

KNOWING GOD AS FATHER

In a time when the common belief of a modern society is that any belief in any god, and any belief in the existence of God should be accepted, when God is seen in everything created, when it is accepted that man himself is God, when He is described as “the force” or “the man upstairs” and when religious leaders refer to God as being “about six feet tall” (Kenneth Copeland), and a God made up of nine trinities (Benny Hinn), and many sincere Christians believe the god of Islam is the God of the Christian, it is time we looked at the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Wilbur Smith in his classic study on apologetics *Therefore Stand* writes: “When Julian Huxley says ‘A scientifically based philosophy enables us in the first place to cease tormenting ourselves with questions that ought not be asked, because they cannot be answered, such as questions about the Cause or Creation or Ultimate or Reality’ (quoted from Julian S Huxley *A Biologist Looks at Man*), he, in the stubborn agnostic attitude of all his writings, is simply attempting to dismiss one of those vast and fundamental problems which will lead to God”. This fundamental problem cannot be dismissed or set aside as unimportant. Yet just to believe that there is a God is not enough, the demons believe this and tremble (James 2:19), neither is it sufficient just to know God if one does not honor him as God (Romans 1:21). People who believe that God is one do well, but that limited belief is no better than the belief of demons if it is not a belief in the one God revealed by Jesus Christ, followed by corresponding actions. Faith in God, the God revealed in Scripture is not going to make a good man. A man might believe in God and be a murderer, or an adulterer. The men who instigated the death of Christ and later put the Apostles to death thought they were doing God a service. Our concept of God must be based upon the person of Jesus Christ. If we take away the revelation of God in Jesus Christ we have no conception of what God is like. This explains the various ideas held today concerning God. When Christ asked his Apostles if they would separate themselves from him and the revelation that he was making (as most of his disciples did at that time) they answered (loose translation) “Lord, what will become of us? We have no place to go. You have the words of eternal life. There is nothing for us in Judaism anymore”. The Jews believed in one God. He had revealed Himself to them, but this was as nothing to the disciples now that they had seen the revelation of God in Jesus. In the Old Testament the people knew God by His covenant name, Yahweh (Jehovah), which spoke to Israel of what God was in Himself rather than what He would be in relation to them. In the New Testament Jesus revealed God as Father, which was a new concept revealed in the life and teaching of Christ. It was not his teaching alone, but the life he lived that revealed God. So he could say “He that has seen me has seen the Father”. If we take away from a conception of God what we owe to the person of Jesus Christ, we have very little left. Our attitude toward Jesus, then, determines our concept of God.

The Fatherhood of God fills the gospel of Christ. He continually spoke of God as his Father and taught us to pray to

“our Father”. In the Sermon on the Mount he uses the word “God” five times and “Father” sixteen times. In the Gospel of John he uses the word “God” eleven times and “Father” sixty-six times. In speaking to God he always says “Father” never “God” except the quotation from Psalm 22:1 on the cross (Matt.27:46). In his book *Knowing God* J.I. Packer states: “You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s Holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity find how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers, and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all”.

There are special spiritual benefits derived from knowing God as Father. It is hard to understand suffering and hardships apart from understanding God. A simple belief in God as a supreme being gives us little comfort as we face trials, pains and heartaches of life. This is why so many people ask “Why is God letting this happen?” The writer of Hebrews gives us a clue to this that so many times seems so mysterious to us when he speaks of the Father disciplining us for our good and gives us the consolation that if you endure discipline, God deals with you as sons...be subject to the Father of spirits and live” (Heb. 12:7,9). Knowing God as Father makes forgiveness natural and possible. When we know God as a loving Father who forgives us, we are then more capable of forgiving others (Matt. 6:14,15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Also it is knowing God as Father that enables us to understand and enter into a life of prayer. Christ both in his teaching and practice shows us how reasonable and natural it is to enter into a life of prayer to our Father. We do not find a single prayer of Christ addressed to God (the quotation from Psalm 22 mentioned earlier may be the one exception) and it is only in the prayer recorded in John 17 that he mentions God. In all his prayers he addressed God as Father and taught us to pray “our Father”. This does not say that in our prayers we are not to think of God as the Creator in all His majesty and almightiness, but knowing God as Father revolutionizes our lives and gives us a clear understanding of who God is and our relationship to Him. As my friend, the late Curtis Dickinson wrote in his paper *The Witness*: “Having God as our Father is a rare and precious privilege. While God is Creator of all humanity, He is Father only to those who are made His children through Christ, His Son. In His infinite grace God offers us the right to become His children, but we must accept and appropriate that relationship made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross”. We would not expect to see those outside the church honoring God as He is revealed in Scripture, but certainly the church itself should never become guilty of having the wrong view of God which is rampant in the religious world today. A. W. Tozer stated it well in *The Knowledge of the Holy* when he said: “Always the most revealing thing about the church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him”.

