

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 1: PROLEGOMENA — KNOWING THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Lesson 3

How Should We Speak of God? — Theological Language

Analogy, Anthropomorphism, and the Limits of Human Language

Key Texts: Isaiah 55:8–9; Numbers 23:19; Hosea 11:9

Speaking Truly of the God Who Surpasses All Our Words

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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 our first two lessons we have established the twin foundations of Unit 1. In Lesson 1 we declared that the study of God is the highest pursuit of the human mind and the doxological crown of all knowledge. In Lesson 2 we navigated the great paradox at the heart of Theology Proper: the God who is incomprehensible has nonetheless made Himself genuinely and savingly known through the twin instruments of general and special revelation, illuminated in the soul by the Holy Spirit. We concluded by insisting that the goal of all this knowing is not mere information but covenantal communion, the yada—knowledge of Jeremiah 9:23–24 and the eternal-life knowledge of John 17:3.

But having affirmed that God can be known and that He has chosen to make Himself known, we now face a question that is at once deeply philosophical and intensely practical: When we speak of God, when we say that He is good, or wise, or loving, or wrathful, or that He “repented” of something, or that He has “hands” and “eyes”, what exactly are we doing? Do our words about God mean the same thing they mean when applied to creatures? If we say that God is “good,” does “good” mean what it means when we say a man is good? If we say God “sees,” does He see as we see? If we say He “repented,” did He change His mind in the way that human beings change theirs?

These are not idle philosophical puzzles. They are questions with enormous theological and pastoral stakes. Answered poorly, they either collapse into a rationalism that domesticates God by assuming our language maps onto Him with perfect precision, or they collapse into an agnosticism that abandons meaningful speech about God altogether. The Christian theological tradition, at its best, has navigated these twin dangers with remarkable precision, developing a doctrine of theological language that preserves both the truthfulness of Scripture’s speech about God and the transcendence of the God about whom Scripture speaks. In this third and final lesson of our prolegomenal unit, we take up this doctrine, the doctrine of how we rightly speak of the God who surpasses all our words.

I. The Problem of Religious Language: How Can Finite Words Describe an Infinite God?

The problem we are addressing in this lesson is ancient. The philosophers of Greece already felt its force. Xenophanes, writing in the sixth century BC, famously satirized anthropomorphic religion by observing that if horses and cattle could draw, they would depict gods with horse-like and cattle-like faces. His instinct was sound: the naïve projection of human attributes onto the divine is a form of idolatry of the imagination. The Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, and after him the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the Christian tradition, pressed the point to a more radical conclusion: if God is truly transcendent, then no positive predication about Him is possible at all. All human language, when applied to God, must be stripped of every positive content; only silence, or pure negation, can do justice to the infinite.

The problem from the Christian theological side is no less pressing. On the one hand, the Scripture is filled with positive declarations about God. He is declared to be good, wise, holy, righteous, loving, sovereign, faithful, merciful, and wrathful. He is said to see, to hear, to speak, to act, to remember, to forget, to rejoice, and to grieve. These are not hesitant suggestions; they are confident affirmations, spoken by the inspired authors of Scripture under the direct superintendence of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Lesson 2 established beyond dispute that God is incomprehensible, that His being infinitely exceeds the full grasp of any creaturely mind, and that the distance between the Creator and the creature is one of kind, not merely of degree. How do these two truths cohere? How can the same God who is unsearchable in His ways be described with confidence in human words?

The answer that the Christian theological tradition has developed, and which we will explore in this lesson, is neither the naive literalism that ignores the Creator-creature distinction, nor the thoroughgoing agnosticism that renders all positive speech about God meaningless. It is the doctrine of analogical predication, anchored in the doctrine of divine accommodation, and governed by the principled use of the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae*. These are not mere academic tools. They are the grammar of reverent theological speech, the means by which creatures made of dust may speak truly, if incompletely, of the God who made them.

II. The *Via Negativa*: Saying What God Is Not

The oldest and most persistent method of theological speech about God in the Christian tradition is the *via negativa*, or apophatic theology, the “way of negation,” the path of describing God by denying of Him what is characteristic of creaturely being. Rather than saying what God is, the *via negativa* specifies what God is not: not mortal, not visible, not mutable, not finite, not composite, not dependent, not created, not limited by time or space. The technical terms of classical theology that begin with the prefix “in-” or “im-” are almost all *via negativa* formulations: immortal (not subject to death), invisible (not perceptible by physical sight), immutable (not subject to change), impassible (not subject to involuntary passions from outside), infinite (not bounded or limited), incomprehensible (not fully graspable by creaturely minds), ineffable (not fully expressible in creaturely language).

