

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 2: THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Lesson 5

The God Who Is There — Against Atheism, Agnosticism, and Idolatry

The Biblical Response to the Denial and Distortion of God

Key Texts: Psalm 14:1; Romans 1:22–25; Isaiah 44:6–8; Deuteronomy 6:4

Every False View of God Is Worship Misdirected

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Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lesson 4 we established that the existence of God is not a conclusion reached by neutral inquiry but a knowledge inscribed on every human heart by God Himself, a *sensus divinitatis* that renders all people without excuse before their Maker. We surveyed the four great classical arguments, cosmological, teleological, moral, and ontological, as instruments for making explicit and articulate what is already, in suppressed form, universally known. And we ended with the indispensable reminder that the classical arguments, however valuable, can confirm but cannot save; for that, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is required.

In this fifth lesson we move from the positive to the polemical, from the affirmation of biblical theism to the biblical response to its alternatives. The God of Scripture does not exist in a vacuum of religious options; He exists as the one true God in a world crowded with rival claimants, counterfeit deities, philosophical alternatives, and deliberate denials. The Scriptures themselves are relentlessly and unapologetically polemical in their treatment of these alternatives. They do not grant atheism, agnosticism, deism, pantheism, and idolatry the status of live intellectual options that a fair-minded inquirer might reasonably adopt. They name them for what they are: the products of a suppressed knowledge, a darkened mind, and a heart determined to worship something other than the God who made it.

This lesson is designed to equip the student of Theology Proper with the biblical categories for understanding and responding to each of these alternatives. We will work through them not as a detached survey of comparative religion, but as the church has always engaged them: with theological clarity, apologetic rigor, and the pastoral awareness that behind every false view of God stands a human soul made in His image, bearing His suppressed knowledge, and in desperate need of the gospel that names the God it has been fleeing. For as Francis Schaeffer declared with characteristic force in the title of his seminal apologetic work: He is there, and He is not silent.

I. Biblical Theism: The Affirmation at the Center of All Theology

Before engaging the alternatives, we must state with clarity and precision the position we are defending. Biblical theism is the affirmation, grounded in the whole witness of Holy Scripture, that one true God exists, a God who is personal, transcendent, immanent, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, righteous, good, and sovereign over all that He has made. This God is not an abstract philosophical principle, a cosmic force, a projection of human ideals, or the sum total of the universe. He is a specific, particular, named Being: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ; the One who revealed Himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14, NASB 1995).

Four defining characteristics of biblical theism deserve particular emphasis as we set them in relief against the alternatives we will examine.

First, God is personal. He is not an impersonal force, an undifferentiated Absolute, or a ground of being that transcends all personal categories. He speaks, He loves, He grieves, He acts, He remembers, He pursues, He saves. The entire narrative of Scripture is the story of a personal God in personal relationship with personal creatures, a story of creation, fall, covenant, redemption, and consummation that makes no sense whatsoever unless the God at its center is genuinely, irreducibly personal.

Second, God is transcendent. He stands above and beyond His creation, not identified with it, not dependent upon it, not contained within it. He is the Creator; creation is His handiwork. He is the Potter; we are the clay. The infinite qualitative distinction between the Creator and the creature, which we established in our prolegomenal lessons, is the bedrock of biblical theism and the fatal flaw of every view that collapses it.

Third, God is immanent. He is not a distant deity who wound up the universe and retired to a safe remove from its operations. He sustains all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:27). He fills heaven and earth (Jeremiah 23:24). Biblical theism holds divine transcendence and divine immanence together in a tension that no rival view succeeds in maintaining: God is infinitely above His creation and intimately near to every creature within it.

Fourth, God is sovereign. He governs all things, all nations, all events, all human hearts, all the movements of history, according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). Nothing falls outside His governance. Nothing surprises Him. Nothing defeats His purposes. This sovereign governance is the ground of all Christian confidence, all Christian prayer, and all Christian witness. The God we are defending against the alternatives of this lesson is not a God who might exist or probably exists or exists as one option among many; He is the God who must exist, does exist, and whose existence is the precondition of the intelligibility of everything else.

