

Who is this God that we worship?

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, August 31, 2003)

In our diverse secular society, we teach our children to graciously accept people of other faiths and beliefs. However, it's something quite different if they don't feel like they're standing securely and comfortably on the rock of our ***own*** faith. It's difficult to feel safe when they see the winds of our changing culture pull the sand out from under so many around them. They're barraged by misinformation from their peers and media icons who proclaim, "There's no such thing as God," who condescendingly dismiss it all as mere superstition, hypocrisy, and self-interest. Just what is it that brings us here to worship, to pray, to dedicate ourselves? More to the point, ***who is this God that we worship?***

Our Biblical traditions tell us that God is unchanging. Yet, the very meaning of the question, "Who is God?" changes considerably depending on just who is asking it and who it is that must respond. These differences can actually provide us with ***unique opportunities*** to grow in our ***own*** faith.

In my work as a neuroscientist, I periodically feel compelled to reassure colleagues that Christians needn't be ignorant or superstitious, no matter how the media may portray us. Science and faith ***don't*** compete with each other; they're actually ***complementary ways*** of viewing the same universe, different mechanisms for evaluating the same data in ***different ways***. Even in the case of the much-publicized battles over the Theory of Evolution vs. God's creation, the ***mainstream*** Christian denominations don't speak against scientific findings. Science asks "What is it?" and "How does it work?" Faith asks, "Why" and "What is our place in it all?" However, the converse should also be true: there is ***no scientific or rational basis*** for criticizing faith. While faith without reason leads to unrealistic views of the way the universe works, ***reason without faith is purposeless and impersonal.***

Many of us find that insights like these help us map out a cohesive worldview. Yet our methods, our thoughts, our approaches to life are all a part of *us*. The fatal flaw here is that reason alone is inadequate to describe *any* human experience, let alone a holistic, spiritual principal.

What *is* our most direct and irrefutable experience of God? When we watch the sun rise over the ocean, or gaze into the night sky, we are energized and filled with awe at the overwhelming enormity of it all, yet at the same time we sense a rightness, a connectedness. Atheists don't deny this - they simply don't recognize it as "worship." Likewise, even though terms like "justice," "altruism," and "moral integrity" are nonsense without faith in a benevolent world, they may labor under the assumption that ethics and morality are rational.

Anna Case-Winters offered insights into these issues at the presbytery-wide event last spring, *Open for dissent: A history and a calling*. She said:

Before we can even ask, "Does God exist?" we have to ask, "What do we mean by God?" This question is the real question for us now... Whether we affirm or deny that God exists, we have to define what it is we are talking about ...

If you were to engage a committed atheist in conversation, it is probably not helpful to begin with the traditional "arguments for the existence of God." These generally only prove convincing to those who already believe on other grounds. It is probably more to the point to begin with the question, "What do you mean by God?" You may find that as they spell out what they mean by God, you do not believe in that God either. They may describe a Santa Claus in the sky or a wrathful judge and punisher of evil or a puppet master pulling all the strings from above.

[end of quote]

“Just who is this god that you do *not* believe in?”

The point here is that instead of rallying to *defend our faith*, it would be much more profitable to establish what it is we *agree* about. God doesn't really *need* us to protect *Him*. You see, there's *much more to our God* than there is to the *false* ones that *we* must also deny.

Anna Case-Winters makes another important point about the God we know as Christians:

For Christians our meaning is Christ-formed.

... it takes the question to another level. Who is this Christ? The new question, the real question, is the old question: "Who do you say that I am?" And our accounting to this question must paint a picture worthy of that to which it points.

She goes on to say that even faithful Christians may miss the point when we focus on the humanity of Jesus. She continues:

I will put it this way: there's more to the Christ than Jesus...

Remember that Christ is not Jesus' last name, but an affirmation, a title meaning "God's anointed." His way of being "the Christ" was a kind of repudiation of all expectations -- expectations of nationalist revenge and triumph, expectation of a king coming to put down the nation's enemies. He freed up religious expectation of his day from the fossilization of his own tradition. Would we now make a fossil of him? How contrary to his spirit that would be.

[end of quote]

When we consider the meaning of God, it's important to remember that many of our neighbors are neither Christians nor atheists. Some are spiritually inclined, but have no real religious affiliation. Still others *are* people of faith, but are not Christian. Even patriotic American citizens, born and raised in this country, may have both religious and cultural traditions that are different from our own.

On our church website, someone asked,

Can you please explain to me why Christians believe that Jesus (May peace be on him) was the son of God? to me, that is a monstrous lie, and if the heavens could hear such a thing, they would crumble! please explain.

