

The Incomprehensibility of God

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COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Paul's letters and prayers demonstrate that his priority is for Christians to increase in knowledge. Although it leads to other things that he also values, spiritual knowledge – or theology, which is just a formal term for the same thing – comes first with the apostle (1:28-29). Here he writes, "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9). Or, as he writes to the Ephesians, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17). And to the Philippians he says, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9-10).

Wisdom, knowledge, insight, and the like, are necessary and foundational to spiritual development. Without them, it is impossible to grasp "his will," to "know him better," to "discern what is best," and to "be pure and blameless until the day of Christ." Therefore, it is self-contradictory to claim, "I may not know much about the Bible, but I know God," or even, "I may not know much theology, but I know a lot about God."

This biblical emphasis on wisdom and knowledge does not limit spiritual development to only a small number of Christians. Now, there are indeed those who practice a form of elitism – they would rule a person's theology or ministry illegitimate because he has not earned a certain degree from a certain seminary, or because he does not interact with a certain theologian, or because he does not write for a scholarly audience. These are people who would criticize a book not because it lacks truth or zeal, but because it does not cite the important scholars in its footnotes. In any case, elitists are usually not the spiritual elite at all, but they are incompetent cowards and hypocrites. And this is why they would not criticize the same point in another writer if he is famous or idolized enough so that their jealousy and cynicism would only backfire against them.

These elitists are the spiritual descendents of the Pharisees, and they are very widespread. They are fond of asking, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Matthew 21:23), when in fact their own authority comes from one another. As with the Pharisees, their appeal is made not to Christ but to human idols and traditions. They would condemn someone for following the biblical practice of name-calling, but they do not hesitate to practice the idolatry of constant name-dropping. Their wisdom is not pure and spiritual, but demonic. By sheer clout rather than reason, they attempt to intimidate Christians into submission. They are not to be feared, but resisted, mocked, and despised.

Scripture does not condone elitism. It does not exclude anyone because of worldly standards or human traditions. Spiritual wisdom is available to every Christian who asks God for it. Here Paul prays for all the believers at Colosse, that all of them would receive "spiritual wisdom and understanding." James writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5), although he says this requires faith and patience. At any rate, this wisdom leads to humility and good deeds (James 3:13), whereas the demonic wisdom of the unbelievers and the elitists exhibits envy and selfish ambition (James 3:14), and often a lust for power, control, and admiration.

The good news is that the spiritual wisdom that is necessary to develop as a believer, and to grow in faith, love, and hope, is available to every Christian through the means God has provided, such as prayer and study. But this also removes any excuse from the believer for spiritual and theological ignorance. A lack of formal education is no excuse, since spiritual wisdom comes from God and not from man.

God's promise in Scripture, that he will pour out his wisdom upon those who ask, is more than sufficient to overcome any hindrance that seems to be present due to the lack of academic training. To deny this is also to deny the power and the promise of God. On the other hand, there are those who take pride in going without a formal education, and at the same time make no effort to pursue wisdom and knowledge through prayer and study. This is not spirituality, but self-righteous delusion. The point is, whether or not one has received a formal education or any training facilitated by man, true wisdom comes from God, through his appointed means, and it leads not to elitism, but humility and service with great boldness.

Then, Paul continues, "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work" (1:10). The Bible teaches a strong connection between true wisdom and holy conduct. For example, the verses that we cited from Paul's letter to the Philippians say that we are to abound "in knowledge and depth of insight" so that we may be "pure and blameless." Our passage speaks of being filled with "the knowledge of his will." God's "will" in such a context denotes his precepts and not his decrees, that is, the morality that he has defined, and not the reality that he has determined. A strong and growing believer, therefore, is one who is learning and obeying God's will, or the teachings and precepts of the Bible.

There are three observations that we can make in connection with this. The first two are two sides of the same issue, and the third one will bring us to a separate discussion.

First, Paul prays that the believers would receive spiritual wisdom *with the intent* that this will also produce good works. The natural fruit of godly wisdom is a godly life, because this wisdom has within it the knowledge that defines godliness, the understanding that this is the way one ought to follow, and the insight to agree with all that God has revealed. So true wisdom leads to godly conduct, but what appears to be godly conduct is only such if it is a product of wisdom from God. An outward conformity to a precept of God that is based on an evil motive or a false understanding is not godly at all. The conformity in this case is incidental and not intentional. Moreover, a godly life is not characterized by altruism alone, but also endurance, patience, joy, and thanksgiving.