II. Atheism: The Denial That Proves What It Denies

Atheism is the explicit denial of the existence of God, the claim that there is no divine Being, no Creator, no transcendent ground of existence, no moral Lawgiver, no personal Sovereign over the universe. In its hard form, atheism is the positive assertion that God does not exist. In its soft form (sometimes called weak atheism or mere non-belief), it is the absence of theistic belief without the positive assertion of God's non-existence. In either form, it represents the most radical alternative to biblical theism and the most direct challenge to the church's proclamation.

Scripture's response to atheism is not a philosophical counter-argument; it is a moral diagnosis. The most famous biblical address to atheism is the opening verse of Psalm 14:

"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.", Psalm 14:1, NASB 1995

The language of Psalm 14:1 requires careful handling, lest we misread it as a crude anti-intellectual dismissal of the atheist. The Hebrew word *nabal*, translated "fool," does not primarily denote intellectual deficiency; it denotes moral and spiritual rebellion, the

willful rejection of God's claim upon one's life. The Proverbs are clear that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), which means that the rejection of the LORD is the beginning of foolishness, not stupidity, but the fundamental disorientation of a life that has refused its proper telos. The *nabal* of Psalm 14 is not a man incapable of sophisticated argument; he may be a man of formidable intelligence. He is a man who has, in the deepest chamber of his will, said to the God who made him: "I will not have You govern me."

Furthermore, the fool's denial is said in the heart, not merely asserted with the lips. This is the territory of the *sensus divinitatis*, the inner domain where the knowledge of God is most immediately and inescapably present. To say in one's heart "There is no God" is not to reach an honest intellectual conclusion after carefully weighing the evidence; it is to attempt the suppression of a knowledge that is already there, inscribed by God Himself upon the inner man. The confession of atheism is, on the biblical account, a performative self-contradiction: it is the use of rational faculties, the invocation of logical laws, and the appeal to evidential standards, all of which presuppose the existence of the God whose existence is being denied, in the service of that denial.

This is the presuppositional critique of atheism at its most basic: the atheist cannot make his argument without borrowing from the theistic worldview he rejects. The laws of logic, the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of identity, the principle of excluded middle, are not physical objects discoverable in the material universe; they are immaterial, universal, and necessary truths that presuppose a rational, ordering Mind behind all things. The uniformity of nature, the assumption that the future will resemble the past, that the same physical laws that operate here operate everywhere, that scientific induction is valid, is not something that can be derived from the materialist's own worldview; it is a faith commitment that only makes sense if a sovereign, rational, consistent God sustains the order of the universe. Without the God of Scripture, as Van Til relentlessly pressed, intelligibility itself collapses, and the atheist's very argument against God becomes an unwitting testimony to God's existence.

III. Agnosticism: The Inexcusable Claim of Ignorance

If atheism is the denial of God's existence, agnosticism is the suspension of judgment, the claim that the existence of God cannot be known, and that therefore neither affirmation nor denial is the intellectually responsible position. The term was coined by Thomas Huxley in 1869, who used it to describe his own position: he was not an atheist (he did not positively deny God), but neither was he a theist (he did not affirm God). He simply did not know, and he regarded the honest acknowledgment of that ignorance as the most rational response to the question.

At first glance, agnosticism may seem like the most intellectually humble and epistemically responsible of all positions on the question of God's existence. It refuses the overconfidence of both the theist and the atheist; it occupies the middle ground of honest uncertainty. But Romans 1 will not allow agnosticism its self-congratulatory modesty. Paul's argument is not that human beings have access to some evidence about God and might reasonably conclude either that He exists or that He does not. His argument is that the existence of God, His eternal power and divine nature, has been

“clearly seen” (*kathoratai*, Romans 1:20) by all people through the created order, and that this knowledge is sufficient to render all people “without excuse.”

On Paul’s account, the agnostic’s claim of ignorance is not an honest reflection of the epistemic situation; it is itself a form of suppression. The light is not too dim to see; the agnostic has pulled the curtain. The evidence is not insufficient; the agnostic has chosen not to follow it to its conclusion. The knowledge of God is not unavailable; it has been made “evident within” every human being (Romans 1:19). Agnosticism is, in Scripture’s diagnosis, not the suspension of judgment in the face of genuine uncertainty, but the willful refusal to render a judgment that the available evidence overwhelmingly demands.

