

## **Reflections on Theological Method and the Doctrine of God: A Review of James Dolezal's *All that is in God*<sup>1</sup>**

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Dr. James Dolezal's book *All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Christian Theism* makes some strong claims. His opponents throughout the text are theologians he dubs "theistic mutualists" who reject what he terms classical Christian theism. For Dolezal, "no less than true religion is at stake in the contest between theistic mutualism and classical Christian theism."<sup>2</sup>

If Professor Dolezal's claim is accurate, then every believing theologian should purchase his book and prepare for battle! To substantiate the charge, Dolezal himself comes armed with a Ph. D. from Westminster Seminary as well as a first book on the doctrine of God which appeared in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The present volume was published by Reformation Heritage Books, part of a well-known and highly honored ministry in Grand Rapids, and carries endorsements from Dr. Paul Helm as well as a professor from Westminster Seminary California and the President of RTS Orlando. Also, *TableTalk* magazine has endorsed Dolezal's findings.<sup>4</sup> With these soldiers lined up behind him, Dr. Dolezal has caught every readers' attention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dr. James Dolezal who kindly read an earlier draft of this review.

<sup>2</sup> James E. Dolezal, *All that is in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2017), 104. He opened the book, *Ibid.*, 1, with: "Two distinctly different models of Christian theism are presently vying for the heart and mind of evangelical Christianity."

<sup>3</sup> James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Keith A. Matheson, "Unlatched Theism, an examination of John Frame's response to *All that is in God*," *Tabletalk*, November 30, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Muller, the most prominent church historian of our day, claims in his foreword that Dolezal's opponents have replaced traditional understandings of God with notions of a changing, temporal deity whose oneness is merely social (ix). These theistic mutualists, with their "aberrant argumentation," argue that God "takes new attributes to his nature," or "a series of new 'properties' (x). Their theistic mutualism leads to the conclusion "that God is passible, composed of parts, and temporally bound." Furthermore, theistic mutualists argue that the three Persons of the Trinity are "three discrete beings" (xi). His scathing conclusion is that, "The modern aberration of theistic mutualism invents new divine attributes and has a somewhat mutable deity altered by relationality. It is a "confused mess of misleading theologians put forth today under the guise of new and relevant reconstructions of the evangelical and Reformed faith." (xii)

Who exactly are the enemy “theistic mutualists”? A partial list includes Covenant and Knox Seminary’s Robert Reymond, Regent Seminary’s J. I. Packer, Westminster/RTS’s John Frame, Westminster’s K. Scott Oliphint, Trinity Seminary’s D. A. Carson, and Southern Seminary’s Bruce A. Ware.

### **Understanding Theistic Mutualism According to Dolezal**

Before we can determine the victors in this great field of battle, we need to define terms and view the terrain of the combat zone. The first question is: What is theistic mutualism and why is the position so detrimental to Christ’s church?

A theistic mutualist insists that God is involved in a genuine give-and-take relationship with his creatures. A theistic mutualist is committed to a way of thinking about God and his relationship to the world whereby he “conceives God as interacting with the world in some way like humans do, even if on a much grander scale.”<sup>6</sup> Theistic mutualists believe that God’s being can be moved by his creatures.<sup>7</sup> They “allow for a measure of ontological becoming and process in God.”<sup>8</sup> They apparently hold that to a certain extent God derives some part of his being from relationship to the creation.<sup>9</sup> They have “embraced a rudimentary form of process theism to the extent that they allow some measure of ontological becoming and dependency in God.”<sup>10</sup> Theistic mutualism relativizes God’s being.<sup>11</sup>

This theistic mutualism is detrimental to Christ’s church because the teaching undermines God’s perfection and fullness of being. They advance “an idolatrous form of theism”<sup>12</sup> because they supposedly locate God’s being within the order of finite beings. Dolezal reasons that “Such a God is inevitably mutable and finite and as such is unworthy of worship.”<sup>13</sup>