The first point is probably agreeable to most and is widely emphasized, but in the second point I must defy a common teaching. This is the idea that if knowledge does not lead to good works, then the knowledge is worthless, and if one's theology does not produce holiness, then the theology is defective. Along with this comes the assertion that knowledge is *necessarily* tied to godliness, and that the sole purpose of theology is to produce a godly life. (There are variations of this teaching, but the basic idea is the same.) However, the Bible does not teach this.

The above is often asserted on the basis of passages like Colossians 1:9-14, in which Paul indeed requests spiritual wisdom for his readers *so that* they will "bear fruit in every good work." But this is a false inference and a misuse of the passage. Contrary to the popular teaching, this relationship does not hold in the same way when it is reversed – that theology is intended to produce godliness does not render the theology worthless when there is no godliness. There is no need for detailed explanation. The idea is simply absent from the passage.

Even 1 Corinthians 13 does not support the teaching. There Paul says, "If I...can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing." He does not say that the knowledge is nothing or that the ability to fathom it is nothing, but that *the person* who does not have love is nothing. Theology is a revelation of the mind of God, and as such it possesses intrinsic value, so that to denigrate it is akin to blasphemy, if it is not already. When there is sound theology but no sound conduct, let us denigrate the person – *he* is worthless and defective – and not the theology.

Third, Paul prays for the Christians to be "*filled* with the knowledge of his will in *all* spiritual wisdom and understanding" (ESV). Unlike many believers, who exhibit either feigned humility or genuine unbelief, the apostle asks for his readers to be *full* of knowledge in *all* wisdom. He requests for them the maximum – the fullness – both in terms of the nature of the knowledge and their capacity to contain and grasp it.

Of course, even our maximum has a limit (1 Corinthians 13:12), but the apostle sets this limit far, *far* beyond those who exalt the doctrine of our "finite human mind" more than the generosity and promise of God (James 1:5), and his power in conversion. This

fullness of all wisdom is extensive enough that, if attained, enables us to be "*fully* pleasing to him, bearing fruit in *every* good work" (Colossians 1:9-10), serving him with "*all* power" and "*all* endurance" (v. 11). Paul's prayer is for fullness in knowledge, holiness, and power. Since this prayer is written under divine inspiration, even if we do not attain to such fullness, we must never suggest that it is impossible in principle.

This biblical teaching requires us to revise some of the traditional theological formulations that erroneously exalt the doctrines of human finitude and depravity above the doctrines of revelation and salvation. Why we do not attain or receive is one issue, but what there is to attain or receive is another. We must not reduce the grace of God and the work of Christ to the level of our failure and unbelief. Paul says that God's gift is greater than man's sin:

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:15-17)

Since the present discussion concerns the fullness of spiritual knowledge, it is appropriate to consider the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God in relation to what is said above. Some courses in dogmatics *begin* their presentation of the divine attributes with the incomprehensibility of God, and in a manner that sets a pessimistic tone for the entire theological enterprise. This is contrary to the biblical pattern.

Consider the example of Romans 11:33-35, a passage often cited in relation to God's incomprehensibility: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" It is an abuse of the passage to make it an absolute reference point, as if it stands alone in Scripture, or to make it the starting point of our theology. This is because when we consider the passage in context, we notice that it comes at the *conclusion* of a lengthy and extensive doctrinal section in which Paul expounds on the full range of Christian theology, including divine creation, human depravity, present and future judgment, the federal headship of Adam in sin, the vicarious atonement of Christ in redemption, justification by faith (and not works), sanctification by the Spirit, predestination (election and reprobation), and more. By Romans 11:33, Paul has resolved *every* question he has raised, including those topics that many theologians insist on calling mysteries and paradoxes, even in defiance against Scripture, such as God's purpose and justice in election (Romans 9), and his sovereign decrees (Romans 10-11).

Charles Hodge thinks that the passage asserts "the incomprehensible character and infinite excellence of the divine nature and dispensations," and that "We can only wonder and adore. We can never understand."¹ However, this is not at all what the passage suggests. Whether we are considering the immediate context of Romans 11 and Romans 9-11, or all the previous materials in Romans 1-11, what exactly is it that we do not understand? What is it that Paul has not explained? He has addressed and resolved all the issues that he raised with full knowledge and confidence.