The writer's use of a common Islamic expression indicates that we *may* know *quite a bit* about the god that he *dis*believes in. It's one of the false polytheistic gods whose worship is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. To his ear, it may also sound like we're suggesting that the God of Abraham could be accused of having a "son" in the biological sense, much like the part men- part-gods that appear throughout pagan mythologies. Our perception of Jesus is quite different than this.

For Islamic people, the problem is a difficult one, since Jesus is an honored and respected prophet for them. However, the Qu'ran says:

They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no Allah save the One Allah. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve.

Now, Christians wholeheartedly agree that there is but one and only one God. We completely agree with those Islamic scholars who understand this verse as an opposition to polytheism. Unfortunately, in at least one other translation, a term corresponding to "trinity" is used. The confusion is further exacerbated by the fact that Mohammed himself believed that the Christian Trinity was: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and Mary the Mother!

A little bit of reflection on our part makes it clear that *we, too*, disbelieve in these *false* gods. However, we *also* recognize the significance of the Trinity to our faith: Jesus didn't just bring people of other races and faiths to the God of Abraham; He brought them to each other as well. The expression "son of God" uniquely expresses *our own, personal* relationship with God. We feel awe in the presence of the God of all creation, yet we are cared for by God, as a child is tended by a just and loving parent. We don't just submit to God out of fear, but rather we serve Him out of devotion and love.

Sometimes there's confusion about our beliefs much closer to home. A few years ago, a Presbyterian minister was widely quoted as saying:

"What's the big deal about Jesus?"

Although the quote was taken out of context, it fueled a storm of controversy between Presbyterians at conservative and progressive extremes. The underlying question: What *do* we believe in as Presbyterians? Which beliefs are essential and which are not?

One might have thought that we had answered these questions centuries ago. As Christians, we have the guidance of the Bible, first and foremost. As Presbyterians, we have our history as a reformed church, summarized by historic professions of faith starting with the Nicene and Apostles Creeds. Yet the question remains: Who is this Christ we believe in? What does it mean to follow Him?

Have we become as the Pharisees who Jesus rebuked, using legalistic arguments to place ourselves apart from the disenfranchised and keep them from God? According to the Gospel of Matthew, some will say:

‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’

Conversely, have we misled ourselves, pandering to the unworthy and ignoring the guidance of scripture? From the same Gospel:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

This age-old debate prompted the General Assembly to prepare the “Hope in The Lord Jesus Christ” statement and study guide. Anna Case-Winters happened to have been the moderator of that committee. [At the risk of interjecting an advertisement, we’ll be repeating the study series on this material on Tuesday nights this fall, from Oct 7-28.]

I'd like to close with something considerably more concrete than these abstract questions.

On September 11, 2001, America was harshly confronted by evil. You didn't have to be a theologian or an ethicist. You didn't need to have ever gone to Sunday School, or to have ever read the Bible. It didn't matter if you were a conservative or a progressive. It didn't matter what your race was, or what your religion was. All of our petty differences disappeared. The horror, the moral revulsion at the consequence of hatred was something concrete, something palpable for believer and skeptic alike.

Yet something *good* was equally palpable, and working even during the tragedy. To me, Jim Bruce's children's sermon said it all that week.

"This is where God is," he said as he held up the newspaper cover showing the volunteer rescue teams at ground zero. For a brief time, the nation came together as one. In those days, weeks, and months, prayers were posted on every park wall, fire department and Police station in Manhattan - indeed around the world. People shared prayers in candlelight vigils. God Bless America became our national anthem, *not* as war cry, but as a *prayer of hope!*

Our faith provided a pattern, a path through the unfamiliar horror and confusion, through the very valley of the shadow of death. Our traditions helped us to put it all together in a way that made some kind of sense as the rational and spiritual creatures that we are.

After the shock and the horror, who did *you* turn to for comfort.

What words gave *you* strength and support?

Who's light did *you* follow?

So I leave you, the faithful, to reflect on this one very *personal* question:

Who is this God that we worship?

Genesis 1: 1-10

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that [it was] good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which [were] under the firmament from the waters which [were] above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry [land] appear: and it was so.

And God called the dry [land] Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that [it was] good.

John 1: 1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John 8:47-59

"Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."

The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge. Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death."

The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?"

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,' though you do not know him.

But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad."

Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Hymns:

- 1) *Morning has broken* 469B
- 2) *Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!* 138B
- 3) *Here I Am, Lord* 525B
- 4) *I Danced in the Morning* 302B