The scriptural warrant for this approach is extensive. When Isaiah declares that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways not our ways (Isaiah 55:8–9), he is describing God by differentiation from the creature. When Paul declares that God “alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16, NASB 1995), he is stacking negations to convey the transcendent otherness of the divine being. When the Lord thunders from the whirlwind in Job 38–41, the cumulative force of His rhetorical questions is negative in form: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Have you entered into the springs of the sea? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades?” God is not what Job is. God is not what any creature is. This series of negations is not a counsel of ignorance; it is a school of awe.

The *via negativa* performs an indispensable function in theological speech. It guards against the idolatry of the imagination by constantly reminding the theologian that the God he is speaking of exceeds every positive description he can offer. No matter how accurate a statement about God may be, the reality of God is always more, always greater, always deeper, always more glorious, than the statement captures. The *via negativa* is the theological discipline of holding that “more” always before the mind, ensuring that our speech about God never collapses into an easy familiarity that forgets the infinite qualitative distance between the Creator and the creature.

At the same time, the *via negativa* alone is insufficient. A theology that consists entirely of negations tells us a great deal about what God is not, but gives us nothing to worship. If the *via negativa* is the whole of theology, the best we can say is that God is a kind of indeterminate, contentless Absolute, wholly unlike anything we know, about whom nothing positive can be affirmed. This is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, in its final form, the god of a sophisticated agnosticism. For this reason, the tradition has always insisted that the *via negativa* must be complemented by the *via eminentiae*.

III. The *Via Eminentiae*: Ascribing Perfections to God in the Highest Degree

The *via eminentiae*, or the “way of eminence,” is the second classical method of theological speech. Where the *via negativa* removes from God what is characteristic of creaturely limitation, the *via eminentiae* takes the positive perfections that we encounter in creaturely existence and attributes them to God in an infinitely elevated, transcendent degree. We observe goodness in a human being; we affirm that God is good, but good in a way that infinitely surpasses and transcends all creaturely goodness. We observe power in the created order; we affirm that God is powerful, but powerful in a way that infinitely exceeds all finite power. We observe knowledge and wisdom in created minds; we affirm that God is omniscient and all-wise, but with a knowledge and wisdom that utterly transcend the best creaturely analogues.

The *via eminentiae* is grounded in the conviction that creation, as the handiwork of God, bears the impress of the divine perfections. When we encounter genuine goodness, beauty, wisdom, or power in the creature, we are not encountering attributes that are foreign to the divine being; we are encountering finite, creaturely reflections of perfections that exist in God in their fullness, in their original, in their inexhaustible abundance. Thomas Aquinas, who developed the most sophisticated account of analogical language in the medieval tradition, expressed it this way: the perfections that we attribute to God pre-exist in Him “in a more excellent and higher way.” They are not foreign to Him; they are native to Him. They are not borrowed from the creature; they are lent by the Creator to the creature, and the creature’s participation in them is the basis on which we can speak of God using creaturely vocabulary.

The *via eminentiae* appears throughout the Scripture in the movement from the creaturely to the divine. The psalmist sees the mountains as strong; God is a stronghold more enduring than any mountain (Psalm 46:1). A human father has compassion on his children; God’s compassion is as high above the father’s as the heavens are above the

earth (Psalm 103:11–13). A shepherd cares for his flock; the LORD is the Shepherd who restores the soul and leads in paths of righteousness (Psalm 23:1–3). In each case, a creaturely perfection is taken up, intensified beyond measure, and ascribed to God, not as a foreign imposition but as the return to the original from which all creaturely instances derive. The *via eminentiae* is, in this sense, a form of theological praise: it takes what is best in the creature and offers it back to God as a doxological acknowledgment that He is the source and the summit of all perfection.

IV. Analogical Language: Neither Univocal Nor Equivocal but Truly Analogical

The *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae* together point toward the doctrine that has become the central affirmation of classical Christian theology regarding theological language: the doctrine of analogical predication. It is worth stating this doctrine carefully and precisely, because the failure to grasp it has been responsible for enormous theological confusion in both directions.