Theistic mutualists have failed to grasp a proper view of God’s self-sufficiency and immutability, or impassibility. God’s self-sufficiency is also called his aseity. This divine self-sufficiency entails, according to Dolezal, that God is purely actual in his being. God cannot become more than he is or other than he is.<sup>14</sup> As pure being, God cannot undergo any change. Dolezal says that God cannot voluntarily subject himself to being moved by creatures. There cannot be the smallest change in God because it would signify an alteration in his being.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Theistic mutualism is “the belief that any meaningful relationship between God and man must involve God in a transaction wherein he receives some determination of being from his creatures.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: “God has been reconceived as deriving some aspects of his being in correlation with the world.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4; <sup>15</sup>: “One of the better known arguments for God’s pure actuality appears in Thomas Aquinas’s...”; <sup>16</sup>: “Pure actuality is understood by Thomists...”; <sup>31n.49</sup>: “God...is pure act.”; <sup>33n.52</sup>: “As purely actual...God...”; <sup>56</sup>: “He must be purely actual in all that he is...”; <sup>58</sup>: “...divine pure actuality-constitutes a baseline, a controlling grammar for all of our thoughts and beliefs about God.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-19.

Thus, when the Bible says that God experiences some change in relation, affection, or agency, these are only anthropomorphic or accommodated expressions. God does not alter himself ontologically when he alters his revelation of himself.<sup>16</sup> God being personal in his loving interaction with the world does not mean that he is acted upon or moved by his creatures.<sup>17</sup>

Calvinist theistic mutualists make a theological error, says Dolezal, when they claim that there are different types of divine immutability. What is termed ontological immutability is supposedly God's unchangeable nature itself, sometimes called his essential nature. This essential nature does not change. God has what some term relational mutability, they assert, in his interaction with angels and people.

However, argues Dolezal, God in his relationships with others is a state of being and thus, by definition, ontological. To say that God changes while in relationships with his creatures, so-called relational mutability, is actually affirming ontological mutability.<sup>18</sup> In Dolezal's understanding, any theologian who proposes that something real in God actually changes while in a relationship with creation, no matter his claim that God does not change in his essential nature, is guilty of asserting God's ontological mutability.

Dolezal writes that the heart of theistic mutualism is a correlative relationality between God and his people. Such a position affirms that God is subject to alteration in his being, and thus in at least some respect, is in becoming. Dolezal laments that this thinking is the prevailing position among many evangelical and Reformed theologians.<sup>19</sup> Some Reformed theistic mutualists grant that God undergoes change but that he goes through changes because he wills to change. In other words, God is in control of those changes, and that is acceptable, a position which can be summarized as a self-controlled mutability. Theistic mutualism includes the view that a righteous man can produce divine pleasure that God would otherwise lack, and that God has chosen to do this for himself. Nonetheless, contends Dolezal, if God freely chooses to be mutable for himself, might he then not be free to augment or negate his omniscience or his omnipresence or some other attribute?<sup>20</sup>

### **Divine Simplicity in Theology Proper**

Dolezal then presents the classic notion of divine simplicity, which means that God is not composed of parts.<sup>21</sup> A part of something is less than the whole of something, and without that part, the whole would be different than it is. If God were composed of parts then he would be dependent upon the parts and the composer of those parts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 24-26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31-35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 39: "Yet divine simplicity is either entirely missing or severely underappreciated in the writings of evangelical theistic mutualism... Many... disparage it as a 'philosophical relic' that the church is wise to disregard."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 37-40.

Thus, God's essence and existence must be identical.<sup>23</sup> God's existence is his act of being, and his essence is also to be. Each of God's attributes must then be identical with his essence. Furthermore, God's attributes, because he is simple in his being, must be identical with each other. That is, God's essence is not a number of divine attributes that exist together as an integrated whole.

