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The Atonement III—Its Relation to the Attributes of God

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The attributes ascribed to God. As the attributes of God are necessarily involved in the philosophy of the Atonement, we think it proper here to make brief allusion to them, especially to those more immediately involved in the Atonement. The attributes usually ascribed to God, either upon the ground of scripture or the supposed necessity of his nature, we shall consider as falling into two groups. First group, attributes of power: eternity, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, intelligence, wisdom; these seven attributes we shall consider as one group, out of which grows the power of God. The second group which we shall regard as the moral attributes, the spiritual forces or powers in the nature of God. **They** consist of holiness, truth, justice, mercy, love. Let it be remembered that in the main we are dependent upon God for our knowledge of him and his attributes, and therefore, we quote the scriptures freely in relation to him. And now a very brief description of the first group.

Attributes of power: 1. Eternity. By “eternity,” regarded as an attribute of God, is meant God’s eternal existence. We may not in rational thought assume a time when God was not—or when he did not exist. God’s eternity is sustained by such scripture as David’s 90th Psalm: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Ps. 90:2). Also St. Paul bears the same witness:

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. (Heb. 1:10-12)

2. Immutability. God’s “immutability,” his unchangeableness, is sustained in such passages of both ancient and modern scriptures as

follow: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17). “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6).

For God doth not walk in crooked paths, neither doth he turn to the right hand nor to the left, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, therefore his paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round. (D&C 3:2)

“Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is one eternal round, the same today as yesterday, and forever” (D&C 35:1). These remarks are subject to modification as noted under the discussion which follows this first group of attributes in a subsequent paragraph.

3. *Omnipotence*. By “omnipotence” is meant all-powerfulness. This attribute is essential to all rational thinking upon God. We may not think upon God and then think upon him as being overruled by a higher power, and still have him remain to our thought as God. The scriptures in their whole spirit present this view of the omnipotence of Deity.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. . . . And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. . . . And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. (Gen. 1:1, 3, 9)

In this manner the work proceeds throughout the creation periods.

Of this attribute David sings:

The heavens shall praise thy wonders, O Lord. . . . For who in the heaven can be compared unto the Lord? . . . O Lord God of hosts, who is a strong Lord like unto thee? . . . Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves [thereof] arise, thou stillest them. . . . The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded them. . . . Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is thy hand, and high is thy right hand. (Ps. 89:5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13)

To the same effect sang Isaiah (Isa. 11:10–15); also Jeremiah (Jer. 27:17), and Daniel (Dan. 4:35).

In the New Testament, the Christ teaches that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26); and negatively, “with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37). The Revelation uses the term “omnipotent” direct: “And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and [as] the voice of ⟨the⟩ mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Rev. 19:6).¹

¹Also Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, lecture 3; so too in *the Book of Mormon*, Mosiah 3:17–18, 21.

4. *Omniscience.* By “omniscience” is meant all-knowing. “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world,” said the Holy Spirit-inspired council of the apostles and elders of the early Christian church (Acts 15:18).

Remember the former things of old: [for] I am God, and there is none else; . . . Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure. (Isa. 46:9-10)

A sparrow falls not without the Father’s notice (Matt. 10:29).

5. *Omnipresence.*^a “Omnipresence” means everywhere present; and perhaps the best description of this attribute of God is in David’s passage—

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely [the] darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Ps. 139:7-12)

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” asked Solomon, in dedicating the first temple, “behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded” (1 Kings 8:27). And Paul, in teaching the nearness of God to men, said that God had “made of one blood all nations of men” and had given to all the privilege of seeking “the Lord, if ⟨happily⟩ [haply] they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:26-28).

Under the attribute of “omnipotence”—all powerful—I include “power,” which is sometimes, and usually, treated separately as an attribute of God: And under “omniscience” I include “knowledge,” which is also usually regarded separately as an attribute of Deity; but both these terms—“power” and “knowledge”—may very appropriately fall under the larger terms—“omnipotence” and “omniscience.”

6. *Intelligence.* In reasoning with Abraham upon the intelligences in heaven, and the fact that they varied in degree of intelligence, the Lord said that where there were two intelligences and the one was more intelligent than the other, “there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all” (Abr. 3:17-19). By which is meant, as we think, not that God is more

^aRoberts left an instruction that the sections on omnipresence and intelligence were to be transposed, and that direction has been followed.

intelligent than any other one of the intelligences, but more intelligent than all of them together. On this head the Prophet of the New Dispensation gave to the world that wonderful announcement, all-comprehensive in its greatness, glorifying God as no other sentence in the language in all the ages has ever glorified him, saying: "The glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36). This is the force and the power that holds in right balance and union all the attributes of God, in their application and in the working out of the purposes of God.