Whether we understand Paul is another issue – I say that we can, but right now this is not our topic. And if we do not understand Paul, we still cannot attribute this to God's incomprehensibility, since Paul seems to have no problem in understanding the things that he writes, so that it is not impossible in principle to understand all that he expounds in the letter. Now if Hodge means that God cannot be "fully comprehended,"² then we might agree (nevertheless, with the qualifications that we shall discuss later), but certainly it is wrong to say that "We can *only* wonder and adore. We can *never* understand." This is not what happens in Romans. In Romans we wonder and adore *because* we have understood Romans 1-11 – all of it.

Let us consider Romans 11:33-35 in its immediate context. He writes in verse 25, "I want you to understand this mystery" (ESV). Our purpose does not require us to consider the mystery itself, but only that Paul wants his readers to *understand* what he calls a mystery. As with other instances in which he uses the word, mystery does not refer to something that is intellectually unattainable in the technical sense, as in how calculus might elude an infant. Rather, a mystery is something that we can understand but, at least for a period of time, has not been told or explained to us.

I could think of a number between 1 and 100,000, and as long as I refuse to reveal it, it would remain a "mystery" to you. But you would have no difficulty understanding it if I were to tell you the number. Mystery in Scripture does not indicate something that we cannot understand because of our limited comprehension, but something that we cannot discover unless conveyed and explained to us by revelation. Then, we can understand it, in many cases, without any difficulty. So Romans 11:33-35 could be expressing a sense of appreciation and wonderment at what Paul has just explained and what we have just understood (whether in Romans 11, 9-11, or all of 1-11). But he has left no question unanswered for 11:33-35 to express an inability to discover or understand anything.

In particular, consider 11:34, which comes from Isaiah 40:13. Paul also cites the verse in 1 Corinthians 2:16. But right after it he adds, "But we have the mind of Christ." And in verse 12, he writes, "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." His point is that we cannot know God and his ways apart from his Word and his Spirit (1:21), but because he has given us his Word and his Spirit, we do understand – quite well, in fact (2:6-10, 13-16), because "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (2:10).

¹ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 378.

² *Ibid.*

It is more than likely that Paul is making a similar point with Isaiah 40:13 in Romans 11, that is, not to say that we cannot understand, but to say that we can and we do, and at the same time to express wonder at what we have just understood. And as in 1 Corinthians 1-2, its use also conveys the assumption that we cannot understand God and his ways *without or beyond* what he has revealed – BUT, he has indeed revealed and explained to us all that Paul has written, and this includes most if not all the topics that theologians often call mysterious, paradoxical, and incomprehensible. Paul uses Isaiah 40:13 to stress the abundance of information revealed to believers and their potential to understand it, all of it.

Paul does not begin his letter to the Romans with God's incomprehensibility, but by calling attention to how much we already know about God – even as unbelievers attempt to suppress this knowledge – rather than how little we can know about him. In fact, for many people, his view of our knowledge is too optimistic for comfort. He declares that even unbelievers cannot help but know about this God, including his power and wisdom in creation (Romans 1). Even some of his moral principles are innate in man (Romans 2). Elsewhere unbelievers are rightly said to be ignorant of God, since they suppress what they know about him, and they do not know him in the sense of having a positive relationship with him. Right now the point is that Paul does not begin his letter – or for that matter, any of his presentations – with God's incomprehensibility. But we find that he often begins with God's knowability, especially where Christians are concerned – that they can and do know God, and that they can and do possess extensive and accurate knowledge about him.

He writes in 1 Corinthians 1:21, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." God cannot be discovered or understood through human effort alone, apart from revelation. God reveals himself through the gospel, which saves those who believe. Unbelievers indeed possess an innate knowledge of God, a knowledge that God placed in them. They did not obtain it by their own human wisdom. And they are indeed so dull that many of them will deny this knowledge, even as the assumptions in their speech and conduct betray the contrary. This universal knowledge is sufficient to condemn them, but insufficient to enlighten them to the truth and produce faith toward Christ.

Our main focus, however, is on how God's incomprehensibility applies to Christians. And we find that even before 1:21, at the very beginning of the letter, Paul says, "For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you" (1 Corinthians 1:5-6). Then, at the end of the second chapter, after citing Isaiah 40:13, a verse often used to assert God's incomprehensibility, he adds, "*But* we have the mind of Christ" (2:16). All of this – that although unbelievers know about him, they deny him, but that believers know him through his self-revelation – is consistent with what we have said about Romans 1-2 and 11.