When we apply a word or concept to God, three possibilities present themselves. First, the word might be used univocally, with exactly the same meaning that it bears when applied to creatures. If “good” means precisely the same thing when applied to God as it does when applied to a virtuous man, then our language about God is univocal. This is the error of naive anthropomorphism: it collapses the Creator-creature distinction at the level of predication, implying that God and creatures share the same properties in the same mode. Second, the word might be used equivocally, with a meaning entirely different from what it bears when applied to creatures. If “good” when applied to God means something entirely unrelated to what it means when applied to a virtuous man, then our language is equivocal. This is the error of radical apophysis: it preserves the transcendence of God at the cost of all meaningful positive speech about Him, making theology, in the end, a discipline of eloquent silence.

The classical doctrine of analogical predication charts a principled course between these two errors. When we apply a word to God, we use it neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically: the word bears a genuine similarity of meaning between its creaturely and divine applications, but the similarity is one of proportion, not identity. God is “good” in a way that is genuinely similar to, though infinitely transcendent over, the creaturely goodness we know from experience. The word “good” applied to God is not a mere equivocation (it has real content); but neither is it a univocal identification (it is not goodness of the same kind and degree as creaturely goodness). It is an analogical predication: goodness as it exists in God, proportioned to the infinite divine nature, bears a genuine but transcendent resemblance to the creaturely goodness from which our concept is drawn.

The biblical foundation for analogical language lies in the Creator-creature relationship itself. Because creation is the handiwork of God, creaturely properties are genuine, if finite and derivative, reflections of divine properties. Because God has made man in His image (Genesis 1:26–27), human attributes, rationality, moral agency, relationality, love, justice, bear a genuine analogical resemblance to the divine attributes of which they are the creaturely image. This is why theological language is possible at all: not because we

have ascended to God by the power of our reason, but because God has descended to us in creation and, supremely, in Scripture, speaking to us in language calibrated to our creaturely capacity, using words drawn from our world to convey truths about His own infinite being.

V. Anthropomorphism in Scripture: When God Is Said to Have Hands, Eyes, or to Repent

Among the most striking features of biblical language about God is its pervasive use of anthropomorphism, the attribution to God of human bodily features and human psychological experiences. The Scripture speaks of God's hands, His arm, His eyes, His ears, His face, His nostrils, His mouth, and His feet. It speaks of God seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking, walking, sitting, rising, and resting. It speaks of God rejoicing, grieving, being angry, relenting, regretting, and being jealous. For the person approaching Scripture with unreflective literalism, these passages can become grounds for a crude corporeal theology that ascribes to God a physical form and human-like emotional volatility. For the person approaching Scripture with a sophisticated but overcorrecting rationalism, they become embarrassments to be explained away or reinterpreted into bland abstractions.

The doctrine of anthropomorphism charts a third way that takes both the language of Scripture and the doctrine of God with full seriousness. Anthropomorphic language in Scripture is the deliberate and inspired use of human and creaturely categories to convey genuine truths about God, truths that could not otherwise be communicated to human beings at all, without implying that God literally possesses a physical body or literally experiences human-like psychological vicissitudes. It is language that is accommodated, in Calvin's term, to the capacity of the receiver; and it is truthful precisely because it is accommodated.

Consider the most challenging of the anthropomorphic passages: those in which God is said to "repent" or "change His mind." In 1 Samuel 15:11, the LORD says: "I regret that I have made Saul king." And yet in the same chapter, the prophet Samuel declares: "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (1 Samuel 15:29, NASB 1995). The two statements stand side by side, and the tension is deliberate. The LORD's "regret" in verse 11 is not a statement about a change in His eternal decree; it is a phenomenological description of the divine response to Saul's faithlessness, expressed in terms suited to human understanding. The declaration of verse 29 is the corrective that prevents the reader from misunderstanding verse 11 as a statement of divine mutability or fickleness.

Numbers 23:19 provides one of the clearest biblical controls on the interpretation of such passages:

"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?",
Numbers 23:19, NASB 1995

The point is unambiguous: God does not repent in the way human beings repent. The human repentance of discovering that a past decision was mistaken, of experiencing

regret born of limited foresight, of genuinely altering a settled purpose in response to new information, none of this can be attributed to the omniscient, immutable God. When the Scripture uses the language of divine “repentance,” it is employing what theologians call anthropopathism, the attribution of human emotional states to God as an accommodated expression of the genuine relational and moral seriousness with which God responds to human sin and faithfulness.

