generalized term that includes multiple deities—representations or manifestations of the One. Still others view God in terms of orthodox Christianity, as a personal, infinite being.

The Bible is a book of words about God and from God. Apart

from words, it is hard to imagine that we can know God, for He has always revealed Himself through language. Beginning with the garden of Eden, God *spoke*—first to Adam and Eve, then on throughout the unfolding history of His revelation to humanity.

Yet in describing the being and acts of God, we encounter the limitations of human language. We are attempting to associate known words, concepts, and images with the unknown. God is an infinite being, beyond time and space, and is not identified with His creation. There is no one like Him, and what we know of Him is limited by what He has revealed as well as our capacity to understand much that is above our comprehension. When we speak of Him, we can do so only imperfectly.

There are three ways in which we may speak about divine reality: *equivocal*, *univocal*, and *analogical*.

To describe something equivocally means that we ascribe a specific meaning to a term that could have other meanings, all depending on how it is used. How we understand an equivocal term depends on its context. For example, a person might use the word *buck* to refer to a dollar in currency. But in another context, buck would refer to a male deer. If someone says, “I killed a buck,” the meaning could be confusing without a proper context. Does the speaker mean he spent a dollar or shot a deer? Again, when someone says “pitcher,” is he speaking of an object that can hold a liquid or of someone who throws a baseball over home plate?

Using the word wrongly in a particular context would be called equivocation. In reference to God, since we are using finite language, it sometimes becomes necessary to explain the unexplainable by speaking in the negative, that is, what is not God. Hopefully what God is not will give some sense of what God is.

A second form of language is called univocal, related to the word *univocation*. Something is univocal if it has only one possible meaning. Something is univocal if it would have the same meaning regardless of its context, making it hard to be misunderstood. For example, if a teacher asks a boy to put his finger on his nose, the

meaning is clear. The statements, “The building is tall,” and, “The man is tall,” are both univocal. How tall they are is irrelevant; the only concern is the quality of tallness.

Someone who believes we can speak of God univocally believes that in saying “God is good” or “John is good,” we mean essentially the same thing. But this is unlikely. Similarly, to say that a woman has an arm is not the same thing as saying that God has an arm. In univocal use of language, there is unity between the word and what it represents. But this does not apply when using finite meanings to describe an infinite being.

The last perspective, analogical, is a middle position between univocal and equivocal language. It is actually a combination of the two. If a woman says she is going to be toast when she gets home because she stayed too long at work, we would understand that she is in trouble when she arrives home. The guest of honor at a celebrity roast isn’t going to be burned at the stake; he is simply going to have harmless jokes told about him. There are both similarities and differences in meaning between an athlete running a hundred-yard race on the track and a train running on the track.

We generally use analogical speech in making statements about God’s being and actions. Words and concepts share similar meanings in the finite world as they do when speaking of the infinite being, but their similarity is by analogy rather than equality. The goodness of God is like the goodness of a human, but they are not equal to each other.²⁸ Since nothing in creation truly describes the God who exists apart and before creation, our descriptions of Him can only approximate Him. When the Scripture speaks of God’s emotions or mental state with ideas like God repenting or forgetting, it speaks not of the actual acts of God but of how He is perceived. When the text says something about God’s eyes or arm, it does not mean that God has physical organs or appendages; rather, it is describing how God acts within the created order by using terms we can relate to through our own acts within the created order.

In summary, viewing God in equivocal terms gives evangelical

scholars little way to truly understand Him. Some evangelical theologians do understand God univocally, believing that the way in which we speak of God is the same sense that God means. But most evangelicals accept that the biblical text and our language speak of God analogically. We do not have the capacity to express God in His perfection and infinite nature. But we do have concepts, and even feelings, that are similar to what God Himself speaks.

Types of Language That May Be Used to Speak About God²⁹

Equivocal	Univocal	Analogical
Term employed in only one sense, so a term has completely different meanings in a context from its other meanings.	Term employed predicatively with different subjects has the same meaning in both instances.	This is a combination of equivocal and univocal sense.
<i>A row of trees and row the boat.</i>	<i>The man is tall and the building is tall.</i>	<i>Jeff runs the 100-yard dash, and the train runs down the track.</i>

6. What do we mean when we speak of God as a personal being?

It is important to understand what it means for God to be a person (in contrast with His divine nature). God's personhood is not the same as human personhood. In a human person, the person and his nature are one. But God is three persons who share all of the same attributes, including the same intellect and will.

The first chapter of Genesis states that God created humans in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and humans are the only creatures to have been created like this. We are created to resemble God (though obviously not exactly). He made us personal beings, even as He is personal. Because of his personal nature, He can relate to us personally. This is different from the religious perspective of pantheism and true of much Eastern thought and some scientists' view of God, in which God is no more than an abstraction. Because we are created in God's image, He is no less personal than we are.

Though theologians commonly speak of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms in referring to God—meaning that we speak of God in human terms regarding figures of speech in the Bible—it is often not acknowledged that we humans are theomorphic (shaped like God). This distinction became part of the author's understanding of God and human nature several decades ago and seems a better way to think of God and us in His image. We are created in the image of God, not only spiritually but also physically. By this, we are not advocating that God is physical; rather, we mean that God created humans not only as spiritual beings, but also as physical beings to reflect what God is without a physical body. As the author (Wayne) has said elsewhere,

Remember, humans were created in the image of God, so we are *theomorphic*—that is, after the form of God. He has created us with abilities or attributes that approximate in part what He is apart from finitude and from human form. God sees and we see, but we do so with the physical organs while God sees in infinity without physical eyes. We think and God thinks, but we do so in a limited manner and sequentially, while God thinks infinitely and intuitively with all knowledge being instantly before Him.³⁰

Because God acts, thinks, wills, relates, and emotes, He has created us to do the same as finite beings. We act personally, because God is a person, but we do not act perfectly or in an infinite way.