We take another example from Paul's speech to the Greeks on Mars Hill, as recorded in Acts 17. There he begins by a confident assertion of his own knowledge of God in contrast to the ignorance of the non-Christians (v. 23). The rest of his speech bears a remarkable resemblance to many of our dogmatics in both outline and content.³ We can multiply examples. The letter to the Hebrews begins by calling attention to God's verbal revelation delivered through the prophets, and now even through the Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). Thus it begins with our extensive and increasingly clear database of spiritual knowledge, not human ignorance or divine incomprehensibility. And John begins his first letter by claiming physical contact with Christ, whom apart from sensation (Matthew 16:17; John 6:45; 1 Corinthians 2:9-10), he recognized as the Word of Life (1 John 1:1-3). Thus he begins with an assertion of direct knowledge and understanding, not with God's hiddenness or incomprehensibility.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof precedes his discussion of the attributes of God with a chapter on "The Knowability of God." But he begins this chapter as follows: "The Christian Church confesses on the one hand that God is the Incomprehensible One, but also on the other hand, that He can be known and that knowledge of Him is an absolute requisite unto salvation."⁴ The statement is acceptable as far as it goes, although the emphasis here reverses the pattern that Scripture exhibits when it addresses believers, who constitute Berkhof's primary audience.

He continues, "It recognizes the force of Zophar's question, 'Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?' Job 11:7." But this is a misuse of the verse. Who says that we are attempting to know God "by searching"? We have already acknowledged 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." We despair of knowing spiritual truth through our sinful efforts, but "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1:10), rendering Job 11:7 practically irrelevant in this context. We do not even try to do what that verse tells us we cannot do.

Then, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck begins his presentation of theology proper as follows:

Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics. To be sure, the term "mystery" in Scripture does not mean an abstract supernatural truth in the Roman Catholic sense. Yet Scripture is equally far removed from the idea that believers can grasp the revealed mysteries in a scientific sense. In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. In that sense it is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past

³ See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), p. 29.

all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the incomprehensible One.⁵

This probably sounds sober and pious to many people, but it asserts the opposite of the biblical pattern and emphasis. At least he raises the relevant point of the believer's understanding of revelation, and not an attempt to know God through his own effort. But to our disappointment, he says that the Christian can barely understand what is revealed. On the contrary, Jesus says, "I...will tell you plainly about my Father" (John 16:25) and Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). There is zero support in Scripture for the idea that we cannot, even in principle, understand something that God has revealed to us.

In fact, rephrasing Bavinck's paragraph in the opposite direction yields an accurate summary of the biblical view:

Understanding is the lifeblood of dogmatics. Scripture is far removed from the idea that believers cannot grasp the fullness of revelation. In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in Scripture is well-suited to the redeemed intellect. In that sense it is all understanding with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with the investigation of finite and sinful creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One, who has revealed himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the One who knows the human mind, and who has enlightened those who believe, and who has clearly revealed himself to them in a way that they can understand.

To begin the theological enterprise with ignorance and pessimism rather than a confident assertion of knowledge, even though we have received God's Word and God's Spirit, is to place ourselves in the position of the non-Christians. This is not humility, but an arrogant and rebellious denial of God's grace and of the work that he has performed in us.

The biblical pattern is to begin by God's knowability – not only that he is knowable, but that as Christians we do know him – and if it is to be mentioned at all, to conclude with God's incomprehensibility after *all* questions have been answered and resolved. The only acceptable reason to introduce this doctrine at the beginning is to subsume the topic under God's knowability, and then to use the doctrine to stress the fact that God has made himself knowable and known, especially to those who believe (1 Corinthians 1-2).⁶

The biblical doctrine is that we cannot know God by our own efforts and methods, but we know only what he reveals to us – that is, what he tells us. We cannot know and should not speculate beyond what he has revealed. God has revealed an abundance of information to us, much more than what many theologians are willing to acknowledge. This amount of information is sufficient to constitute a complete worldview that answers

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Two: God and Creation* (Baker Academic, 2004), p. 29.

⁶ This is what I have done in my *Systematic Theology*.

all necessary questions, and in a way that is explicit and consistent, without apparent or actual contradictions.

Theologians often present a different view concerning the actual extent of this revelation and the nature of our understanding of it. My judgment is that the usual proposals are false, and usually blasphemous, at least by implication.

