

What Do We Mean by “God?” (Part 1)

Text: 1 John 4:8 (NIV)

8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Prayer:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, My Rock and My Salvation. Amen.

The challenge in our day is to avoid creating a God in our own image. Human nature always seeks to justify its aberrant behaviours. We argue with the police officer that we weren't really going that fast. Our speedometer is a bit off. Or, the radar is malfunctioning. If that doesn't work we say we had exceptional reasons for speeding.

What is evident today is the attempt to rewrite the Bible to say that what we once thought objectionable for Christians, is no longer objectionable. So we are in a moral wilderness where many Christians cannot tell right from wrong and many are questioning the value of the Bible as a guide in our spiritual lives. If you stand up for traditional morality one runs the risk of being labelled “old school.” Frank Moore, in the first book of his two-volume work, *Coffee Shop Theology*, says there is “an unconscious eagerness to create a God more accepting of questionable choices and destructive lifestyles.”

C. S. Lewis once said, “We want not so much a Father but a grandfather in heaven, a God who says of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’” So, because we don't like the Biblical God, we create a choice of homemade varieties.

OUR GRANDFATHER IN HEAVEN

This God is a kind of senile but kind person who really doesn't mind what we do as long as we don't hurt each other or damage the furniture. He picks us up when we fall, never blames us for anything, always lets us off, and is always cheerful.

OUR FARRIE GODMOTHER IN HEAVEN

This is a similar deity to the Heavenly Santa Claus. This God is the source of all the magic we desire. We throw a request in the wishing-well

each night and prayer becomes simply a way of getting our desires met with only cosmetic changes on our part. Nicer clothes in the closet! A few more Loonies and Toonies in the piggy bank. God is a real sweetheart of a guy.

GOD, the "JUDGE JUDY" IN THE SKY

Some opt for a God who is rather stern and rigid. He's like a judge with a robe and a mallet ready to condemn us at the slightest violation of the rules. This God is angry and wants to consume us all in eternal fires. Most people are not eager to embrace this kind of deity. So, for the most part, we avoid "the Judge Judy" God by decriminalizing all our vices.

GOD THE HEAVENLY HANDYMAN

God! Mrs. Fix it in Heaven. When we get broken, when life get shattered, we run to God to fix it, like a child to it's mother. We want God to kiss it and make it better. God cleans up the mess we've made with our lives. This God makes home visits only when called. Other than that, we really don't have much of a relationship with this God until panic time. Once things are up and running again, we don't find much use for Mrs. Fixit.

GOD, THE IMPERSONAL GLUE OF THE UNIVERSE

This deity is different than the others in that this God is not like a person at all—just an impersonal force. This God is like the substance, however microscopic or subatomic, that holds everything together. This God is just the life force that drives evolution forward. This God makes no demands on us at all.

C. S. Lewis said, with a hint of sarcasm, "The Life-Force is a sort of tame God. You can switch it on when you want, but it will not bother you. All the thrills of religion and none of the cost. Is the Life-Force the greatest achievement of wishful thinking the world has yet seen?"

I'm sure we could go on with other varieties of deity that we create once we reject or seek to modify the God revealed to us in the Scripture.

As a Christian, it is my duty, as much as lies within me, to introduce you to the God of the Bible. I want to connect you with the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not all Christians agree on very single detail of doctrine. There are many ongoing conversations. But, about the character is God, there is great

consensus. Yes, there are squabbles about a few points of how God administers God's sovereignty in election and salvation. For the most part these discussions are carried on with good will and do not destroy fellowship. The various sides of that discussion (there are more than two), still confess belief in the "One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

This One God is Sovereign and Almighty. This One God created all that is for a divine purpose. There is no other God but this One God who is revealed in the Bible as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father. This same God is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

Westminster Confession

"There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty."

That's quite a mouthful, isn't it?

The Methodists modified that by striking out the word "passions" for obvious reasons. It made God seem unfeeling and unconcerned about human affairs. It smelled too much like the Greeks who considered the gods 'apathetic' or beyond feeling. The Presbyterians, of course, simply meant that God wasn't moody or subject to irrational swings.

But this statement in the *Westminster Confession* seems rather philosophical. God appears like a definition in a dictionary and not someone we have met.

John Wesley, considered God not just the great creator of reality but, also, the one who preserved creation. God wasn't just a sovereign who was governing everything by his immutable will, as if there was no other will in the universe. God was also an actively-involved loving parent who cared patiently for his creation.

In his Notes on 1 John 4:8, Wesley said, "God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract as he is said to be love; intimating that this is ... his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections."

Rather than putting sovereignty and power out front, Wesley taught that the love and compassion of God were out front. That's what Jesus came to tell us about God. Yes, God is the almighty sovereign. But, the reigning attribute that shed glorious light on all the others is the love of God. God is a loving compassionate Father who is sovereign and almighty, rather than God is an almighty sovereign who is also, by the way, loving and compassionate. The perspective matters.

So then, let's talk about what God is like. I first studied Systematic Theology under Walter Ellwell who wrote and edited many books. I found his approach helpful in preparing this message.

The Attributes of God

1. NATURE OF AN ATTRIBUTE:

Definition: "Attributes of God" are the qualities of God's being and character, or those perfections of God which are revealed in Scripture and which are exercised and demonstrated by God in God's various works. They are distinctive features which tell us what God is like. "Attributes" are not qualities attributed to God by theologians, but qualities revealed to us by God in God's works and God's Word.

