### God is Spirit

God can be classified among beings lacking a physical body. Jesus said of the Father, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24). We recall, however, that God the Son became human through the incarnation. So then, when we speak of God being spirit, we have in mind His immaterial form, in which God the Son also existed before His incarnation.

**1. Immaterial**

As mentioned earlier, a spirit being lacks a physical body. It can exist without physical supports, such as food, water, oxygen, gravity, etc. Spirit beings also are located in a different sphere or dimension, which our physical senses cannot perceive. They enjoy greater freedom in movement from one place to another.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us defend the position that God (excepting the Son) has no body, but exists in a spiritual form. This discussion is complicated by the fact that the Bible often speaks of body parts in God. In 2 Chronicles 6:20, we read, “…that Your eye may be open toward this house day and night,” and in Psalm 18:8, “Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured.” We also read of God’s face (Ex 33:20), nose (Deut 33:10), tongue (Isa 30:27), back (Jer 18:17), hand (Deut 11:2), finger (Ex 8:19), heart (Gen 6:6), and legs (Isa 66:1). How is this consistent with God’s immateriality?[[2]](#footnote-2)

In light of the fact that God is spirit, we must conclude that such cases are instances of the figure of speech anthropomorphism. This is a figurative way of expressing God’s actions. First, we note that these “body parts” are always mentioned in connection with something God does. We never encounter an instance where they are mentioned as simply existing outside of that context. We never read, for example, that God has eyes except when it states that God is observing something. It is never written that God has hands except in a context where He is doing a work. Therefore, anthropomorphisms are used to dramatically display God’s actions, but they are not meant to be taken literally.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Second, there are certain body parts that are never mentioned in regard to God, such as flesh, bones, blood, or intestines. These body parts, in distinction from the ones the Bible ascribes to God, reflect no external activity. Therefore, they serve no purpose in describing God. Third, we never see mention of God’s left hand, only of the right hand. This is because most people accomplish tasks of skill with the right hand. Finally, the Hebrew term for “body,” that is, גִוְיָּה (*givya*) is never used in describing God, only certain body parts as symbols of His actions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this regard, Lewis Chafer writes the following: “Where physical members are thus ascribed to God, it is not a direct assertion that God possesses these members, or a corporal body with its parts; but that He is capable of doing precisely those things which are the functions of the physical part of man.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Grudem explains why God used this poetical form to describe His actions: “If God is going to teach us about things we do not know by direct experience (such as his attributes), he has to teach us in terms of what we do know.”[[6]](#footnote-6) It is curious to note that Psalm 61:4 attributes wings to God! Does this mean that He is a bird?[[7]](#footnote-7)

What about the claim that God has a spiritual body? Some evangelical scholars, like Bray and Bloesch, embrace this position.[[8]](#footnote-8) Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov proposes a more sophisticated view of God’s corporality. He feels that God’s spiritual body provides Him with a defined, concrete form. He assigns a name to God’s corporality – Sophia. In Bulgakov’s words,

The Absolute Spirit can have an absolute corporality, which is nothing other than the Glory of God… Sophia, and is God’s corporality. This does not contradict God’s existence as a spirit, but absolutely actualizes it. His corporality is *just as spiritual* and His essence and is not distinct from it. Yet, it is definitely concrete.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At first glance, it seems reasonable that God’s spiritual nature would be contained in some type of concrete form. When God appeared to people, in fact, He appeared in a definite form. On the other hand, employing the words “body” or “corporality” in respect to God’s makeup can easily cause confusion, since these terms are conventionally associated with physical matter. In addition, giving God’s corporality a specific name, Sophia, personifies one of God’s qualities and sets one on the trajectory to polytheism.

In refutation of the “spiritual body” theory, we recall the arguments advanced above that convincingly demonstrate the use of figurative speech in regards to God’s “body.” Additionally, confining God to a body may well complicate our understanding of His omnipresence. Finally, God’s appearing in a bodily form is best explained by the phenomenon of “theophany,” or God manifesting Himself in a concrete form for people’s sake.

**2. Unlimited**

In distinction from other spiritual beings, God not only enjoys more freedom than physical beings, but He knows no limitations and enjoys complete independence. Physical beings are limited in many ways. Even angels can exist only in one place at one time. God, however, is everywhere at all times. In answer to the question of where God may be worshipped, Jesus announced, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24), i.е., one may worship this unlimited spiritual being at any place.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Let us clarify the meaning of the phrase “God is spirit.” In John 4:24, this refers to God’s existence as a spirit-being. A similar phrase is found in 2 Corinthians 3:17: “The Lord in the Spirit.” Yet here, we have a reference to the person of the Holy Spirit. The former expression lacks the Greek definite article, which indicates that the phrase points to a quality in God. The latter expression has the definite article, indicating a concrete object or person, namely the Holy Spirit.

**3. Without Gender Distinction**

A spiritual being has no gender distinction. Although the Scriptures employ the grammatical male gender for God, this does not mean that He is a male. God has no gender distinction. He is neither male, nor female – He is spirit.

This fact points out a contrast between Israel and other peoples of antiquity, whose pantheons contained both male and female gods, who intermarried and bore children. Such an understanding is foreign to biblical faith. The use of the grammatical masculine gender points not to a gender distinction in God, but to His personhood.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Also interesting is that, at times, the Bible ascribes to God feminine characteristics. For example, God gives birth (Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14), cares for children (Deut 32:11; Isa 49:15; Matt 23:37), and carries and comforts them (Isa 66:12-13). In addition, scholars often associate God’s wisdom in Proverbs 8 with God Himself. Wisdom in this chapter, though, is feminine. So then, God possesses all positive character qualities, both typically masculine and typically feminine.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Unlike the biblical presentation of God, some more extreme adherents of feminism propose removing all masculine pronouns from the Bible referring to God. Others suggest that the Holy Spirit is the feminine aspect in God. Still others claim that God is not a person at all, but an impersonal force. However, such depictions of God distort the biblical picture of the Almighty and are therefore inappropriate for Christian faith.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Against these feminist claims, we respond that God prefers to represent Himself as masculine. First, we see that He is represented by prepositions of the masculine gender in divinely inspired Scripture. Second, the Son of God became incarnate as a man. Third, in relation to the Holy Spirit, masculine prepositions are used, even though the Greek word πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is in the neuter gender. Finally, even the titles used of God, such as Father and King, are masculine.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**4. Invisible**

Spirit beings cannot be seen by the physical eye. As a result, God forbade Israel from making any image of Him in a physical form. The second commandment reads, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:4). Any physical representation of the invisible God would lead to a distorted view of His divine nature.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Something to consider in this discussion is that several biblical figures claimed to have seen God.[[16]](#footnote-16) On the other hand, the Bible also states that no one has ever seen God or can see Him. John writes, “No one has seen God at any time” (1 Jn 4:12; Jn 1:18) and, “Not that anyone has seen the Father” (Jn 6:46). Paul confirms, “…whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16) and, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible” (1 Tim 1:17). God warned Moses, “No man can see Me and live!” (Ex 33:20).

How can we explain this apparent contradiction? We must assume that in the biblical narrative, people did not actually see God in all His glory. They only saw the manifestation of God that He permitted them to see, i.e., a partial revelation of His glory. Here is another example of the biblical concept of “theophany.” However, no one has seen God in His full glory.

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