First, there is the premature assertion, vehemently defended, that God has not revealed anything beyond what they have grasped. So some questions are said to be beyond revelation as we have it, when the truth is that the questions are beyond their own understanding or that the answers are beyond their willingness to accept. All this talk about the "finite human mind" amounts to measuring divine revelation by our human finitude. It is the very opposite of humility.

Second, there is the violent insistence that revelation as we have it contains numerous paradoxes and contradictions, and that only additional revelation, which we will not receive in this present life, will provide the necessary materials for understanding and reconciliation. This denial of the clarity of revelation and the effect of redemption is so essential to the theological thinking and ecclesiastical posturing of some theologians that they would even strive to defrock ministers who insist that God's revelation is understandable and self-consistent.

J. H. Thornwell concludes his lecture on "The Nature and Limits of Our Knowledge of God" as follows:

Our ignorance of the Infinite is the true solution of the most perplexing problems which encounter us at every step in the study of Divine truth. We have gained a great point when we have found out that they are really insoluble – that they contain one element which we cannot understand, and without which the whole must remain an inexplicable mystery. The doctrines of the Trinity, of the Incarnation, of the Prescience of God and the Liberty of Man, the Permission of the Fall, the Propagation of Original Sin, the Workings of Efficacious Grace, all these are facts which are clearly taught; as facts they can be readily accepted, but they defy all efforts to reduce them to science.⁷

He seems to say that if we cannot "reduce them to science," then they are "inexplicable." Is he indeed asserting this relationship? Is something either "science" or else inexplicable? Why? And what does he mean by "science"? Why should we reduce anything to "science"? We will not spend time on these questions. At this point, we need only to notice that he calls those doctrines he listed "inexplicable," and that they carry problems that are "insoluble."

⁷ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), p. 141-142.

First, the "problems" with all of these doctrines have been conclusively solved, often just by pointing out that there were no problems in the first place – they were invented by human tradition and philosophy.⁸ If Thornwell does not know or refuses to accept these solutions, that is his fault. But when he proposes that "ignorance" is the "solution" to all these problems, then we must protest that all of Scripture is against him both in its pattern and content. Scripture does not use ignorance as an excuse for believers or a defense against unbelievers. It does not admit to any internal incoherence, and it does not then appeal to either God's infinitude or man's finitude to "solve" the problem. When we follow Thornwell, who represents only one of many like him, we introduce confusion and false humility into Christians, and rather than exalting the truth of the gospel before unbelievers, we confirm them in their disbelief and irreverence.

In fact, to begin our consideration of the doctrine of God with his incomprehensibility, and to introduce pessimism for believers, is to model the pagan disposition to suppress the knowledge of God, perhaps even out of a similar motive, that is, to leave room for disbelief, disagreement, and disobedience against him. The difference is the starting point for the denial – unbelievers deny God at an earlier point – but the principle is identical. And indeed we find that God's incomprehensibility is often used as an excuse to reject God's answers to a number of doctrinal questions.

To insist that we cannot understand something when God has repeatedly explained it and answered all questions about it – for example, when it comes to the "problem" of evil – is just a polite way of saying that we reject God's revelation on the matter. It is an attempt to think like the devil but speak like a saint. And it is in this way that teachings on the incomprehensibility of God and the finitude of the human mind are, more often than not, used to display false humility and to disguise gross rebellion against God's explicit and thorough revelation.

Suppose there is a child whose parents understand how he processes information and provide him with detailed explanations and instructions, but he plugs up his ears and screams, "No! No! No! I do not understand! You are so wise and mature, so far beyond me, but I am just a child. I cannot understand what you are saying." There is no humility here; rather, he mocks his parents and despises their authority. He is an irksome and disobedient child who requires correction and discipline.

Now, is God infinitely greater than human parents, so that he is indeed too far beyond our grasp? But he is also infinitely more knowledgeable of the human mind, infinitely more capable of explaining himself, with an infinitely greater access to our souls by his Spirit. If we speak in faith and honesty, we will have to say that we can know God and his will much better than we can know our human parents. This may still not be very much, compared to all that there is to know about an *infinite* being. We can never know all of him, but we know our parents even less.

⁸ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin and Captive to Reason*.

Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:11-12). In ourselves, we have access to neither the mind of man nor the mind of God, but God has revealed his mind (not the mind of other men) to us by his Spirit. Scripture is consistently optimistic about *the Christians'* ability to know God. The traditional doctrine of God's incomprehensibility that teaches the opposite is outright damnable.