But such a God is difficult to comprehend! Dolezal admits that human experience does not provide an ontological model for understanding it. For every creature, essence and existence are distinct principles of being. A person exists, but his essence is what makes that person a specific person. A person's attributes, his wisdom or goodness, for example, are in addition to his essence. All people have the same human essence, but not all people have the same wisdom or goodness.<sup>24</sup>

But how then is the Christian to understand Scripture's language which makes God sound like he is a man? While the Bible speaks as if God were a man who repents, he is not a man — but God! Likewise, divine attributes like wisdom and goodness sound human but are not. While they are separate and distinct in humans, they are not separate and distinct in God.<sup>25</sup>

Dolezal asserts that there are three basic approaches used to solve problems with divine simplicity, but that each one relativizes God to make language about him more intelligible.<sup>26</sup> The first approach simply disregards or dismisses divine simplicity. These theologians assume that there are some attributes which belong to the divine essence while other attributes are acquired via relationships with creatures. Such a view violates simplicity's insistence that God cannot be composed of substance i.e., attributes connected to his essence, and accidents i.e., sources of being distinct from his essence. Dolezal asserts that perhaps a majority of contemporary evangelical theologians operate under those assumptions.<sup>27</sup>

The second approach is to oppose or deny divine simplicity. There are a number of reasons why divine simplicity is denied. Some say that it is nonsensical to argue, as does simplicity, that all of God's properties are identical with all of the others. It seems self-evident that God's power, love, and knowledge are clearly not identical properties. Others have said that divine simplicity is not warranted by Scripture. They argue that the Bible presents God as in some sense composite.<sup>28</sup> Yet, Dolezal posits that divine simplicity does not render God an abstract property; what may be

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<sup>23</sup> A theologian cannot claim that there is no essential change in God while there is nonessential change. Nothing is distinct from or falls outside of his essence. Cf. *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60: "Divine simplicity accordingly insists on an inescapable incapacity and inadequacy of all our God-talk."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Theologians who come under scrutiny here are Bruce A. Ware in *God's Lesser Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) and *God's Greater Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004) and Rob Lister in *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), *Ibid.*, 65-67.

<sup>28</sup> Theologians who come under scrutiny here are Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983); Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 1980); and John S. Findberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), *Ibid.*, 67-69.

termed properties are nothing but the concrete, personal God himself. The distinctions of attributes are a divine accommodation to reveal something of the fullness of his being.<sup>29</sup>

The third approach is to reconceive simplicity in a way that distorts its teaching. Some revisionists do not believe that the divine essence itself is simple but has genuine complexities. They argue that there is univocal language about God which makes God's attributes real and distinguishable characteristics of his divine being.<sup>30</sup>

In response, Dolezal says this third position comprehends the unity of the divine essence as a corporate unity embracing units of actuality and intelligibility. Such a view precludes any attributes as ontologically identical to the divine essence. Rather, since God's essence is simple, it cannot be composed of an aggregation of his attributes.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, he contends that human language still speaks truthfully about God even though we draw all that we may say about God from vestiges of him in creation. What is a unity in God is presented in Scripture in the form of creaturely multiplicity. The diversity of attributes flows from how he has revealed himself and not from God's own being. Human language and thought does not parallel the very form of God's being.<sup>32</sup>

### **Divine Eternity and Creation**

Dolezal then addresses the topic of God's eternity. He argues that God has no future or past since he does not experience successive states of being.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, some Reformed theistic mutualists insist that God's eternity is, in fact, an endless succession of moments. For them, God is "everlasting" rather than eternal.<sup>34</sup> Other theistic mutualists hold that God existed before time and creation, but that when he created the world, he entered into time. So God is timeless without the universe but temporal within the universe.<sup>35</sup> Yet others underline that God takes on new attributes to his essence to relate to his creatures, in time, after creation.<sup>36</sup>

A prominent Reformed theologian contends that since time and history change, then God, who exists in time, changes. Nevertheless, God is unchangeable in his supra-temporal existence. Still, his changing existence in time is no less real than his atemporal existence. God assumed this new manner of being at the creation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 69-71.

<sup>30</sup> Theologians who fall into this category include Charles Hodge, R. L. Dabney, Robert Reymond, John Frame, and Kevin Vanhoozer. Ibid., 71-73

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 73-75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 75-78.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 79-82.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 485-504 comes into view here, Ibid., 90.

<sup>35</sup> William Lane Craig, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality" in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssel (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 129-60, apparently argues in this fashion. See Ibid., 91.

<sup>36</sup> This reference is to Lister, *God is Impassible*. See Ibid., 92.

