
Somewhat Communicable Attributes

Theologians have often talked about two kinds of attributes of God: communicable attributes and incommunicable attributes. These are big words to describe something quite simple: as human beings, we share some (communicable) attributes with God (the ability to love, do good, and be fair and just) while we do not share others of his (incommunicable) attributes (eternality, unchangeable, infinite, almighty, etc.). There may be a third category, namely attributes that we have a small part of, but what we have is nothing in comparison what God has. We have knowledge, for example, but our knowledge is like a drop of water in the ocean compared to God's knowledge. We have power, but our power is less than that of a snail in comparison to God's power which is greater than that of an elephant. While we might use words like knowledge and power to describe human beings, it is almost ludicrous to think that we have anything that can really compare to what God has.

Yet, throughout history, it seems that people want to make believe that we have a lot more of these attributes than we really do. As a good example, we can think back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. These years followed the Enlightenment, a period of time when philosophers began to teach that if everyone on this earth really worked at it, we could solve all of our problems all by ourselves. God began to be removed from the picture as being the one who provides a solution to the problems faced by humanity. About 150 years ago, with huge advances being made in the fields of technology, manufacturing, medicine, transportation, and so much more, it looked like we were unstoppable. In 1900 it was quite common for many to think that in a short time, because of all the progress, there would be no problem common to man that would be insurmountable.

How wrong they were. In 1914, after a single shot was fired in Sarajevo, war broke out in Europe, and countries around the world were drawn into the battle. It was evident very early on that all the human ingenuity that had been used to find solutions to problems could also be used to create new ones. Weapons were fashioned such as had never been seen on the earth, weapons that could kill many people in seconds from a great distance. When the war ended four years later, the world was shaken. Millions of people had died, and many declared that we had learned our lesson, and WWI was known, however briefly, as the War to End All Wars. How wrong they were. Twenty-one years later a second massive war began, and it was more deadly than the earlier war, for we had figured out how to make even more powerful weapons with more deadly results. In addition, we had learned to vilify others and make them into non-humans so that we did not feel guilt when we killed them in gas chambers or by dropping thousands of bombs on a single city. The 20th century saw more violent death than all of the other previous centuries combined.

What went wrong? A lot of things, but perhaps one of them was the attitude that we believe that we are more like God than we are. We have knowledge, but our knowledge has limitations. We might know how to create many new things, but we do not know how to stop at creating only good things, and we make things that are harmful as well. When God knows something and when he puts his knowledge into action, what results is always good. This is not true of humanity. Similarly, God uses his power for the benefit of

others. Human beings do not. In fact, when people become powerful, the more powerful they are, the more corrupt they become, or so says Lord Acton.

It's not that knowledge and power are bad things. If they were, would have a huge problem with God, for he is all-knowing and all-powerful. Rather, the problem arises when we begin to think that we have more knowledge and power than we really do and when we use that knowledge and power inappropriately. In other words, when we act independently of God, believing ourselves to be like him in ability, we run into all sorts of problems.

As people 150 years ago made huge advances in so many fields of study, they did not maintain an awe of God. With all that we can do, they began to think that God's knowledge and power were really not all that special and that what God had to offer could be set aside. Humanity has come to believe that we have the same quantity of those somewhat communicable attributes as God has, with devastating results.

Today, God is largely forgotten, while at the same time humanity no longer believes that we can solve all of our problems. We have come to understand that we create more problems than we solve, and that leads us to a sense of despair. There is nothing we can do, and we have come to realize that. Analysts of the current western culture sense that there is a deep feeling of hopelessness today that was not present at the beginning of the last century. What we know is not enough, and what we can do is insufficient.

Perhaps the pendulum has begun to swing, and perhaps the hopelessness will bring people back to a recognition of a need for someone bigger than themselves. If that is true, then it is also true that we, as Christians, have what they are looking for, for we know God, and we know how we can know him. It is through Jesus of course, so it does appear that Jesus is the solution to the world's problems, for he brings us back to God. When we know God, we realize how small our accomplishments and abilities are, and we are more willing to listen to him and learn from him and, then, in an act of humility, seek his help. We have knowledge, but God's knowledge is better, and we have power, but God's power is far greater. Living without God results in all sorts of problems; living with him and before him will enable us to use our knowledge and power, as insignificant as they may be, for the good of humanity.

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