There is also an internal incoherence in the agnostic position that is worth pressing in apologetic conversations. If the agnostic claims that the existence of God cannot be known, he is making a very strong epistemological claim, the claim to know that God’s existence falls outside the range of human knowledge. But how does he know that? On what grounds can he be confident that the human cognitive apparatus is incapable of arriving at a justified belief in God’s existence? The claim “I cannot know whether God exists” is itself a theological claim, and a remarkably confident one. It presupposes a comprehensive knowledge of the limits of human knowing that the agnostic does not and cannot possess. The agnostic who is genuinely committed to epistemic humility must acknowledge the possibility that God’s existence is knowable, and that possibility, pressed honestly, opens the door to the very inquiry he has been avoiding.

IV. Deism: The God Who Made the Clock and Wound It Up and Left

Deism is a position that occupied a prominent place in Enlightenment intellectual culture, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that has never entirely disappeared from the religious landscape of Western civilization. The deist affirms that God exists and that He created the universe, but denies that He is personally, providentially, and continuously involved in its ongoing operations. God is, on the deist account, the great Watchmaker who designed and constructed the cosmic timepiece, wound it up at the moment of creation, and has since withdrawn to a respectful distance, allowing it to run according to the natural laws He built into it. Prayer is pointless because God does not intervene in natural processes. Miracles are impossible because God has committed Himself to a policy of non-interference. The Bible is at best a record of human religious reflection about God, not the inspired verbal address of a God who speaks.

Deism has a surface plausibility because it affirms both the existence of God (against atheism) and the intelligibility of the natural order (against what it regards as the superstitious credulity of orthodox theism). It was deeply attractive to many of the intellectual luminaries of the American founding, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and others held positions that approximated deism, and it continues to exercise influence wherever people are willing to acknowledge some kind of Creator-God but unwilling to submit to the sovereign, intervening, personally demanding God of Scripture.

The biblical refutation of deism is comprehensive and devastating. The entire doctrine of providence, which we will study in detail in Unit 9, stands as a direct and irreducible contradiction of the deist's absentee God. The Scripture from beginning to end depicts a God who is continuously, actively, and personally involved in the governance of His creation: who sends rain and drought (Deuteronomy 28:12, 24), who raises up and brings down kings (Daniel 4:34–35), who numbers the hairs of our head and attends the fall of every sparrow (Matthew 10:29–30), who works all things together for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28), who sustains all things by the word of His power at every moment (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17).

The deist's God is also, in the end, a contradiction in terms. A God who created a universe but has no ongoing relationship with it has, in effect, created something outside of and independent of Himself, a kind of secondary absolute that runs by its own laws without any reference to its Maker. But the God of Scripture is the God "in whom we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28, NASB 1995), the One upon whom every created thing depends for every moment of its continued being. If God were to withdraw His sustaining presence from the universe for one instant, it would not merely run down; it would cease to exist. The deist's watchmaker God is not the God of the Bible; he is a philosophical projection, and a philosophically unstable one.

V. Pantheism: When God and the Universe Become One

If deism errs by placing God at an infinite remove from His creation, pantheism errs in the opposite direction by identifying God with His creation. Pantheism, from the Greek *pan* (all) and *theos* (God), is the view that God is the universe and the universe is God; that "God" is simply another name for the totality of all that exists. The divine is not a distinct Person standing over against creation; it is the impersonal Ground of Being that pervades and constitutes all things. In its Eastern forms, pantheism appears in various strands of Hinduism and in much of Buddhist philosophy. In its Western forms, it appears in the philosophy of Spinoza, in the Romantic celebration of nature as divine, and in the diffuse spirituality of the contemporary New Age movement.

Pantheism's appeal is not difficult to understand. It seems to take seriously the presence of God in all things, to find the divine not only in temples and sacred texts but in forests and sunsets, in the rhythm of the seasons and the mystery of human consciousness. It resonates with the deep human intuition that the world is not a merely mechanical assemblage of matter in motion but is charged with a significance that transcends the physical. And it avoids what some find troubling in orthodox theism: the apparent arbitrariness of a God who stands completely outside His creation and governs it by His own sovereign will.

