

# What Can We Know about God?

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**R. C. SPROUL**



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## Contents

<b>One</b>	Knowledge of God . . . . .	1
<b>Two</b>	One in Essence . . . . .	13
<b>Three</b>	Three in Person . . . . .	23
<b>Four</b>	Incommunicable Attributes . . . . .	31
<b>Five</b>	Communicable Attributes . . . . .	39
<b>Six</b>	The Will of God . . . . .	49
<b>Seven</b>	Providence . . . . .	59





## Chapter One

# Knowledge of God

Several years ago, a well-known Christian school invited me to address the faculty and administration on this question: “What is a Christian college or university?” Upon my arrival, the dean gave me a tour of the campus. During the tour, I noticed this inscription on a set of office doors: “Department of Religion.” When it came time to address the faculty that evening, I mentioned the inscription I had seen, and I asked whether the department had always been called by that name. An older faculty member replied that

years ago the department had been called the “Department of Theology.” No one could tell me why the department name had been changed.

“Religion” or “theology”—what difference does it make? In the academic world, the study of religion has traditionally come under the broader context of either sociology or anthropology, because religion has to do with the worship practices of human beings in particular environments. Theology, by contrast, is the study of God. There is a big difference between studying human apprehensions of religion and studying the nature and character of God Himself. The first is purely natural in its orientation. The second is supernatural, dealing with what lies above and beyond the things of this world.

After explaining this in my lecture to the faculty, I added that a true Christian college or university is committed to the premise that the ultimate truth is the truth of God, and that He is the foundation and source of all other truth. Everything we learn—economics, philosophy, biology, mathematics—has to be understood in light of the overarching reality of the character of God. That is why, in the Middle Ages, theology was called “the queen of the sciences” and philosophy “her handmaiden.” Today

the queen has been deposed from her throne and, in many cases, driven into exile, and a supplanter now reigns. We have replaced theology with religion.

### Theology Defined

The word *theology* shares a suffix, *-ology*, with the names of many disciplines and sciences, such as *biology*, *physiology*, and *anthropology*. The suffix comes from the Greek word *logos*, which we find in the opening of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The Greek word *logos* means "word" or "idea," or, as one philosopher translated it, "logic" (it is also the term from which we get the English word *logic*). So when we study biology, we are looking at the word or the logic of life. Anthropology is the word or logic about humans, *anthrōpos* being the Greek word for *man*. The primary part of the word *theology* comes from the Greek *theos*, which means "god," so theology is the study of the word or logic of God Himself.

*Theology* is a very broad term. It refers not only to God but to all God has revealed to us in sacred Scripture. Included in the discipline of theology is the study

## What Can We Know about God?

of Christ, which we call “Christology.” It also includes the study of the Holy Spirit, which we call “pneumatology,” the study of sin, which is called “hamartiology,” and the study of future things, which we call “eschatology.” Those are subdivisions of theology. In this booklet, we are concerned with “theology proper,” which has specific reference to the study of God Himself.

The content that theologians study in order to do theology is God’s revelation. God has plainly revealed His existence to every creature on earth; all people know that He exists, whether or not they acknowledge it. However, we need to move beyond the knowledge that God exists and come to a deeper understanding of who He is—His character and nature—because no aspect of theology defines everything else as comprehensively as our understanding of God. In fact, only as we understand the character of God can we understand every other doctrine properly.

### God Incomprehensible

Historically, the first undertaking for theologians is the study of the incomprehensibility of God. At first glance, such an undertaking appears contradictory; how can one

study something that is incomprehensible? However, this pursuit makes sense when we grasp that theologians use the term *incomprehensible* in a narrower and more precise way than it is used in everyday speech. Theologically speaking, *incomprehensible* does not mean that we cannot know anything about God but rather that our knowledge of Him will always be limited. We can have an apprehensive, meaningful knowledge of God, but we can never, not even in heaven, have an exhaustive knowledge of Him; we cannot totally comprehend all that He is.

One reason for that was articulated by John Calvin in the phrase *finitum non capax infinitum*, which means “the finite cannot grasp the infinite.” The phrase can be interpreted in two distinct ways because the word *capax* can be translated either as “contain” or as “grasp.” An eight-ounce glass cannot possibly contain an infinite amount of water because it has only a finite volume; the finite cannot contain the infinite. But when Calvin’s phrase is translated with the other meaning of *capax*, “grasp,” it indicates that God cannot be grasped in His totality. Our minds are finite, lacking the capacity to grasp or understand all that God is. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He surpasses our ability to comprehend Him in His fullness.

## God Revealed

Since the finite cannot grasp the infinite, how can we, as finite human beings, learn anything about God or have any significant or meaningful knowledge of who He is? Calvin said that God in His graciousness and mercy condescends to lisp for our benefit. In other words, He addresses us on our terms and in our own language, just as a parent might coo when talking to an infant. We call it “baby talk”; nevertheless, something meaningful and intelligible is communicated.

We find this idea in the Bible’s anthropomorphic language. *Anthropomorphic* comes from the Greek word *anthrōpos*, which means “man,” “mankind,” or “human,” and *morphology* is the term for the study of forms and shapes. Therefore, we can easily see that anthropomorphic simply means “in human form.” When we read in Scripture that the heavens are God’s throne and the earth is His footstool (Isa. 66:1), we imagine a massive deity seated in heaven and stretching out His feet on the earth, but we do not really think that is what God is like. Likewise, we read that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10), but we do not interpret that to mean that He is a

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# Who is God, and how can we know Him?

Jesus said that knowing God is essential. The fact that God exists is obvious from creation, but in order to know who God is, we must learn what He has revealed about Himself in the Bible.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains what Scripture teaches about God's nature, will, and attributes, presenting a glorious picture of the one true God—the God we are called to know, trust, and obey.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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