<sup>37</sup> The referent (Ibid., 92-94) is John M. Frame in *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

In a similar fashion, another Reformed theologian also tries to convince readers that God at creation took on new attributes, properties, and characteristics that he did not previously have, that are neither of his essence nor are necessary to his essential identity as God. The key for this assertion is the incarnation itself which reveals God as eternal in his essential character but temporal in his covenantal character.<sup>38</sup>

Drawing his analysis together, Dolezal asserts that the theologians mentioned above wrongly agree that “God cannot act in the temporal realm without somehow existing on the same ontological continuum with His creatures.”<sup>39</sup> God acts in time to create, thus moving from a state of inactivity, not creating, to one of activity. God is moved or changed in this process, they think. They assume that God cannot act in or relate to the world if he is timeless.

The only legitimate option, says Dolezal, is for theologians to assent to the intellectually incomprehensible notion that God is eternally Creator. Foundational is that God must be able to do all things, such as create, from his own being. He doesn’t need new properties of being to create because creator-hood belongs to God in his eternal essence.<sup>40</sup> In this regard it is appropriate for theologians to speak of God’s absolute attributes, those which belong to him from eternity without a relationship to creatures, and his relative attributes, which have a relationship toward creatures. Relative names or attributes still denote something which exists absolutely in God and are not something which has happened to him (accident). In other words, “‘Creator’ is a relative name and denotes absolute reality.”<sup>41</sup>

When God wills something it is produced. Unlike creatures, this eternal act of will to create does not need a subsequent act of creation. In this way creation appears not in time but with time. It is not as if God moved his power from bare potential to actuality by his willing to create.<sup>42</sup> Creation brings about no change in God because he did not become Creator. He is the eternal Creator, says Dolezal.

### **Divine Simplicity and the Trinity**

Dolezal’s final topic is the Trinity. Since evangelical theistic mutualists disregard divine simplicity, they are faced with the three Persons of the Godhead as either three parts of God or three discreet beings who compose the social unit called God.<sup>43</sup> Often, theistic mutualists explain Trinitarian unity using the notion of perichoresis (mutual indwelling) to account for God’s unity. However, Dolezal disputes that only the simple unity of identical substance can ensure that the fullness of the Godhead is in each person of the Trinity.<sup>44</sup>

He explains the unity of the divine being, or God’s unity of singularity, by elaborating the Biblical witness to God’s singularity and exclusivity, and concludes that the Father, Son, and

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<sup>38</sup> The referent (Ibid., 94-95) is K. Scott Oliphint in *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>42</sup> The opponent here is T. F. Torrance in *Christian Doctrine of God, One Being in Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 105-06.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 106-07.

Holy Spirit have the exact same nature. Furthermore, the consequences of divine simplicity also keep believers from contemplating three gods.<sup>45</sup> What that means is that unlike men, in God there is no determination of his being in addition to his essence. There are no particularizing features that are over his divine nature. This view of divine simplicity is essential to monotheism and demonstrates that God must be one being because that is what it means to be God.<sup>46</sup> In other words, God's essence, or whatever is in God, is ontologically identical to his divine nature—his substance and nature are equivalent.<sup>47</sup>

Despite this unity, the three persons are truly distinct. The distinctions are in personal relations. The Father begets or has the real distinction of paternity, the Son is begotten or has the distinction of begottenness, and the Holy Spirit is breathed or sent forth with the relative property or distinction of spirated procession.<sup>48</sup>