But pantheism, for all its spiritual appeal, is both philosophically incoherent and biblically impossible. Philosophically, pantheism cannot account for the distinctions that make experience possible: the distinction between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between the self and the other. If everything is God and God is everything, then good and evil are both divine, truth and falsehood are both divine, and there is ultimately nothing to distinguish them. The mystic who insists that all distinctions are illusory and that the self is identical with the divine has not achieved a profound spiritual

insight; he has destroyed the very framework within which insight, spiritual or otherwise, is possible.

Biblically, pantheism is refuted at the very first verse of Scripture: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1, NASB 1995). The Creator-creature distinction, the fundamental ontological divide between the One who creates and the thing that is created, is the bedrock presupposition of the entire biblical narrative. God is not the world; He made the world. The world is not God; it is His handiwork, entirely dependent upon Him, entirely distinct from Him in being, and entirely subject to His sovereign governance. The worship of nature, the identification of the divine with the created, is precisely what Paul identifies in Romans 1:23 as the archetypal form of idolatry: the exchange of “the glory of the incorruptible God” for “an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

VI. Polytheism and Idolatry: The Exchange of Glory

Polytheism, the belief in many gods, was the dominant religious framework of the ancient world in which both the Old and New Testaments were written, and it remains a living reality for hundreds of millions of people today across various religious traditions. The gods of Greece and Rome, the pantheons of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the deities of Hindu tradition and the spirit world of animistic religions, all represent the polytheistic impulse: the multiplication of divine beings who preside over different domains of life and nature, who compete with one another, who interact with human beings in ways both benevolent and capricious, and who demand worship and appeasement.

The Scripture’s response to polytheism is total and absolute. The LORD God of Israel is not one deity among many, not the patron deity of a particular nation competing in the divine marketplace for the loyalty of human beings. He is the only God, the maker of heaven and earth, before whom all the gods of the nations are no-gods, “nothings” (Hebrew: *elilim*, Psalm 96:5; 1 Corinthians 8:4–6). Isaiah 44 contains the most sustained and devastating biblical polemic against polytheism and idolatry, and it is worth quoting at length because of its incisiveness:

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.’”, Isaiah 44:6–8, NASB 1995

The LORD’s challenge to the gods of the nations in Isaiah 44 is the challenge of omniscience to ignorance: “Let them declare to them the things that are coming.” No god of the nations, no idol of wood or stone or silver or gold, can announce the future because no idol knows it. Only the God of Israel, who declares the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done (Isaiah 46:10), possesses the knowledge that belongs to genuine divinity. The gods are mute where the LORD speaks; the gods are blind where the LORD sees; the gods are powerless where the

LORD acts. They are, as Paul declares, “no gods by nature” (Galatians 4:8, NASB 1995).

But what makes idolatry so theologically significant in the biblical narrative is not merely that it is false; it is that it is, at its heart, a form of worship. Paul’s description of the fall into idolatry in Romans 1:21–25 is profoundly illuminating on this point:

“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures ... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”, Romans 1:21–23, 25, NASB 1995

Notice the verbs: they “exchanged” the glory of God for an image; they “worshiped and served” the creature. Idolatry is not the cessation of worship; it is the redirection of worship. Human beings are, by creation and by design, worshipping creatures. The *sensus divinitatis* is not merely a cognitive endowment; it is a doxological impulse, an inclination toward worship that is as native to the human soul as breathing is to the human body. When that impulse is not directed toward the true God, it does not disappear; it attaches itself to a substitute. The idol is never merely a stone or a concept; it is whatever a human being trusts in, lives for, finds his ultimate security and significance in, and sacrifices for. In this sense, as Calvin rightly observed, the human heart is an idol factory, ceaselessly productive in manufacturing substitutes for the God it was made to worship.

