



Lesson 67

Can You Understand God? part 1

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In this lesson we are going to be looking at two words: Apophatic and Cataphatic. We're also going to be looking at what each of them mean and how they can be used.

Apophatic Theology

"If you can understand, it's not God"

There was a prominent early Christian theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth century. His name was Augustine (Saint Augustine, Augustine of Hippo, etc.) he wrote many books on Biblical doctrine. He was born in AD 354 and he died in AD 430; shortly after he died the Vandals who were besieging the city he was in conquered it. He lived in Algeria, a country in northern Africa. He was a bishop and often debated Biblical doctrine with other Christians. A lot of his books and sermons still survive today. He said, "Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus". That is Latin for "if you can understand, it's not God", roughly. What he was saying is that if you can understand something, that understanding is not from God. So, when it comes to Biblical doctrine, we cannot understand God; if we think we do we are mistaken.

What Apophatic means

Apophatic is a negative theology. We looked at a statement about God; it said that if you can understand something, it isn't (from) God. This basically means you can't understand God. There is a word for this theology, and it is apophatic. The word apophatic comes from the Greek language. In Ancient Greek, there are two words; apo, and phanai. Apo means "of, from, away from; separate, apart from, free from" and phanai means "to speak". Eventually these words merged, and formed the word "Apophanai", which means "to speak off" or, "to speak away from". The word "Apophanai" later turned into the word "Apophasis", which means "denial, negation". Later the word turned into "Apophatikos" which means "negative", "to say no". This word was Latinized in the 19th century and became the word we have today- Apophatic. So what technically is Apophatic theology? Apophatic theology is also called Negative theology, it approaches and describes God by negation, speaking only of what God is not like, rather than what God is like. This theology means you can never understand God; it is the theology that is behind the saying we looked at previously.

Romans 11:33-36

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." Romans 11:33-36. Paul says God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out. That is exactly what the Apophatic model is. It means that we cannot understand God. That is why Paul asked the rhetorical question, who has known God's mind. Romans 11:33-36 is a good example of the Apophatic model.

The Great Controversy 527

Ellen G. White said, "... the finite minds of men are inadequate to fully to comprehend the plans and purposes of the Infinite One. We can never by searching find out God. We must not attempt to lift with presumptuous hand the curtain behind which He veils His majesty. The apostle exclaims: 'How unsearchable are His judgements, and His ways past finding out!' Romans 11:33." *The Great Controversy* 527.1 This is an example of the Apophatic mindset. Ellen White is saying that we cannot understand God, and we should not try to. She is saying that we need an Apophatic mindset. She uses Romans 11, which we just looked at, as a proof for her point. God is too high for our understanding, so if we try to understand Him we will be led into doubt and unbelief. If we aren't careful we will fall into the snares of Satan (and that is what she titled this chapter).

Cataphatic Theology

What Cataphatic means

Cataphatic is the opposite of apophatic. Apophatic means that we can't understand God- it's negative, while cataphatic is positive. It means that we can understand God. "Cataphatic theology involves defining or knowing God through positive statements." Cambridge Dictionary. "Cataphatic theology ... is theology that uses 'positive' terminology to describe or refer to ... God – i.e. terminology that describes or refers to what the divine is believed to be..." Wikipedia. Cataphatic means that we can understand God.

1 John 4:8

There are examples in the Bible where we can clearly see a Cataphatic model. A prominent passage is 1 John 4:7,8. Those verses say, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." John says that God is love. We (humans: Christians and non-Christians) understand what it means to love others- that means that we can understand God. John says that if you love other people you know (understand) God, but if you don't love others you don't know God. According to this model God is understandable because He is love. This is an example of Cataphatic theology.

Understanding human nature

Ellen G. White (EGW) says that we can understand God. In Romans 11, Paul says you can't understand God, and in *The Great Controversy* 527, EGW agreed with him. This was all Apophatic theology. However, although EGW says that we can't understand God in one place, in another passage she says we can. ST July 14, 1909, paragraph 7 says, "The work of Christ in the world was to reveal the Father. Man must be given a knowledge of God through a revelation of the character of His Son. By coming to earth and taking the nature of man, the Savior bridged the gulf between heaven and earth, and made it possible for man to understand the character of God and to understand His purpose for mankind..." Here Ellen G. White plainly says that we can understand God. She says that the connecting link is the nature of man. When we understand the nature of man, we are understanding Christ's nature, and Christ's nature (as a human) is connected to the nature of God. So when we understand the nature of man we are understanding God- that's cataphatic- that is what EGW tells us.

Limiting God

People believe that the Cataphatic model is bad. They believe that it will limit God. The Apophatic model says we can't understand God; He could be anything- He's unlimited. But the moment we begin to try and understand Him, is the moment we begin to limit Him. We're only humans so our brains can't understand a subject as big as God. We bring Him down to our level so that we can understand Him. And that's what people don't like. When we begin to understand God, we limit what He can do because we are limited. That is why people do not like the Cataphatic model- it limits God.

Two Theological Models

<u>Apophatic</u>	<u>Cataphatic</u>
negative	positive
You can't understand God	You can understand God

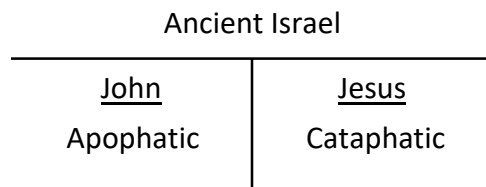
John and Jesus

John was apophatic

We can use the terms apophatic and cataphatic to describe the dynamics in the history of Christ. We previously saw that if you believe in an apophatic version of theology you believe that you cannot understand God; while if you believe in a cataphatic version of theology you believe that you can understand God. John the Baptist can be represented by the Apophatic model. As we know, he didn't have a correct understanding of God's kingdom, so he also didn't have a correct understanding of God. For a long time- all while he was doing his ministry- he didn't even understand Christ. Ellen G White says, "And now from his dungeon he [John the Baptist] watched for the Lion of the tribe of Judah to cast down the pride of the oppressor, and to deliver the poor and him that cried. But Jesus seemed to content Himself with gathering disciples about Him, and healing and teaching people. ... To the desert prophet all this seemed a mystery beyond his fathoming." *The Desire of Ages* 215.3 and 216.1 He was the first angel and he represents an Apophatic mindset because he didn't understand God.

Jesus was cataphatic

Jesus represents the Cataphatic theology. We have been looking at apophatic vs. cataphatic. We saw how Apophatic theology believes that you can't understand God, and Cataphatic theology believes that you can understand God. We saw how in Christ's time; John believed in Apophatic theology- he didn't understand the nature of the kingdom. Christ represented the cataphatic theology. He came to earth in the form of a human to explain to us what God is like, and what the kingdom of heaven is like. All the times Christ said, "the kingdom of heaven is like", He is telling us that we can understand God and the kingdom; that Cataphatic theology is correct. So when we compare the two methodologies, we have two choices. We can believe John and say that we can't understand God, which is apophatic, or we can be Christ's disciples and say it is essential to understand God- that was the point of Christ's mission.



In Summary:

Two Theological Models

<u>Apophatic</u>	<u>Cataphatic</u>
negative	positive
You can't understand God	You can understand God

Ancient Israel

<u>John</u>	<u>Jesus</u>
Apophatic	Cataphatic

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