7. *Wisdom.* Wisdom that arises from knowledge seems essentially an attribute of Deity; as well from the nature of the attributes as from the declaration of scripture. God as unwise is unthinkable; unpossessed of this attribute, he could not appeal to the consciousness of man as God at all. Therefore it is agreeable to think with Elihu in Job, that God "is mighty in strength and wisdom" (Job 36:5). Also with David: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" (Ps. 104:24). And again David: "Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite" (Ps. 147:5). So Paul: "To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever" (Rom. 16:27); "The wisdom of <the> [this] world is foolishness with God" (1 Cor. 3:19); He says, again so high above the wisdom of men does he esteem the wisdom of God; that even "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor. 1:25). We may fittingly close his testimony with his prayer: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17).

Worth to go with this testimony is that of Joseph Smith, in which is found the same spiritual music: "The Lord is God, and beside him there is no Savior. Great is his wisdom, marvelous are his ways, and the extent of his doings none can find out. His purposes fail not, neither are there any who can stay his hand" (D&C 76:1-4).

Comments on the limitations in the attributes of God. We may now consider somewhat the limitations of the attributes so far named.

The eternity of God may be regarded as absolute. "I Am that I Am" (Ex. 3:14), the Eternal One, the Self-existent, admits of no modification. His immutability should be regarded as stability, adherence to principle. What stands among men under the name of "constitutional morality," fixed devotion to law; and working through law to achievement of his divine purposes, rather than by caprice, or by arbitrary, personal action. But God's immutability should not be so understood as to exclude the idea of advancement or progress even of God. Thus, for example: God's kingdom and glory may be enlarged, as more and more redeemed souls

are added to his kingdom: as worlds and world-systems are multiplied and redeemed and enrolled with celestial spheres, so God's kingdom is enlarged and his glory increased. So that in this sense there may come chance, enlargement, and progress even for God. Hence we could not say of God's immutability as we do of his eternity that it is absolute, since there may come change through progress even for God; but an absolute immutability would require eternal immobility—which would reduce God to a condition eternally static, which, from the nature of things, would bar him from participation in that enlargement of kingdoms and increasing glory that comes from redemption and the progress of men. And is it too bold a thought, that with this progress, even for the mightiest, new thoughts, and new vistas may appear, inviting to new adventures and enterprises that will yield new experiences, advancement, and enlargement, even for the Most High.² It ought to be constantly remembered that terms absolute to man may be relative terms to God, so far above our thinking is his thinking; and his ways above our ways.

²On this point Sir Oliver Lodge has a passage at once advanced and bold, and yet for which he claims Christian warrant. It is, however, far removed from modern Christian orthodoxy, though splendidly true:

The universe is not a "being" but a "becoming"—an ancient but (light-burning) [light-bringing] doctrine when realized,—it is in change, in development, in movement, upward and downward, that activity consists. A stationary condition, or stagnation, would to us be simple non-existence; the element of progression, of change, of activity, must be as durable as the universe itself. Monotony, in the sense of absolute immobility, is unthinkable, unreal, and cannot anywhere exist: save where things have ceased to be.

Such ideas, the ideas of development and progress, extend even up to God Himself, according to the Christian conception. So we return to that with which we started: the Christian idea of God is not that of a being outside the universe, above its struggles and advances, looking on and taking no part in the process, *solely* exalted, beneficent, self-determined and complete; no, it is also that of a God who loves, who yearns, who suffers, who keenly laments the rebellious and misguided activity of the free agents brought into being by Himself as part of Himself, who enters into the storm and conflict, and is subject to conditions as the Soul of it all; conditions not artificial and transitory, but inherent in the process of producing free and conscious beings, and essential to the full self-development even of Deity.

It is a marvelous and bewildering thought, but whatever its value, and whether it be an ultimate revelation or not, it is the revelation of Christ. (Lodge, *Science and Immortality*, 292)

The attribute “omnipotence” must needs be thought upon also as somewhat limited. Even God, notwithstanding the ascription to him of all-powerfulness in such scripture phrases as “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), “with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37)—notwithstanding all this, ~~we~~ I say, not even God may have two mountain ranges without a valley between. Not even God may place himself beyond the boundary of space: nor on the outside of duration. Nor is it conceivable to human thought that he can create space, or annihilate matter. These are things that limit even God’s omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice, reign of law, God can do. But even he may not act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit even him.