Modern polytheism rarely takes the form of temple worship to Zeus or Baal. It takes the form of the materialist who lives as if money, career, and comfort are the ultimate goods; the romantic who makes another human being the center of his existence; the nationalist who worships the nation; the hedonist who worships pleasure; the ideologue who worships a political vision. The idol factory has not closed; it has merely updated its product line. And the biblical response to every form of idolatry is the same: “I am the LORD your God ... You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:2–3, NASB 1995).

VII. The Presuppositional Response: The Impossibility of the Contrary

Having surveyed the major alternatives to biblical theism, atheism, agnosticism, deism, pantheism, and polytheism/idolatry, we are now in a position to state the comprehensive presuppositional response: every one of these alternatives is not merely false but self-defeating. Without the God of Scripture, intelligibility itself collapses. This is the claim at the heart of the Van Tillian presuppositional apologetic, and it is a claim with profound theological grounding in the biblical witness we have been examining.

Consider what the God of Scripture provides that no alternative worldview can provide. He provides the foundation for the laws of logic: the immaterial, universal, necessary laws of thought that govern all rational discourse presuppose an immaterial, universal, necessary Mind that grounds them. He provides the foundation for the uniformity of nature: the assumption that the cosmos operates according to consistent, discoverable

laws, the assumption upon which all science depends, presupposes a sovereign, rational, consistent God who sustains that uniformity moment by moment. He provides the foundation for objective moral values: the intuition that some things are genuinely and timelessly right and wrong presupposes a transcendent moral standard that can only be grounded in the character of a holy, personal God. He provides the foundation for the reliability of human cognition: the trust we place in our rational faculties as genuine truth-trackers rather than mere products of blind evolutionary processes presupposes a God who made those faculties for the purpose of knowing truth.

The presuppositional argument does not merely say that theism is more plausible than the alternatives, or that the evidence slightly favors the existence of God. It says that without God, there is no evidence, no argument, no logic, no science, no morality, no rationality, and therefore no atheism, no agnosticism, no deism, no pantheism, and no idolatry worthy of the name. The very act of arguing against God presupposes the existence of rational discourse, which presupposes the existence of the rational God whose existence the argument denies. The unbeliever, as Van Til put it, must sit in God's lap to slap His face.

This does not mean that the presuppositional argument alone is sufficient for apologetics. As we noted in Lesson 4, the arguments, whether classical or presuppositional, can confirm and expose, but they cannot save. The goal of the presuppositional critique is not to win a philosophical debate; it is to press the implanted knowledge of God into the open so that the gospel can do its proper work. We expose the self-defeating nature of the alternatives not to humiliate but to illumine, to strip away the intellectual scaffolding that allows a person to continue suppressing the truth, and to leave them standing before the God they have been fleeing, whose gospel is the only answer to the need that suppression creates.

VIII. The Pastoral Implication: Every False View of God Is Worship Misdirected

We close this lesson with what is, in many respects, its most important insight, an insight that transforms our posture toward those who hold false views of God from intellectual contempt to pastoral compassion: every false view of God is, at its root, an act of worship misdirected.

The atheist who has invested years of intellectual energy in the demolition of theism is not a person who has transcended the need to worship; he is a person who has redirected his doxological energies toward a substitute absolute, whether human reason, scientific naturalism, or personal autonomy. The agnostic who refuses to commit to the existence of God is not a person who has achieved genuine intellectual neutrality; he is a person who has made a god of epistemic self-sufficiency. The deist who acknowledges a Creator but refuses His involvement in personal history is not a person who has found a rational middle ground; he is a person who wants a God he can acknowledge without submitting to, a safe God, a harmless God, a God who makes no demands. The pantheist who identifies God with the universe is not a person who has transcended the distinction between the sacred and the secular; he is a person who has found a way to worship without accountability to a personal God. The idolater, whether

ancient or modern, is not a person who has given up on God; he is a person who has found a god he can control.

In every case, the underlying reality is the same: a human being made in the image of God, endowed with the *sensus divinitatis*, constitutionally oriented toward worship, has turned away from the true Object of worship and fastened upon a substitute. And in every case, the substitute, however sophisticated its philosophical dress, however sincere its devotion, will ultimately fail to satisfy the soul it was chosen to serve. For the human heart was made for God, and it is, as Augustine declared in the opening pages of his *Confessions*, restless until it rests in Him.