Critics might now say, "Ah, now he claims to have all the answers." Based on the pattern of their previous objections, we should anticipate this as a possible reaction. But this response would show once again how obsessed they are with personalities and with themselves. How much a particular Christian knows is irrelevant to a proper formulation of the doctrine. Our main concern has been the biblical position, or the principle of the issue. Also, throughout our discussion we have made it clear that this biblical optimism is applied to all Christians, although it is withheld from those who remain in unbelief. On the other hand, our critics and the theologians that they follow wish to impose their own limitations upon all believers, and even upon the content of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit.

In revising the traditional doctrine of God's incomprehensibility, we must also reconsider the terminology that is used and the category that is assumed. It is agreed that God is infinite, and therefore there is an infinite amount of information that could be known about him. And since we are finite, this means that we can never know all of God. In this sense, God is incomprehensible. It is not that we cannot understand anything about him at all, but that he can be known only as far as he has revealed himself.

Theologians fall into error, and I would say heresy and blasphemy, when they say that we cannot understand even God's written revelation. But they are often vague and inconsistent on this point. In any case, the important issue right now is to note that "incomprehensible" often means that we cannot understand *everything* about God, and not *anything* about God. And the doctrine is often introduced as an intrinsic characteristic of God's nature, or an attribute of God.

Regarding the terminology, the word "incomprehensible" could be misleading, since it can be, and often is, used in two different ways. The first definition in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, designated as archaic, is "having or subject to no limits." This definition is appropriate to the doctrine, since we indeed admit that we cannot know the *totality* of God *because* he is infinite. However, the second definition, not archaic, is "impossible to comprehend: unintelligible." This is not the idea that we wish to convey by the doctrine. There are indeed theologians who at times affirm that God is incomprehensible in this sense, but we have said enough about them by this point – Scripture exposes their false humility. God and his revelation are not unintelligible. Since the first definition is archaic, perhaps *Webster's New World Dictionary* is correct in reversing the order, so that its first definition for the word is "not comprehensible; that cannot be understood;

obscure or unintelligible." Again, we must not say that God and his revelation are incomprehensible in this sense.

The point is that the primary meaning for "incomprehensible" is now "unintelligible." And this is the first meaning that comes to mind when many believers and unbelievers learn of the doctrine. If this is what we mean, then we are wrong. But if this is not what we mean, then we are misleading our audience and compromising the faith. Believers who struggle against assaults from outsiders as well as their own doubts will think that we have no answers for them. And unbelievers who already think that Christianity is irrational and that Christians are simpletons will receive confirmation for their suspicion – their own theologians call God and his revelation "unintelligible," which is not very far from "complete nonsense."

Our only option is to disown the theologians and believers who speak this way (they do not represent the Christian faith), and restate our doctrine in accordance with Scripture – that God has revealed himself in a clear and coherent way, and in a way suited to the human intellect, that we understand much about God and his revelation, that we are able to answer all questions and challenges against the faith, and that whereas non-Christians stand in blindness and ignorance, we proclaim the fullness of the will of God to them from a position of knowledge and authority (Acts 17:23).

To correct this problem of misleading terminology, we can either subsume this doctrine under the "knowability" of God (and while we are on the subject, perhaps "understandability" is a better word?), or subsume it under the "infinity" of God. He is infinite, but intelligible and understandable. He has spoken abundantly and clearly to mankind. And it is from this foundation of revelation, knowledge, and understanding that we proclaim, "Now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

Regarding the category, we should note that the incomprehensibility *of God* is in fact an attribute *of man*. If a cat cannot fully understand me, it does not mean that incomprehensibility is inherent in me, or that it is one of my attributes. If I *could* be fully understood, even if only in principle or if only by God, then incomprehensibility is not one of my attributes.

God is incomprehensible to his creatures, but since he is omniscient, he is not incomprehensible to himself. Since he fully understands himself, incomprehensibility cannot be one of his intrinsic qualities. *He* is not incomprehensible; *we* find him incomprehensible. And the divine attribute that renders him incomprehensible *to us* is his infinity, not an intrinsic attribute of incomprehensibility.

If there were no creatures, God would still be triune, spiritual, eternal, self-existent, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so on. But there would be no one to find him incomprehensible. He would still be infinite, and his infinite understanding would fully comprehend his own infinite being.