### God’s Personhood

God’s personhood is most clearly demonstrated in His possession of personal quality traits, like self-consciousness and self-determination. Self-consciousness is the ability to be aware of one’s own existence, think of oneself, observe one’s own behavior and evaluate it. Shedd describes self-consciousness as follows: “In consciousness, the object is another substance than the subject; but in self-consciousness the object is the same substance as the subject.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Strong concurs, “Man is not only conscious of his own acts and states, but by abstraction and reflection he recognizes the self which is the subject of these acts and states.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Self-determination is the ability to exercise free will and determine one’s course in life, that is, to decide what one will become and what one will do. Strong defines it in relation to humans as follows: “Man, by virtue of his free-will, determines his action from within. He determines self in view of motives, but his determination is not caused by motives; he himself is the cause.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We also affirm that a person possesses other personal characteristics, such as reason and emotion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If all persons have the qualities of self-consciousness, self-determination, reason and emotion, then we can expect to discover the same character traits in God. Scripture testifies of God’s self-consciousness in 1 Corinthians 2:10, where we read, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God,” that is, God knows Himself and about Himself.[[5]](#footnote-5) Concerning God’s self-determination, Scripture says, “{What} His soul desires, that He does” (Job 23:13) and, “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps 115:3). So then, God directs His own course.[[6]](#footnote-6)

God is a rational being – “His understanding is infinite.” (Ps 147:5). He displays emotion. He rejoices, grieves, becomes angry, has compassion, etc. The Bible records both positive and “negative” emotions in God. Zephaniah 3:17 testifies, “He will exult over you with joy… He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.” Yet, in Judges 2:14 we see that “the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a personal being, God enters into relationship with other persons, including humans. God often speaks of Himself as a God in relationship. He revealed Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3:6), i.е., as a God in relationship with these individuals.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The most striking exhibition of God’s personhood is when He became incarnate, that is, became human. As a human, He did all the things people commonly do. God’s personhood is also confirmed by humanity’s personhood, since people were created in His image. If humans possess personhood, then the One who created them after His own image certainly does as well.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Since God is a person, we often see the figure of speech “anthropomorphism” applied to Him. Anthropomorphism is when God is described as possessing exclusively human features, like hands, feet, mouth, etc. It is important to recognize anthropomorphism as a figure of speech, since God (except for the Incarnate Son) does not have a physical body. Nonetheless, the fact that anthropomorphism is used in describing God underscores His real personhood. Although God has no mouth, He does speak. Even though He has no hands, He does act.

About this phenomenon, Karl Barth taught that “biblical thinking about God would rather submit to the grossest anthropomorphism than to a confusion that would imply that God lacks life and sovereign decision.”[[10]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, in their version of the Old Testament the Septuagint translators strove to remove all anthropomorphic allusions in the biblical text, apparently thinking them unworthy of God.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Our final proof of God’s personhood lies in the fact that existence as a person is far superior to an impersonal existence. If God is the highest being, then it is certain that He possesses the characteristics of personhood.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Unfortunately, some have distorted the concept of God’s personhood, both in the world of religion and the realm of philosophy. Many have proposed that God is impersonal, a cosmic power, that directs the world. We encounter such a view in Hinduism and other forms of pantheism. In the West, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) advanced it.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Along with the fact that this view not only contradicts the biblical portrait of God, it leads to tragic consequences. Carl Henry comments, “Where the living God is clouded as the transcendent source of human life and dignity, respect for the meaning and worth of personal existence tends to vanish.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831) advanced another extreme view, that God is the *only* existing person. Other individuals are merely figures of His imagination.[[15]](#footnote-15) John Robertson also erred is supposing that God is not a person, existing separately from other persons, but understood Him to be the very relationships that exist between persons.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In antiquity, one of the basic postulates of Greek philosophy was the impersonality of the Divine. It was thought that if God possessed personhood, that would present some kind of limitation to His freedom and glory. Since the Highest Being must be free from all limitations, He could not be a person. Henry relates that the God of Aristotle is one who “does not hear prayer and who is disinterested in man and the world.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Even God’s Old Testament people, Israel, somewhat deemphasized God’s personhood. God identified Himself to Moses with the name “The LORD (יהוה), the God of your fathers” (Ex 3:15). The pronunciation of the name יהוה, usually translated “LORD,” was lost, or more precisely, forgotten. Ancient Hebrews used a consonantal text (without vowels), and the reader committed the pronunciation to memory. Since the Israelites considered God’s name too holy to pronounce, from the second century B.C., instead of reading the name God gave to Moses, they would read אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*), or “Lord.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Consequently, God’s people eventually forgot the proper pronunciation of God’s name יהוה. Scholars conclude that the name was pronounced “Yahweh,” or something similar. Nonetheless, no one really knows for sure God’s personal name. We can consider the loss of God’s name another factor in depersonalizing Him. He is a Person without a name.

In relation to God’s name, we may make further comment. As noted above, instead of pronouncing God’s name in the biblical text, the reader would say אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*), or “Lord.” Over time, later scribes, who wanted to remind the reader to read אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*), inserted the vowel points for that word above and below the consonants for יהוה. From the combination of consonants from יהוה and vowels from אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*) we get the pronunciation “Jehovah.” Therefore, the name Jehovah is a fabrication.

The last false view of God’s personhood for our consideration is the idea that God, as a person, has a need for fellowship with people. Therefore, God created humans not out of desire, but out of necessity. Yet, as we noted in our discussion of God’s aseity, the Bible teaches God’s total independence and self-sufficiency. In fact, God can satisfy His desire for fellowship within His own Being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, He created humans out of desire, not necessity. God desires fellowship with people, but has no absolute need for it.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The doctrine of God’s personhood benefits us in practical ways. First, the fact that God is personal means that He can personally come to our aid. Second, we can fellowship with Him person to person. Third, knowing that God has personality will prevent us from approaching Him mechanically, as one whose actions and reactions we can predict with absolute precision. We affirm, of course, that God always acts consistently with His Word. At the same time, He is personal and prefers us to relate to Him as such.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In conclusion of our study of God’s personhood, we must mention an item that we will examine more closely in our discussion of the Trinity. Is God one person, or three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? In this chapter, our goal was not to distinguish God’s nature and His three Persons. When we use the term “person” here, we are simply saying that the triune God has all the characteristics of personhood. We are attempting to contrast the biblical view with the false teaching of God as an impersonal force. We will discuss the Persons of the Trinity in a later chapter.

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2. Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TХ: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1. – P. 185; Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 167-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strong, p. 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chafer, v. 1, p. 186; Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TХ: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chafer, v. 1, p. 180, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Noted in Henry, v. 5, p. 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Julias S. J. Jewish Backgrounds of the NT. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1995. – P. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. v. 5, p. 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Julias, p. 268-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 161; Henry, v. 5, p. 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 270; Duffield G. P. Van Cleave N.M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. – Los Angeles, CА: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)