This pastoral insight should govern the entire tenor of our engagement with those who hold false views of God. We do not engage the atheist merely as an intellectual opponent to be defeated; we engage him as a fellow image-bearer fleeing the God who made him and loves him. We do not engage the pantheist merely as a philosophical error to be corrected; we engage her as a person whose sense of the divine significance of the world is not wrong but merely misdirected, who has rightly perceived that the universe is charged with meaning, but has attributed that charge to the creation rather than to the Creator who put it there. We engage every false view of God with the confidence that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, that the same God who wrote His knowledge on every human heart can also, by His Spirit, break through the suppression, illumine the darkness, and bring the fleeing sinner home.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Psalm 14:1

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.”

Romans 1:22–25

“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

Isaiah 44:6–8

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are

coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.”

Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Biblical Theism	The affirmation, grounded in the whole witness of Scripture, that one true God exists who is personal, transcendent, immanent, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, righteous, good, and sovereign. He is the specific, named God of the biblical narrative, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who stands in absolute distinction from all creation.
Atheism	The denial of the existence of God. In its hard form, the positive assertion that no God exists. In its soft form (weak atheism), the mere absence of theistic belief. Biblically diagnosed in Psalm 14:1 not as intellectual failure but as moral and spiritual rebellion, the willful suppression of the knowledge of God that is inscribed on every human heart.
Agnosticism	The claim that the existence of God cannot be known, and therefore that neither affirmation nor denial is the intellectually appropriate response. Coined by Thomas Huxley in 1869. Biblically refuted by Romans 1:19–20, which declares that God has made His existence “clearly seen” through creation, rendering all people “without excuse.”
Deism	The belief that God exists and created the universe but is not personally or providentially involved in its ongoing operations. God is conceived as a divine Watchmaker who designed and wound up the cosmic machine, then withdrew. Refuted by the biblical doctrine of providence (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17; Acts 17:28) and the entire narrative of Scripture.
Pantheism	The identification of God with the universe: the claim that “God” is simply another name for the totality of all that exists. God is the impersonal Ground of Being, not a personal Creator standing over against His creation. Refuted by Genesis 1:1 and the Creator-creature distinction that is the bedrock presupposition of all of Scripture.