THE IDOLATRY OF THEISM

Webster defines theism as “a belief in the existence of a god or gods, specifically a belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of man and the world who transcends yet is immanent in the world”. So how can this belief in one God who is immanent in the world, that is, being within the limits of possible experience or knowledge, be idolatry? J.I. Packer in *Knowing God* asks the question: “What does the word ‘idolatry’ suggest to your mind? Savages groveling before a totem-pole? Cruel-faced statues in Hindu temples? The dervish-dance of the priests of Baal around Elijah’s altar?” He then answers: “These things are certainly idolatrous, in a very obvious way; but we need to realize that there are more subtle forms of idolatry as well.” He further quotes Charles Hodge as saying: “idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images”. We usually define idolatry as being the worship of something other than God or replacing God with a devoted object that becomes a god to us rather than the true God. This is not usually the case. The apostle John warns the Christians of the first century: “little children keep yourselves from idols” (I John 5:21). The apostle Paul warns the church to not become idolaters as Israel did in the wilderness when they made and worshipped the golden calf while Moses was receiving the Law at Sinai (I Cor.10:7-11). Their idolatry was basically redefining God and the true faith. It was not merely the construction of a golden calf; it was their denoting the calf with God’s covenant name. “This is your God, O Israel that brought you out of the land of Egypt”. To redefine God and His word from that which He reveals Himself to be and what His standards are is a form of idolatry just as the radical nature of what God had delivered through Moses was lost by merging it with the false religions of the surrounding society, so we lose the radical nature of what God delivered through Jesus Christ when we, while believing in the one true God make Him to be a god other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the idolatry of theism, believing in the one God, yet believing He is other than what Jesus revealed Him to be.

The idolatry of the Gentiles, according to Paul, was that they “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four footed animals and crawling creatures” (Rom. 1:23). The idolatry of theism results in a life that corresponds to one’s concept of the god being worshipped. The Psalmist states: “those who make idols will become like them. Everyone who trusts in them” (Ps. 115:8), and Jeremiah states: “they walked after the emptiness and became empty” (Jer. 2:5). II Kings 17:15 says that Israel “followed vanity and became vain”. One of the problems Christian people have is they expect God to act as they think God should act. Their concept of God is not based upon His revelation in His son, Jesus Christ, but upon whatever they conceive God to be. As Gary North states in *The Sinai Strategy*: “All forms of idolatry are ultimately variations of self worship, for it is man, as a self-proclaimed sovereign being, who asserts the right to choose whom he will worship in place of God. Man, the sovereign, decides” not Jesus Christ.

Theism becomes idolatry when we believe in a God of love and goodness but not a God of Judgment and wrath. The apostle Paul tells us to “behold the kindness and severity of God” (Rom 11:22), and again “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). We are not to emphasize the goodness of God alone nor His severity alone, but to contemplate both together. Both are attributes of God. There is a lot of muddleheaded thinking and confusion when it comes to this aspect of faith in God. We have developed a Santa Claus theology of God that insulates Him from any responsibility for anything other than the comfort and well being of man. This denies His omnipotence and lordship over His world and makes the redemptive work of Christ on the cross meaningless. It was the wrath and severity of God that nailed him to the cross and punished the sin of the believer. If God is unrelated to heartbreaking and destructive things like cruelty, hardship and physical suffering then His words to Moses “who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11) are not true. This shows that God is in control of every aspect of the life of mankind. He again tells Moses that He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth, who forgives iniquity and sin, yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Exodus 24:6,7). The theism of idolatry believes in only one aspect of the nature of God. When trouble comes into some Christian’s lives and they have to deal with situations they cannot explain, or when they see so much suffering and adversity in their lives they ask “how can God let his happen?” or “why does this have to happen to me?” It is difficult to understand the contradictions with which people live and with no hesitation reproach God for things they can’t accept. How can people live a life of rebellion, sin and disobedience, then have the audacity to be angry at God or question His actions? If he is not a good God and a God of grace they would have been judged and destroyed before they had a chance to complain against Him. This is theistic idolatry. Helmut Thielicke, the great German theologian stated it this way in his book *Between God and Satan*: “Although we are ready to concede that God is our Master in theory, it looks very different when we meet it in everyday life, where our practice is diametrically opposed to our theory and we aspire to be gods of God”.

Ravi Zacharias, who has challenged liberal attitudes and made a case for Christianity at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and other prominent universities around the world, in his book *Deliver Us From Evil* says that “on virtually every campus where I debated the issue of God’s existence, some individual challenged God’s goodness by pointing out all the evil in the world: ‘a plane crashes, and thirty die while twenty live, what sort of God is that?’ The implication was of course, that God must be evil”. When this was tossed to him by a female student his answer was: “My question to you, young lady, is this: when you arrogate the right to yourself to choose who may live in your womb and who may die, you call it your moral right, but when God exercises the same right, you call Him evil. Can you explain that contradiction to me?” The explanation is simple: Idolatry of theism.