Dolezal uses negative expressions to explain the three persons. The distinctions are not between the persons and the divine essence but only among the persons themselves. The distinctions are also not the same as creaturely persons where a person is a complete substance distinct from all other persons. Likewise, in creatures, relations inhere as accidents but not so in God. The three persons are not complete individual substances. Divine relations are not features of his being which exist over and above his substance. Unlike men, he is not composed of substance and relations.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to Dolezal's presentation of classical Trinitarian unity are composition models of Trinitarianism favored by theistic mutualists. Social Trinitarianism is the favorite flavor for them, and Jürgen Moltmann is the most influential advocate. For Moltmann, perichoresis is the glue that holds the Trinity together. Evangelical theologians J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig are also social Trinitarians who maintain the one divine nature to be an aggregate of the three persons each with distinct centers of consciousness. For them, it is the Trinity as a whole that is properly God. The three persons are parts of the one God. Also, Calvin Seminary's Cornelius Plantinga is in favor of a social Trinitarianism and rejects the Augustinian tradition's notion that God has a singular mind and will. He asserts that the three persons have distinct centers of consciousness with a harmony of knowledge, rather than an identity of knowledge. For Plantinga, the Trinity is a complex thing of persons, essences, and relations.<sup>50</sup> Dolezal rightly refutes these erroneous views of social Trinitarianism.

However, there are some evangelicals who also hold to modified forms of social Trinitarianism. John Feinberg apparently supports that for the Trinity to have true fellowship, they cannot always be thinking of everything they know. However, if Feinberg is correct, then the three persons have discrete acts of will, divine knowing and willing are distinguished from the divine essence, and to say that God knows something is the result of different acts of knowing which

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-23.

<sup>50</sup> The literature in the section includes Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, IL.; IVP Academic, 2003), and C. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism" in *A Reader in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 67-89. See Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 123-27.

coalesce.<sup>51</sup> Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem apparently contend for a functional subordination within the Godhead. For them, the Father exercises authority over the Son not just as incarnate but from eternity. Each person exercises a power of will which is distinct. Such a view means that God's will and power are a collective aggregation of acts.<sup>52</sup>

### **Appraisal and Conclusion**

The topics addressed in *All that is in God* are of high importance and the author does a great job presenting his position. The issues under debate touch just the tip of the theological iceberg of how believing theologians are to interpret the scriptures relative to the doctrine of God and ultimately to all of the other theological topics.

To make progress analyzing the problem, it would be helpful to turn back through the pages of church history beginning with medieval thinking, moving to the Reformation and then into modernity. However, both to avoid contemporary debate and to restrict the size of this study, the concluding investigation will focus on the 19th century theologian Charles Hodge's review of the issues. Dolezal rightly points out that Hodge rejected Thomas Aquinas' theological method relative to interpreting God's attributes. Let us more closely examine Hodge's analysis of the divine attributes, which receives a footnote in Dolezal's text.<sup>53</sup>

Hodge began by asserting that the divine essence is unchangeable and that it has certain perfections. Those perfections are revealed both in the constitution of human nature as well as in scripture.<sup>54</sup> The perfections are called attributes, which are essential to God's being and are necessarily involved in the believer's idea of God. God's attributes are distinguished from predicates which refer to him, from the properties or distinguishing characteristics of the three Persons of the Trinity, and from accidents or qualities which may or may not belong to a substance.<sup>55</sup>

Hodge's analysis of the historical development of the attributes indicated that there were paths which he thought that believing theologians should not follow- those of nominalism and realism. The medieval realist notion viewed God as a composite being, composed of different elements. Those realists believed that general terms did not express mere thought or conceptions in our

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<sup>51</sup> John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2001), See Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 130-32.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2005); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994). See Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 132-34.

<sup>53</sup> Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 73. In an earlier interpretation of A. A. Hodge's thinking, he laments, 64: "just how much the mechanistic Enlightenment thinking has impacted Christian theology."

<sup>54</sup> Hodge made strong univocist claims (using Dolezal's term) when he asserted, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (London: Clarke, 1960), 1:396: "The Scriptural view of this subject, which distinguishes the attributes in God as distinct, and assumes that knowledge in Him, in its essential nature, is what knowledge is in us, does not conflict with the unity and simplicity of God as a spiritual being." He continued: "...that knowledge in God is knowledge, and not power or eternity; that it is what knowledge is in us, not indeed in its modes and objects, but in its essential nature. We must remove from our conceptions of the divine attributes all the limitations and imperfections which belong to the corresponding attributes in us; but we are not to destroy their nature." "God, therefore, does and can know in the ordinary and proper sense of that word."