Polytheism	The belief in many gods. The dominant religious framework of the ancient world in which both Testaments were written, and a living reality for hundreds of millions today. Refuted by the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), the prophetic polemic of Isaiah (44:6–8), and Paul’s declaration that the gods of the nations are “no gods by nature” (Galatians 4:8).
Idolatry	The worship of anything other than the living God, whether a physical image, a philosophical abstraction, or any person, desire, or value that functions as one’s ultimate trust and loyalty. Biblically understood as the redirection of the doxological impulse (which is native to every image-bearer) from the true God toward a substitute. Romans 1:23, 25 describes it as the “exchange” of God’s glory for a lie.
Nabal (נָבָל)	Hebrew word translated “fool” in Psalm 14:1. Does not primarily denote intellectual deficiency but moral and spiritual rebellion, the willful rejection of the LORD’s claim and governance over one’s life. The nabal is not a person incapable of argument but a person who has, in the depths of his will, refused to acknowledge the God he knows.
Presuppositional Apologetics	The apologetic method, associated with Cornelius Van Til, that argues for God’s existence by exposing the internal incoherence of all non-theistic worldviews. Without the God of Scripture, the laws of logic, the uniformity of nature, objective moral values, and the reliability of human cognition are all without ground. Every alternative to biblical theism is not merely false but self-defeating.
Creator-Creature Distinction	The fundamental ontological divide between God (the uncreated, self-existent, necessary Creator) and everything else (the created, contingent, dependent creature). The bedrock presupposition of biblical theism and the fatal flaw of pantheism, which collapses it. All genuine Christian theology is governed by this distinction.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the God of Scripture is not one religious option among many that fair-minded inquirers might reasonably choose from. He is the only true God, the ground of all reality, the One without whom nothing else, including the very act of denying Him, is possible. We must believe that biblical theism is not merely plausible or probable; it is the only worldview that can account for the intelligibility of the universe, the objectivity of morality, the reliability of reason, and the dignity of the human person. And we must believe that the alternatives surveyed in this lesson are not honest intellectual positions that deserve equal respect; they are, in the biblical diagnosis, forms of suppression, rebellion, and misdirected worship that can only be answered by the gospel of the God who is both the offense they are fleeing and the grace they desperately need.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The doctrine of the idol factory, the recognition that the human heart is constitutionally incapable of not worshipping, and that every false view of God represents worship misdirected rather than worship abandoned, should produce in us a profound compassion for those who are caught in the grip of these alternatives. We do not look at the sophisticated atheist with contempt, nor at the sincere pantheist with condescension, nor at the comfortable deist with impatience. We look at each of them as Augustine's restless hearts, created for a rest they have not found, worshipping with real devotion at altars that cannot satisfy. Let our engagement with false views of God always be animated by the compassion that comes from knowing that the God who is the answer to their restlessness is the same God who, in sovereign grace, found us when we were fleeing Him.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Identify the functional idols in your own life.** Before engaging idolatry in others, let this lesson search us. Calvin was right: the heart is an idol factory. What are the things in your own life that function as ultimate concerns, that you trust in, live for, and organize your life around in ways that compete with or displace God? The study of false views of God is not only apologetics; it is self-examination.
2. **Learn to diagnose the false view before engaging it.** When you encounter someone who denies or distorts God, learn to identify which alternative they are operating from before you respond. The response to an atheist is different from the response to a pantheist; the response to an agnostic is different from the response to a deist. Precision in diagnosis produces precision in engagement.
3. **Use the presuppositional critique as an opener, not a closer.** The goal of exposing the self-defeating nature of alternatives to biblical theism is not to win an argument but to remove intellectual cover, to press the suppressed knowledge of God into the open where the gospel can address it. Always move from the critique to the proclamation; never rest in the critique alone.
4. **Know the biblical polemic against idolatry.** Isaiah 44, Romans 1, and Psalm 115 are the primary biblical texts for engaging idolatry in all its forms. Know them. The Scripture's satirical treatment of idol-making in Isaiah 44:9–20, the man who uses half a log to warm himself and the other half to make a god, is one of the most incisive pieces of apologetic writing in the history of the world. Use it.
5. **Proclaim the God who is there.** Every engagement with false views of God must ultimately arrive at the proclamation of the true God, not as an abstract philosophical conclusion but as the living, personal, redeeming God who loved the world and gave His only Son. Paul on the Areopagus names the Unknown God and announces His resurrection (Acts 17:22–31). We must do the same: name Him, announce Him, and call people to repentance and faith in the God who is not far from each one of them.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: You may have friends, family members, or coworkers who hold one or more of the views described in this lesson. This lesson gives you both the theological understanding to grasp why those views fall short and the pastoral instinct to engage them with compassion rather than contempt. Remember: the goal is not to win the argument but to commend the God who is the answer to every restless heart.

For the pastor and teacher: The people in your congregation are surrounded by alternatives to biblical theism every day, in the media they consume, the universities their children attend, the conversations they have with colleagues and neighbors. They need to be equipped not merely with the affirmation that God exists, but with the biblical categories for understanding why the alternatives fail and why the God of Scripture alone can satisfy the deep hunger of the human soul. Preach and teach this doctrine with both rigor and pastoral warmth.

For the apologist: Paul's model in Acts 17 remains the gold standard: begin where your audience is (he quotes their own poets), press the implanted knowledge of God into clearer articulation (he names the Unknown God), expose the inadequacy of their alternatives (he refutes idolatry), and proclaim the specific, historical gospel (he announces the resurrection and the coming judgment). This lesson has given you the theological anatomy of the alternatives; now go and engage them in the power of the Spirit.