So with the all-knowing attribute, omniscience: that must be understood somewhat in the same light as the other attributes just considered: not that God is omniscient up to the point that further progress in knowledge is impossible to him; but that all *the* knowledge that is, all that exists, God knows. All that shall be he will know. The universe is not so much “a being” as a “becoming,” an unfolding. Much more is yet to be. God will know it as it “becomes,” or as it unfolds; for he is universal consciousness, and mind—he is the “All Knowing One” because he knows all that is known, and all that shall yet be to become known—he will know it.[†]

“Omnipresence” is the everywhere present attribute. This must be so far limited as to be ascribed to God’s Spirit, or influence, or power,

[†]Raising a point that has remained somewhat open in LDS doctrine, the committee of the Quorum of the Twelve expressed a desire that Roberts be less definitive about the nature of God’s progression with respect to knowledge: “Progression of God in knowledge. This thought is not accepted by members of the committee. We do not feel that it is wise to express a thought limiting God in this manner, which will cause needless controversy. While we believe in eternal progression and that God is progressing, it is not in quest of hidden truth or laws yet undiscovered to Deity. We prefer to believe with Nephi: ‘O how great the holiness of our God! For he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it’ (2 Ne. 9:20). Moreover, we believe that his progress is because of his knowledge and that he is the author of law (D&C 88:42).” Here also, Roberts wrote: **Meaningless**. Reporting to President Clawson, George Albert Smith explained: “What is the need of stating that God is progressing in knowledge? In other words that there are laws and eternal truths, which he does not know? This will only lead to controversy and needless discussion and argument, and no purpose accomplished. In the judgment of the committee the statement should not be made. There are scriptures which contradict this thought.”

but may not be affirmed of God as a person or individual, for in these latter respects even God is limited by the law that one body cannot occupy two places at one and the same time. But radiating from his presence, as beams of light and warmth radiate from our sun, is God's Spirit, penetrating and permeating space, making space and all worlds in space vibrate with his life and thought and presence; holding all forces—dynamic and static—under control, making them to subserve his will and purposes.

God also uses other agencies to reflect himself, his power or authority: also his wisdom, goodness, justice and mercy—angels and arch-angels, both in heaven and on earth; and in the earth prophets, apostles, teachers—all that make for up-lift, for righteousness; all that catch some ray of the Divine Spirit in poem, music, painting, sculpture, state-craft or mechanical arts—all these but reflect God and are a means of multiplying and expressing him, the Divine. And in some special way, as witness for God, and under very special conditions, the Holy Ghost, that Being accounted the third person of the Godhead—he reflects and stands for God, his power, and his wisdom, his justice, truth, and mercy—for all that can be, or is called God, or is God. All these means, direct and indirect, convey God into the universe, and keep him everywhere present in all his essentials of wisdom, power and goodness, while his bodily presence remains as the moving center of it all.

Moral and spiritual attributes of God. There is yet to be considered the second group of attributes: holiness, truth, justice, mercy, love; and these are the attributes which are more immediately involved in the doctrine of the Atonement.

1. Holiness. "Holiness" as an attribute of God, is equally indispensable as any other of the attributes of Deity. Equally unthinkable is it that Deity should not possess it, as it is that he should not possess intelligence or wisdom. No marvel that Moses sang, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? . . . glorious in holiness" (Ex. 15:11). "I am the Lord your God: . . . ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44) was God's word to ancient Israel. Throughout the scriptures God is spoken of as the "Holy One of Israel." "Thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises <in> [of] Israel" (Ps. 22:3). "Sing unto the Lord . . . at the remembrance of his holiness" (Ps. 30:4). "God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness" (Isa. 5:16). "And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Both the Old and the New Testaments are replete with the doctrine. In one of the prophets it is written: "O Lord, . . .

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab. 1:12–13). And again in the scripture: “I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31);³ which perhaps more than any other utterance of holy writ, asserts the holiness of God.

2. Truth. The attribute of “truth” is ascribed to God; and here we again come in touch with the absolute, as when speaking of God’s eternity. God can be no other than the absolute in this quality. An untruthful God! The thought is blasphemy! “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent” (Num. 23:19). “Mercy and truth shall go before thy face” (Ps. 89:14). “A God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deut. 32:4). “Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth” (Ps. 31:5). “Abundant in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6). So our modern scriptures: “God doth not walk in crooked paths, neither doth he turn to the right hand nor [to] the left, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, therefore his paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round” (D&C 3:2). It cannot be emphasized too strongly—God is a God of truth; and does not, and **could** not lie without ceasing to be God. It would wreck the moral universe for God to lie. He must be, he is truth! “A God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deut. 32:4).