Similarly, Hosea 11:9 provides a crucial hermeneutical key for reading anthropomorphic language in the prophets:

“I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”, Hosea 11:9, NASB 1995

The precise divine assertion, “I am God and not man”, functions as the hermeneutical corrective embedded within the passage itself. God’s compassion for Ephraim, described in the preceding verses in deeply personal and relational language (“I taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms”, Hosea 11:3), is genuine; but it is the compassion of God, not the compassion of a human father. It is infinitely purer, infinitely more steadfast, and infinitely more sovereign than any creaturely love. The anthropomorphic language communicates the reality; the divine self-identification corrects any misreading that would collapse God into the human.

VI. Calvin’s Doctrine of Accommodation: God “Lipses” to Speak to Us

No doctrine in the history of Christian theology has more illuminated the relationship between divine transcendence and scriptural anthropomorphism than John Calvin’s doctrine of divine accommodation. Calvin, the great sixteenth-century Reformer of Geneva, developed this doctrine with a consistency and a pastoral warmth that have made it one of the enduring contributions of Reformed theology to the broader Christian tradition. And at the heart of the doctrine is one of the most memorable and theologically suggestive images in all of Calvin’s writings: the image of God as a parent who “lipses”, who lisps, who speaks with the simplified speech of a nurse or parent addressing a young child.

The image appears in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in his discussion of the way in which God condescends to speak to human beings in Scripture. Calvin writes that when God’s majesty is too exalted for human capacity, God “accommodates” Himself to us: He does not speak to us as He speaks within the eternal life of the Trinity, in a mode suited to infinite minds; He speaks to us as a parent speaks to a very young child, using simplified language, familiar images, and human analogies. He “lipses”, He adjusts the infinite content of His self-knowledge to the finite capacity of His creature. This is not deception; it is grace. The parent who speaks simply to a child is not lying to the child; she is speaking the truth in a form the child can receive.

Calvin applies this principle throughout his biblical commentary with extraordinary exegetical discipline. When God is described as “repenting” in Genesis 6:6, Calvin does not conclude that God genuinely changed His decree; he concludes that the language is accommodated to human understanding of emotional response. When God is described

as “descending to see” Sodom in Genesis 18:21, Calvin does not conclude that God was spatially absent from Sodom until this moment; he concludes that the language accommodates God’s deliberate, personal engagement with human wickedness to the categories of human judicial investigation. When the Psalms speak of God’s “arm” and “hand,” Calvin does not postulate a divine body; he recognizes that power is expressed in Scripture through the bodily instrument of power that human beings know from daily life.

The doctrinal significance of Calvin’s accommodation principle is profound. It preserves the truthfulness of Scripture’s speech about God by insisting that accommodated language is genuinely true, not merely approximate or metaphorical in a way that obscures rather than reveals. God’s love, expressed in the language of a father’s compassion, is truly love, not a useful fiction invented to make an unintelligible reality vaguely accessible. At the same time, accommodation preserves the transcendence of God by insisting that the reality always infinitely exceeds the expression, that the love, the holiness, the power, and the wisdom of God are always more than the scriptural images that convey them. The images are windows, not walls; they open onto an infinite reality, not a finite one.

The doctrine of accommodation also has direct implications for the interpretation of Scripture. It means that biblical anthropomorphisms should be read as genuine theological communications about God, not dismissed as primitive mythological residue, as the higher critics have urged, and not pressed into crude literalism, as naive readers have sometimes done. They should be read as the inspired, gracious, perfectly calibrated speech of a God who knows exactly what His creatures need to hear in order to know Him truly, fear Him rightly, and love Him deeply. The God who “lipses” to speak to us is the same God whose speech, so calibrated and so condescended, is nevertheless the very Word of God, “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16, NASB 1995).

VII. The Theological Implications: Humility in Speech, Confidence in Truth

Having worked through the *via negativa*, the *via eminentiae*, the doctrine of analogical predication, the theology of anthropomorphism, and the principle of divine accommodation, we arrive at the theological and pastoral implications of the whole, the two great convictions that the doctrine of theological language leaves us with, held in creative tension with one another.