<sup>55</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:368.



minds, but substantive existence.<sup>56</sup> While Hodge advised against walking down that path, the route looks familiar because it at least has similarities to the road advocated by Dolezal's antagonists, the univocists. If this is the case, then it could perhaps be suggested that the univocist's position is not solely the ugly child of enlightenment thinking but has a much longer theological pedigree.<sup>57</sup>

Another objectionable way to describe the relationship between God's attributes and essence, according to Hodge, could be to follow Aquinas and some Lutherans who argue that God is pure act (*actus purus*)- a theme well known to readers of Dolezal's book. This is a false representation, Hodge asserts, and should be corrected. To say that the divine attributes only differ in name, or are simply a divine accommodation, is "to destroy all true knowledge of God."<sup>58</sup> Aquinas' view makes God simply a force that can be known only by its effects. Theologians are left with either abandoning attempts to determine the divine attributes or to renounce knowledge of God as well as faith in the revelation that he has graciously given of himself. This means that God, as such a force, is not a person and has no will; such a view "is essentially pantheistic." Hodge cited with approval an author who said that this teaching is "the denial of God as He is revealed in the Scriptures."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, if God is *actus purus*, then God cannot have knowledge. "If omniscience is only a different name for omnipotence, it ceases to be a distinct attribute of God." Hodge was strongly against confounding knowledge and power in God. To say that they are identical in the divine being is to affirm "that as God knows from eternity He creates from eternity..." "We are thus led, by these speculations, into pantheistical views of the nature of God and of his relation to the world."<sup>60</sup> To be crystal clear on his strong rejection of this medieval notion, Hodge lamented: "It is deeply to be regretted that...the Lutheran and Reformed theologians, after renouncing the authority of the schoolmen, almost immediately yielded themselves to their speculations."<sup>61</sup>

The best way to represent attributes and essence, from a historical perspective, would be to follow Francis Turretin and others, posited Hodge. Turretin taught that the attributes had a real foundation in the divine nature, and Hodge believed that there should be an actual distinction between the divine attributes. God's attributes, as revealed in scripture, are objectively true and are grounded in the divine essence. Theologians should reject the "...extreme view of the simplicity of his essence," said Hodge, "which requires us to assume that the divine attributes

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<sup>56</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:369: They comprehended "the divine attributes as differing from each other *realiter*, as one *res* or thing differs from another."

<sup>57</sup> The other dead end street for Hodge was the way of nominalism. Nominalists argue that general terms are words which answer to mental abstractions. Nominalists "confound the attributes, making them all mean the same thing, which is equivalent to denying them all together"; in referring to the different attributes, they "only use different words for one and the same thing." *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:371.

<sup>59</sup> Hodge says "...there can be no difference between the actual and the possible, for the one as well as the other is always present to the divine mind. It would also follow that the creation must be infinite, or God finite." Aquinas' teaching "is derogatory to God." Positively citing Martensen, *Dogmatik*, 113, Hodge asserts: "It is the denial of the very essence of faith, if it is only in our thoughts that God is holy and righteous, and not in his own nature; if it is we who so address Him, and not He who so reveals Himself." Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:372.

<sup>60</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:395.

<sup>61</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:394.

differ only in our conceptions.”<sup>62</sup> The ground for that rejection is that the divine attributes differ not only in human thinking; there is a reason in God why theologians think of him as possessing these diverse perfections. In other words, “...the divine perfections are really what the Bible declares them to be.”<sup>63</sup> He summarized the problem when he bemoaned, “Instead of determining the nature of the divine attributes from the representations of Scripture and from the constitution of man as the image of God, and from the necessities of our moral and religious nature, they allowed themselves to be controlled by a priori speculations as to the nature of the infinite and absolute.”<sup>64</sup> In terms of method, thought Hodge, theologians must be controlled by scripture and the laws of humanity’s nature and not by speculative medieval thinking.<sup>65</sup>

Charles Hodge’s teaching clearly disagrees with Dolezal’s presentation, and Dolezal rightly admits that the great northern Presbyterian theologian held to a notion of a complex divine essence.<sup>66</sup> Yet, Charles Hodge has been judged by scholars and ministers alike to be a champion of orthodox theology for nearly two hundred years. Contemporary American reformed theologians who come under Dolezal’s sharp critique can certainly claim an honored American pedigree.