3. Justice. “Justice,” as an attribute, is of the same quality as the attribute of “truth”—it must be conceived as absolute in Deity. God not just! The thought would be unbearable. Of course we have scripture warrant for the doctrine: “Justice and judgement are the habitation of thy throne” (Ps. 89:14). “There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour” (Isa. 45:21). “The just Lord is in the midst thereof” (Zeph. 3:5). “Behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation” (Zech. 9:9).

4. Mercy. “Mercy” as an attribute of God is in a class with truth and justice and holiness. A God without compassion—only another name for mercy—would be a monstrosity. No, God must be merciful! Else what shall become of man? God not merciful! It is unthinkable, that is all. “Mercy and truth shall go before thy face,” is the testimony of the Psalmist (Ps. 89:14). “And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious” (Ex. 34:6). “But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful” (Neh. 9:17).

³“Nevertheless,” continues the passage, “he that repents and does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven” (D&C 1:32), showing that while God may not compromise with sin by looking upon it with any “degree of allowance,” yet he has compassion upon the sinner who repents.

5. *Love.* “Love!” The crowning glory of all the attributes of God! We may revel in this attribute. “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (1 Jn. 4:16). “Every one that loveth is born of God” (1 Jn. 4:7).

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 Jn. 4:9-10)

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The harmony of God’s moral and spiritual attributes. These attributes of the second group, as well as those considered in the first group, must be thought upon as constituting a harmony; those—the first group—in harmony with the existences as real and eternal as ~~themselves~~ *the attributes*; and these—the second group—in a harmony within or among themselves. Thus justice may not deny the claims of mercy. Mercy may not rob justice. Even love may not allow God to intrude upon justice, or wisdom, or truth. At the same time it must be remembered that mercy and love, no less than justice, are attributes of God, and somehow and somewhere must find entrance into the divine economy, must get themselves expressed and that worthily; worthy of their intrinsic nature and value, and worthy of God in whom they inhere in perfection, and all in perfect balance. And while “all must be law”; all must also be “love”—i.e., in harmony with love; for God, from first to last, is love. The attributes of God must be preserved in perfect accord if the moral and spiritual harmony of the universe is to be maintained. And the matters relating to man must conform to the moral and spiritual attributes of God, or they cannot be conceived as substantially placed, and eternally secure. It is these considerations which unite the attributes of God with the subject of the Atonement. If God’s moral government of the universe is, like his physical government, one of law, then law, not personal, arbitrary caprice, will and must rule. And if God’s attributes constitute a moral and spiritual harmony, and are united perfectly with his attributes of power and majesty—then again in the devising of any scheme for redemption of men from the consequences of the violation of law, that scheme must take into account the attributes of God; and plan its scheme of “salvation” in accordance with the attributes of Deity and their harmonious action and reaction upon one another.

It may be thought that our exposition of the attributes of God in this chapter is unnecessarily elaborate, especially since but two or three paragraphs are devoted directly to a treatment of their relationship to the Atonement; but I am sure that a realization through consciousness of the majesty and beauty, and glory of those attributes, is necessary to a full appreciation of their relations to the Atonement, hence the space devoted to their consideration; and I offer it as all worthwhile.

The relationship of the Atonement to the attributes of God. We have already said in the chapter preceding this, that it is the quality of the inexorableness in law that made the Atonement of the Christ necessary; and now at the conclusion of the considerations of the attributes of God—which are his perfections—they also make the Atonement of the Christ necessary to the salvation of man if harmony be maintained *within* them. For the perfections of God’s attributes correspond precisely with a reign of perfect law. Maintenance of the harmony of God’s attributes and maintenance of a reign of perfect law is essentially the same thing; for each demands that when there is a transgression there shall be an atonement for it; which is but the vindication of the law, in the one case; and reaction to the harmony of the attributes of God in the other. So when the attributes of God are brought to bear on the squaring human conduct with either a reign of law or the attributes of God, the quality of the attributes, say of wisdom and justice, mercy and love, and their harmonious relations must needs be so taken into account that any adjustment that can make redemption from the consequences of a broken law possible, must be of a character that will make no break in the sustained harmony and interplay of God’s attributes, as well as in the maintenance of perfection in the application of mercy and justice and love in a reign of law.

These are the considerations which make the ethic of the gospel so absolute. “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17). The only way to achieve an absolute standard of “oughtness” of righteousness, is to accept the immutable ethic founded upon the attributes of God, as the true standard of the law of righteousness.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: *Oxford and Cambridge Bible Helps*, concordance; Smith, *Six Lectures on Faith*; Wright, concordance, in *Bible Treasury*. For a discussion about the implications of Roberts’s ideas concerning the attributes of God, see pages 626–28 below.