A. Humility in Our Speech About God

The first implication is epistemic and doxological humility. If our language about God is analogical and accommodated, if it genuinely conveys truth about God but always conveys less than the full reality, then the student of Theology Proper must cultivate a permanent posture of reverent reserve in theological speech. This is not agnosticism; it is not the refusal to make theological affirmations. It is the awareness that every affirmation we make about God, however carefully constructed and biblically grounded, is an ectypal representation of a reality that infinitely exceeds the representation.

The history of theological error is, in no small part, a history of forgetting this humility. Heresy frequently begins not with the denial of Scripture but with the over-confident extension of human logical categories into the being of God, the assumption that because something seems to follow logically from our language about God, it must be true of God in the literal and univocal sense. Arius pressed the language of divine “begetting” (applied to the Son) in a univocal, temporal direction, concluding that “there was a time when the Son was not.” The Nicene fathers rightly responded that the word “begotten” as applied to the eternal Son is an analogical, accommodated expression of an eternal divine relationship that utterly transcends creaturely generation. Humility in theological speech is not a concession to uncertainty; it is a form of faithfulness to the God who is always greater than our categories.

B. Confidence in the Truthfulness of His Self-Revelation

The second implication, held in equal force alongside the first, is confidence, genuine, robust, unashamed confidence in the truthfulness of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. Analogical language is not uncertain language. Accommodated speech is not misleading speech. When God tells us through the Scripture that He is holy, He means it, and the holiness He means is genuinely holiness, not a pleasant fiction. When He tells us that He loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), the love He declares is genuinely love, even if it is a love infinitely purer, more steadfast, and more sovereign than any love we have experienced in creaturely form.

This confidence is especially needed in the present moment of the church’s life. The postmodern challenge to theological language has insisted that all human language is culturally conditioned, perspectively limited, and incapable of reaching objective truth about anything, let alone about God. Against this corrosive skepticism, the doctrine of divine accommodation stands as a firm and principled answer: the language of Scripture is not the product of human religious imagination; it is the product of God’s own gracious condescension, calibrated by infinite wisdom to convey genuine truth to finite creatures. It is, as the Westminster Confession declares, the Word of God, given to be “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined.”

The student of Theology Proper thus inhabits a paradoxical but glorious position: he speaks humbly, knowing that the God he speaks of always exceeds his speech; and he speaks confidently, knowing that the God who gave him the words to speak has guaranteed their truthfulness. He is like the man who stands at the edge of the Grand Canyon, aware that no words can capture what he sees, and yet possessed of a vocabulary of awe, wonder, beauty, and magnitude that genuinely conveys something true about the scene before him. Our words about God are honest words, true as far as they go, and the God they describe is always greater still.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Isaiah 55:8–9

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Numbers 23:19

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

Hosea 11:9

“I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Via Negativa (Apophatic Theology)	Latin for “the negative way.” The theological method of describing God by negation, saying what God is not (not mortal, not finite, not changeable, not composite). It guards against anthropomorphism and preserves the transcendence of God, but must be complemented by positive speech about God to avoid empty agnosticism.
Via Eminentiae	Latin for “the way of eminence.” The theological method of attributing to God the positive perfections found in creatures, but in an infinitely elevated and transcendent degree. Where the via negativa removes creaturely limitations from God, the via eminentiae takes creaturely perfections and ascribes them to God as He possesses them in their highest and most perfect mode.
Univocal Predication	The use of a word with the exact same meaning when applied to God as when applied to creatures. Univocal predication erases the Creator-creature distinction at the level of language and implies that God and creatures share attributes in the same mode and degree. This is the error of naive anthropomorphism.
Equivocal Predication	The use of a word with a completely different meaning when applied to God than when applied to creatures. Equivocal predication