Moving beyond a critique based upon Hodge’s systematics, Dolezal’s book presents a number of unanswered questions. The first two questions flow from John Frame’s response to Dolezal’s book.<sup>67</sup> The first question concerns the nature of God’s attributes and the creation. Bavinck, according to Frame, taught that God had attributes that are apart from creation, that he termed “necessary” attributes. God has “free” attributes that he has by virtue of his relationships to creatures. Dolezal seems to charge that Bavinck’s “free” attributes are what he terms “new” attributes that in fact don’t exist. If God’s free attributes don’t exist, then does God have no relationship to his creatures? God having no relationship to creatures is a form of deism. On the other hand, if a theologian holds that God’s relationship to his creatures are his own eternal being, then is that not a form of pantheism?

The second question concerns the notion of God as eternally creator. Dolezal argues that it is foundational that God must be able to do all things, such as create, from his own being. But what does it mean to say that God creates from his own being? Couldn’t that mean that the creation is in some sense or way “part” of God in some pantheistic fashion? Dolezal argues that God doesn’t need new properties of being to create because creator-hood belongs to God in his eternal essence. Granted, God has an eternal attribute to create a world different from himself. But

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<sup>62</sup> Theologians then distinguish between the reason as determining and the reason as determined (*ratio rationantis/ ratio rationatae*) relative to the attributes. Hodge expressed himself precisely, “...the divine attributes differ neither *realiter*, nor *nominaliter* but *virtualiter*.” *Ibid.*, 1:373.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:394.

<sup>65</sup> Hodge, *Ibid.*, 1:396: “And in determining what is, and what is not, consistent with the nature of God as an infinitely perfect being, we are to be controlled by the teaching of the Scriptures, and by the necessities (or laws) of our moral and religious nature, and not by our speculative notions of the Infinite and Absolute.” For more information on Hodge’s theological method, see Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 1:73-75.

<sup>66</sup> Dolezal notes that the prominent southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney was also a univocist who asserted that if someone claims that the divine attributes differ only in name, then “...they are unmeaning”. *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>67</sup> John Frame, “Scholasticism for Evangelicals: Thoughts on *All that is in God* by James Dolezal” Nov. 25, 2017 in Frame-Poythress.org.

unanswered for me was when Dolezal thought God acted to actualize this world. Is not creation from “the beginning” - when he spoke something into existence that is not of his own existence? Also, I don’t think that he would want to say that actualizing the created world is part of God’s essence- because that would be pantheism. Dolezal would not want to affirm any type of pantheism- but his teaching should probably be more clear on this important point.<sup>68</sup>

Dolezal also speaks of “absolute” and “relative” divine attributes. The “relative” attribute was not clear to me at least. For Dolezal, is a “relative” attribute of God’s essence and therefore not truly relative- or are they truly relative and therefore non-divine? The author needed to make this section more clear.<sup>69</sup>

While being able to claim a relatively long American theological heritage, some of Dolezal’s warnings against certain contemporary evangelical theological expressions are still correct.<sup>70</sup> His book is in some ways helpful. Dolezal does his best to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the old Princetonian and southern Presbyterian, as well as more contemporary formulations of equivocist thinking. It is at this point that Dolezal’s book raises another important question. The question concerns the relationship between the doctrine of God proper, and thus all other doctrines, and theological method.<sup>71</sup> To choose a theological method is also to select a way of looking at and thinking about the world from within a specific culture.<sup>72</sup> Dolezal seems to charge that some evangelical theologians are intellectually trapped within a post-Kantian world and formulate their doctrine of God, specifically their equivocist thinking, according to that worldview. But what does Dolezal offer as an antidote? He argues that a better substitute is a

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<sup>68</sup> While Dolezal analyzed how both Augustine and Bavinck dealt with this problem, and rightly insisted that theologians must distinguish between the way humans predicate about God which is different from how God actually exists, nevertheless he provided no answer to this question as best as I can observe. See *All that is in God*, 98-100.