Three Cautions to Christians

1. Even though we know some of God's attributes, we do not know all of the attributes that could be known.

2. Even though we know some of God's attributes, we do not understand fully even those. This is reflected in Christian hymnody.

"Could we with ink the ocean fill/and were the sky of parchment made/
were every stalk on earth a quill/ and every man a scribe by trade/
to write the love of God above/ would drain the ocean dry/nor could the scroll contain
the whole/ though stretched from sky to sky/The love of God/How rich and
pure/how measureless and strong/it shall forevermore endure/the saints and
angels song." (Frederick M. Lehman)

3. We can truly talk about the incomprehensibility of God. God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

2. CLASSIFICATION OF THE ATTRIBUTES:

The attributes may be divided into two classifications:

a. Incommunicable: Those attributes which emphasize the transcendence and the exalted character of God. These attributes God cannot share with us.

- i. Self-existence (depends on nothing outside for existence)
- ii. Immutability (unchangeable)
- iii. Omnipresence (everywhere present)
- iv. Omnipotence (all powerful)
- v. Eternality (without beginning or ending)

b. Communicable: Those attributes which find some reflection or analogy in humankind who were made in the image of God. Those attributes God can in part share with us.

- i. Holiness
- ii. Justice = righteousness
- iii. Goodness
 - love
 - grace
 - mercy
 - general benevolence of God for the good of his creation
- iv. Truth

Or, God can communicate (1) Intellectual attributes: knowledge & wisdom; (2) Moral attributes: goodness, love, grace, long-suffering, faithfulness, holiness, righteousness; and (3) Volitional attributes: his sovereign will.

3. PARTIAL LIST OF ATTRIBUTES:

We cannot exhaust the attributes of God in one session. But, we can show how certain attributes, or defining qualities of God, are deduced from Scripture. For, example:

A. Infinity: God is "without limitations"

1 Timothy 6:16 (TNIV)

16 who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

Romans 11:33 (TNIV)

33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

B. Self-existence: God "depends on nothing else" for his existence.

Psalm 90:2 (TNIV)

2 Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Revelation 1:8 (TNIV)

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Acts 17:25 (TNIV)

25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

Isaiah 40:13-14 (TNIV)

13 Who can fathom the Spirit [a] of the LORD,
or instruct the LORD as his counselor?

14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge,
or showed him the path of understanding?

C. Immutability: God is “always consistent, and unchangeable” in his character and essence.

Malachi 3:6 (TNIV)

6 “I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

James 1:17 (TNIV)

17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

Hebrews 13:8 (TNIV)

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

D. Omnipotence: God is “all powerful.” God can accomplish whatever God wills to happen.

Genesis 17:1 (TNIV)

The Covenant of Circumcision

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

Genesis 18:14 (TNIV)

14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.”

Jeremiah 32:27 (TNIV)

27 “I am the LORD, the God of the whole human race. Is anything too hard for me?”

God can do whatever he wills to accomplish. I have heard people asks can God create a rock too heavy for God to lift? But, putting the word God in a sentence doesn’t make the sentence a logical one. The almightiness of God refers to God being able to accomplish God’s will.

E. Omnipresence: God is “everywhere present.” This doesn’t mean solely that God is physically immense and huge. It really means that God is accessible everywhere to everyone. No one ever needs to fear that they are beyond the reach of God.

Psalm 139:7-12 (TNIV)

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

F. Omniscience: "all knowing." God journeys with us and God knows all things past and future. Nothing God or surprises God.

Revelation 20:12 (TNIV)

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

John 14:6 (TNIV)

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 16:13 (TNIV)

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

Colossians 2:3 (TNIV)

3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

John 17:17 (TNIV)

17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

Time doesn't permit us to give further example. But, you can by reading the Bible learn that God is:

- G. Righteous
- H. Just
- I. Wrathful against sin
- J. Good
- K. Loving
- L. Merciful
- M. Faithful, Covenant-keeping

Who is God Like?

That's the main question for Christian proclamation. Who is God's like? Above all God is like Jesus. Jesus is the "perfect image" of God. Jesus came to show us exactly what God is like. John 14:9-10 reads:

9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? **10** Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."

And Hebrews 1:1-3:

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. **3** The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

Finally, let me close with the verse in John 1:18: “**18** No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and^[a] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

For Christians, God is known as revealed in creation, in the story of Israel as the people of God, and supremely in and through Jesus Christ.

The vast majority of the world today are virtually ignorant of the God of the Bible. They have heard of God, but much of what they have heard is distorted, one-sided, or altogether inaccurate. They have created a god who exists only in their own imaginations. It is very sad that so few will take time to try to know God better. To know God is to love God. To know God means eternal life. That’s what Jesus came.

I encourage you brothers and sisters to read the Bible prayerfully, meditate intently, and obey promptly. And, I pray that the Holy Spirit will shine more light upon God Word so that we will be drawn into an ever-deepening relationship with the God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Holy One of Israel.

PRAYER:

Our Father, give us insight into your Word that we may learn to know you and Jesus Christ whom you have sent to us. If we learn to know you truly, it will mean everything in this life and the next. Amen.