	preserves divine transcendence at the cost of meaningful speech about God; if our words mean something entirely different when applied to God, then they convey no genuine information about Him whatsoever.
Analogical Predication	The use of words about God that bear a genuine but transcendent similarity to their creaturely meaning. Analogical language is neither univocal (same meaning) nor equivocal (different meaning) but analogical (proportionally similar meaning). It is the classical Christian solution to the problem of theological language, preserving both the truthfulness and the transcendence of speech about God.
Anthropomorphism	The attribution to God of human bodily features (hands, eyes, face, arm) in Scripture. Anthropomorphisms are not crude literalisms implying that God has a physical body; they are inspired, accommodated expressions that convey genuine theological truths, God's power, attention, presence, and engagement, through imagery drawn from human experience.
Anthropopathism	The attribution to God of human emotional experiences or psychological states (repentance, grief, anger, jealousy) in Scripture. Like anthropomorphisms, anthropopathisms are accommodated expressions that convey genuine truths about God's relational and moral engagement with His creation, without implying that God experiences these states in the way finite, fallen creatures do.
Divine Accommodation	The gracious act of God whereby He condescends to reveal Himself in forms and language suited to the finite capacity of His creatures. Associated especially with John Calvin, who described God as "lipping" to speak to us as a parent speaks to a young child. Accommodation does not distort truth; it calibrates truth to the capacity of the receiver.
Apophatic Theology	From the Greek apophasis ("negation"). Synonymous with the via negativa; the theological approach that prioritizes negative statements about God as the most appropriate form of theological speech, given the infinite transcendence of the divine being over all creaturely categories and concepts.
Cataphatic Theology	From the Greek kataphasis ("affirmation"). The theological approach that affirms positive statements about God, asserting what God is rather than merely what He is not. Cataphatic theology must be governed by the principles of analogical predication and divine accommodation to avoid collapsing the Creator-creature distinction.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that when Scripture speaks of God, in all the richness and variety of its language, including its anthropomorphisms, its descriptions of divine emotion, and its lofty declarations of divine attributes, it is speaking truly. The language of Scripture is not mythological decoration to be peeled away from a purer philosophical core; it is the inspired, accommodated speech of God Himself, given to us as the primary instrument of our knowledge of Him. We must also believe that the reality of God always exceeds the language used to convey it, that no doctrine, no formula, no creed, however carefully constructed, is the full measure of the God it describes. Both convictions are essential: Scripture speaks truly, and God is always greater.

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

The doctrine of theological language, rightly grasped, should produce a very particular combination of awe and confidence. The awe comes from the recognition that the God we are speaking of infinitely exceeds our best speech about Him, that every time we read a psalm or a prophecy or an epistle, we are looking through a window into an infinite reality that no window can fully contain. The confidence comes from the recognition that the window is a real window, that the view through it is genuinely true, genuinely illuminating, and genuinely sufficient for knowing, loving, fearing, and trusting the God who gave it to us. Let these twin emotions, awe at the inexhaustible greatness of God, and confidence in the truthful sufficiency of His Word, accompany every session of theological study and every act of worship.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Read anthropomorphic passages with theological attention.** When you encounter language in Scripture that speaks of God's hands, eyes, repentance, or anger, do not flatten it into crude literalism or evacuate it of content through over-spiritualizing. Ask: What genuine truth about God is being communicated through this accommodated expression? What does this tell me about God's character, His relational engagement with His creation, His moral response to human sin and faithfulness?
2. **Use the key biblical correctives.** Numbers 23:19, Hosea 11:9, Isaiah 55:8–9, and 1 Samuel 15:29 are among the passages that Scripture itself provides to govern the interpretation of anthropomorphic language. Memorize them. They are the built-in hermeneutical controls that prevent both over-literalism and over-spiritualization.
3. **Practice theological humility in conversation.** When you discuss theology with others, in small groups, in personal conversations, in teaching, cultivate the habit of speaking confidently about what Scripture clearly teaches while acknowledging the limits of our creaturely understanding. There is a difference between "I know this is what Scripture says" and "I fully comprehend what this truth means in the infinite life of God." Both statements may be true simultaneously.
4. **Let the via negativa deepen your worship.** The practice of meditating on what God is not, not limited, not mortal, not changeable, not dependent, not surprised, not defeated, is one of the oldest and most powerful disciplines of theological

devotion. Try spending time in prayer simply working through the negations, each one a window into the infinite transcendence of the God you worship.

5. **Let accommodation deepen your love for Scripture.** The doctrine of divine accommodation means that every page of Scripture is a love letter, the infinite God stooping to speak to finite creatures in language calibrated to their capacity, at infinite condescension and with infinite wisdom. When you open your Bible, you are not merely consulting a theological reference. You are receiving the speech of a God who has “liped” to speak to you, because He loves you and wants you to know Him.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: You may have wondered, reading the Bible, how to make sense of passages where God seems to change His mind or act in very human-like ways. This lesson gives you the tools to read those passages faithfully: as the genuine, accommodated speech of the transcendent God, who has stooped to speak to you in terms you can understand, without compromising one word of His truth.