<sup>69</sup> For example, in *All that is in God*, 100n56 Dolezal said that a relative attribute is not ontologically relative but is different from “absolute” attributes because they are articulated from the standpoint of our relation to God as creatures in time. If that is the case, are the “absolute” attributes knowable in any sense by creatures who live in time?

<sup>70</sup> Believing theologians must combat any denial of fundamental biblical teaching regarding God’s attributes and Dolezal has brought this important teaching to his reader’s attention.

<sup>71</sup> For more information on how humans are to speak and know about God, see Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, 1:85-90.

<sup>72</sup> For information on culture and the philosophy of Aristotle in theological method, see Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, 1:46-47; for cultural influences, see *Ibid.*, 1:79-80; for epistemological foundations, see *Ibid.*, 1:82-84.

rejuvenated scholastic tradition.<sup>73</sup> In other words, it appears that he wants contemporary theology proper to be confined to pre-enlightenment neo-Thomist thought patterns.<sup>74</sup>

Theological method relative to the doctrine of God involves advanced hermeneutics and complex concepts. The words that we use to describe God necessarily flow out of a given worldview or metaphysic that speaks the truth about reality. The question for me is whether Thomas Aquinas' metaphysic, which reached back in time to the pagan thinker Aristotle, was the most biblically faithful worldview that can be constructed and used in crafting a doctrine of God that is as close as possible to God's own self-revelation.<sup>75</sup> There is no question that by God's common grace a pagan based metaphysic can synapse with that given by God through special revelation. Yet, the question remains whether systematic theologians today can conform their thinking more closely to the worldview directly given by God in scripture than did Aristotle. In other words, it would seem that a superior alternative would be for the faithful systematic theologian, as far as possible, to theologize with a biblical metaphysic rather than self-consciously utilizing either past or contemporary cultural or philosophical grids.<sup>76</sup> However, such a theology is not easy to construct!<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Dolezal believes the doctrine of divine simplicity reached its summit in Aquinas. 55: "Several factors enabled Thomas...perhaps most important of which was the recovery of Aristotle's metaphysical framework..." "The conceptual framework did not alter the essential claims of the doctrine, though it did enable Thomas to explicate it in more precisely existential terms."; 61: For more information on "how each modern mechanism displaced the older, predominantly Aristotelian, natural philosophy, see..."; 61-62: "...mechanism took over the field of natural philosophy..."; 62: The philosophical change brought "a restricted understanding of the meaning and significance of divine simplicity..."; 63: For those elaborate [medieval and Protestant scholastic] denials to make sense, "one would need to presuppose the basic accuracy of Aristotelian metaphysics...". Dolezal also argues in 63 that after Hume and Kant, Christian theologians abandoned the metaphysical structure of Aristotelian philosophy as they went simply to the Bible assuming that they didn't have to commit to a particular understanding of being.

<sup>74</sup> For information on John Owen's rejection of Aristotle's method in theology, see Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, 1:92; for a note comparing Aquinas, Calvin, and Turretin, see *Ibid.*, 1:53n107.

<sup>75</sup> Aquinas was too great a thinker for me to assert that his metaphysics was simply Aristotelian. There were aspects (like his doctrine of *esse* or the transcendentals of being) that were clearly not Aristotelian.

<sup>76</sup> For general information on the nature of theology, see Richard C. Gamble, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology" in A. T. B. McGowan, *Always Reforming* (Leicester, England: IVP, 2006) 211-39; for more information on an attempt at a faithful biblical theological method, see Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 1:5-8, 10, 17-18, 23-24, 27-31, 41-48, 56-72, 76-77, 94-99 and 274-75.

<sup>77</sup> We certainly want to avoid the type of problems that swept through the Netherlands from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> between Voetius and his followers, and Cocceius and his. While Cocceius rejected Voetius' scholastic method, in some ways those debates were really between those who followed Aristotle's philosophical tradition and opponents who followed Descartes. See Bavinck's analysis in *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:180-81, 183-86 and John Bolt's editorial note 1:186n21. For some past attempts to create such a theology and the inherent difficulties in its accomplishment, see Gary T. Meadors, ed., *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).