For the one who is spiritually adrift: If you are reading this lesson and find yourself resonating more with one of the alternatives than with biblical theism, if you have been functioning as a practical agnostic, or a deist who acknowledges God but keeps Him at a safe distance, or an idolater who has found his ultimate security in something other than the living God, let this be the occasion of return. The God this lesson defends is the God who, in the words of the prophet, says: "Return to Me ... and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3, NASB 1995). He is not far. He is not silent. And He is not done with you.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Which of the alternatives to biblical theism surveyed in this lesson, atheism, agnosticism, deism, pantheism, or polytheism/idolatry, do you encounter most frequently in your own cultural context? What form does it typically take in the conversations and relationships of your daily life?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Psalm 14:1–3. What does the Hebrew word *nabal* (fool) tell us about the nature of the fool's denial? What are the moral consequences described in verses 1–3 that flow from the rejection of God? What does this passage suggest about the connection between theology and ethics?

3. Read Romans 1:21–25. Identify the progression Paul describes: from knowing God, to refusing to honor Him, to futile speculation, to the exchange of His glory. What does this progression tell us about the relationship between suppressed theology and the proliferation of idolatry?
4. Read Isaiah 44:6–8 and then read Isaiah 44:9–20. What specific challenge does the LORD issue to rival gods in verses 6–8? What is the satirical point of Isaiah’s description of the idol-maker in verses 9–20? What makes the idol-maker’s error so tragic according to verse 20?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain why agnosticism, despite its apparent intellectual humility, is rendered “inexcusable” by the argument of Romans 1:18–21. What is the difference between honest intellectual uncertainty and the willful refusal to follow evidence to its conclusion?
6. What is the fatal philosophical flaw of pantheism? Why cannot the identification of God with the universe account for the distinctions, between good and evil, truth and falsehood, self and other, that make coherent experience possible?
7. Explain the insight that “every false view of God is worship misdirected.” How does this insight change the way we understand and engage those who hold false views? What does it reveal about the human soul that even atheism involves a kind of worship?
8. What does the presuppositional argument mean when it says that without the God of Scripture, “intelligibility itself collapses”? Give two specific examples of how the denial of the God of Scripture undermines the conditions necessary for rational thought, moral judgment, or scientific inquiry.

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Calvin taught that the human heart is an idol factory. In your own life, what are the things, relationships, achievements, possessions, securities, comforts, that most threaten to function as ultimate concerns in competition with God? How do you identify and repent of functional idolatry in your own heart?
10. Think of a specific person in your life who holds one of the false views surveyed in this lesson. How might the pastoral insight of this lesson, that he or she is a restless heart seeking rest in the wrong place, shape the tone, the approach, and the ultimate goal of your engagement with that person?
11. Isaiah 44:6–8 grounds the uniqueness and supremacy of God in His ability to declare the future. How does the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, particularly prophecies concerning Christ, serve as a live form of this argument in apologetic conversations today?
12. Deuteronomy 6:4 declares: “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.” As we close Unit 2 on the existence of God and prepare to move into Unit 3 on the names of God, reflect on the significance of the word “our” in this text. The God whose existence we have been defending is not merely a philosophical conclusion; He is the covenant God who has bound Himself to His people in love. How does this covenantal dimension of

the knowledge of God's existence transform our relationship to everything we have studied in this unit?

Prayer Focus

As we close Unit 2, our study of the existence of God, let us come before the LORD in the posture of Isaiah 44: as witnesses to the God who is first and last, who alone can declare the end from the beginning, beside whom there is no other God and no other Rock. Thank Him that He is not an abstraction or a philosophical conclusion but the living, personal, covenant-keeping God who has bound Himself to His people, who sent His Son to redeem them, and who by His Spirit has opened the eyes of the suppressed and the darkened and the fleeing, and brought them, brought us, home.

Pray for those in your life who are caught in one of the alternatives surveyed in this lesson, for the atheist who argues against the God whose existence he cannot escape, for the agnostic who has made a sanctuary of uncertainty, for the deist who has found a God he can acknowledge without bowing to, for the idolater who has built his life on a foundation that will not hold. Ask the God who is there, and who is not silent, to do what no argument can: break through the suppression, illumine the darkness, and call the restless hearts of your neighbors to the rest that is found only in Him. And ask Him to make you a faithful and compassionate instrument of that calling, for the glory of His great name.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

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