For the teacher and preacher: The doctrine of theological language is the grammar of expository preaching. Every time you stand to expound a text, you are handling accommodated divine speech, language given by God to convey infinite truth through finite words. Handle it with the reverence it deserves, the precision it demands, and the pastoral warmth it invites.

For the apologist: The postmodern challenge to religious language, the claim that all language about God is merely culturally conditioned projection, is not a new problem. The Christian tradition has a robust and principled answer in the doctrines of analogical predication and divine accommodation. God’s speech about Himself in Scripture is not our projection; it is His condescension. We do not invent the language; we receive it.

For the one who is suffering: The anthropomorphic language of Scripture is not a poetic luxury; it is a pastoral necessity. When the psalmist cries “Awake, O Lord! Why do You sleep?” (Psalm 44:23, NASB 1995), he is not making a literal claim about divine slumber; he is using accommodated language to bring his deepest anguish before the God who is present, attentive, and engaged. The anthropomorphic language of the Psalms is the language of prayer, the language of creatures who have been given words by God Himself to address Him in the midst of their deepest need. Use it.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Have you ever struggled with a passage in Scripture where God seems to act or speak in a very human-like way, changing His mind, expressing regret, or being described with physical features? How did you handle that passage? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Isaiah 55:8–9. What specific comparison does God use to describe the distance between His ways and human ways? What does this tell us about the relationship between divine and human thought?

3. Read Numbers 23:19. What two specific human characteristics does God deny of Himself in this verse? What is the context of the passage, and why is it significant that these words come through Balaam?

4. Read Hosea 11:1–9. Make a list of the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic expressions used to describe God in verses 1–8. Then read verse 9. What function does God's self-identification in verse 9 serve within the passage?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the difference between univocal, equivocal, and analogical predication. Why are both univocal and equivocal predication inadequate for theological language, and how does analogical predication offer a principled solution?

6. What is the *via negativa* and what does it contribute to Theology Proper? What is its limitation, and why must it be supplemented by the *via eminentiae*?

7. What is divine accommodation? How does Calvin's image of God "liping" to speak to us illuminate both the truthfulness and the limitations of scriptural language about God?

8. In 1 Samuel 15, God is said to "regret" making Saul king (v. 11), and yet Samuel declares that God "will not change His mind" (v. 29). How do you reconcile these two statements? What does this passage teach us about anthropopathic language in Scripture?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. How does the doctrine of divine accommodation change the way you read and receive Scripture? In what ways might it deepen your love for the Bible and your sense of the gracious condescension it represents?

10. The lesson argues for holding together humility (our speech about God is always less than the reality) and confidence (our speech about God is genuinely true). In your own theological conversations and personal devotion, which of these do you tend to neglect? What would it look like to hold both more consistently?

11. How might the *via negativa*, meditating on what God is not, enrich your personal prayer and worship? Try writing a short prayer that makes use of negative predication to approach the transcendence of God.

12. As we conclude Unit 1 (Prolegomena), reflect on the three lessons as a whole. How have the doctrines of divine knowability (Lesson 2) and theological language (Lesson 3) built upon and deepened the foundation laid in Lesson 1? What is the single most important insight you are carrying into the rest of this series?

Prayer Focus

As we close Unit 1, the prolegomenal foundation of our entire Theology Proper series, let us come before God in prayer with the double posture that this unit has formed in us: humility before the God who infinitely exceeds all our words, and confidence in the God who has graciously given us words that are truly His own. Thank Him for the gift of Scripture, for the condescension by which the infinite God has “liped” to speak to creatures of dust in language they can receive and believe and love. Thank Him that His accommodated speech is not diminished speech; it is the very Word of God, living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.

Ask the Lord to guard your theological speech throughout this series, to keep you from the twin errors of crass literalism that domesticates God and sophisticated agnosticism that silences Him. Ask Him to give you the tongue of the prophet who declared: “The LORD God has given me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word” (Isaiah 50:4, NASB 1995). May our speech about God be true, reverential, and life-giving, always tethered to the Word He has given, and always pointing beyond itself to the God who is always greater still.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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