

What is God Really Like? 1

*“I am enough of a romantic to believe that,
if something is worth being rude about,
it is worth understanding well.”*

– David Bentley Hart (The Experience of God) –

If there is a God . . .

If there is a God—a *faith statement*¹ for sure—we don’t get to make him up. A *real* God should not and cannot merely be a reflection of my imagination. A God who is real and alive must exist beyond my own puny understanding, bigger than any box in which I try to contain him or her or whatever pronoun we use for this Being. Even using the simple pronoun ‘he’ for God is awkward and inaccurate. I will use it, but when I do, I tend to cringe. God is *not* a ‘him’ or a ‘her.’ Jesus said “God is Spirit” (John 4:24). But God is far more personal than an ‘it.’ Thus, we lean to the language of ‘him’ historically because when God showed up in the flesh, ‘he’ came as a man, Jesus (his ‘son’). Furthermore, Scripture mainly speaks of God as Father and describes God with male metaphors, such as ‘King.’ On the other hand, the Hebrew pronoun for the Spirit is ‘she.’ In fact, God’s caring and nurturing attributes, such as compassion and mercy, are most often associated with feminine traits.

Some thinkers say that even calling God a ‘being’ falls short, or claiming that God ‘exists’ says too little. Rather, God is the very *ground of being*; God is *existence itself*, whatever that means. Those who talk this way assert that nearly anything we claim about God already belies our hidden desire to stand over, box in and control

him. Language, words, doctrine, theology—aren't these less than God? And yet don't they frequently function to shrink the Creator of all into a manageable doctrinal specimen we can pin down and dissect? Isn't it more convenient to cage him within our tiny, overconfident minds, where he must parrot our own lofty thoughts? The stubborn fact is that whatever we say about God or for God with great certitude is sifted through the thick veils of our religious traditions, cultural assumptions and personal interpretations. Skeptics and agnostics ask, "What can we really *say* for sure about this God?" Rightly so.

There seem to be as many versions of God as there are people, even within a particular faith, no matter how diligently religion attempts to indoctrinate us. Never mind comparing Hindus to Buddhists or Moslems to Jews. Among Christians, we'll see later how John Wesley would say John Calvin's God was worse than the devil! Even today, among North America's most downloaded Protestant preachers, Mark Driscoll and John Piper's grasp of God stands poles apart from that of Gregory Boyd or Brian McLaren. I like to think we're all still serving the same Lord, and yet sometimes I wonder if we have two (or more) diverse religions competing for the same 'Christian' label! The Apostle Paul spoke about different gospels and other christs in his day (Gal. 1:6-8).

Much closer to home, unbeknownst to us, even our closest loved ones probably hold drastically different notions of God than what we imagine. And closer still, as my own spiritual journey progresses, I may continue to pray to the same God, never realizing how much 'the God of my understanding' (to use 12-step recovery lingo) has morphed. While God doesn't change, my image of God may progress (or regress) so much over time that I am virtually worshipping another god under the same name. Moreover, this may be both good and necessary.

My point here is that those of us who claim to believe in 'the

God of the Bible' must become more aware of how we read the text through thick lenses of our own unconscious biases. From these distorting filters we are prone to construct idols of God in our own image. And so, we hear the controversial German preacher, Meister Eckhart, cry out in exasperation, "God! Deliver me from 'god!'"² That is, save me from every shadowy *conception* of God that I've created and worshiped, deceiving myself into believing it is the one true God! So I say no—if there is a God, I *don't* just get to fashion him from the clay of my own image. I *need* him to reveal himself in a way that can be known.

What God is not . . .

One stream of Christian thought called '*negative theology*'* suggests the best we can do is describe what God is *not*. You can name any attribute of God—any image of God you can find, even in the Bible—and then ask, "Okay, God is a father, but how is he *not* a father? God is a king, but how is he *not* a king? God is a shepherd, but how is he *not* a shepherd?" This is a good exercise as far as it goes, because it cautions us against taking these human metaphors too far. It reminds us that our image of God is just that: an image, an icon, a picture. We have these pictures, but God is bigger than any of them. God is *far more* than fire or light or water, even though these elements are used to describe to him. The hen, the eagle, the lion and the lamb signify some aspect of God's character, yet God is obviously *not* a bird or animal. Negative

'Negative Theology'

Also known as *via negativa* (negative way) or *apophatic* theology. 'Apophatic' comes from the word for 'deny.' It defines God by denying our definitions of God.

theology warns us against totalizing any of these symbols into an idol with which to displace God.

For example, in Numbers 21, we have the wilderness story in which a plague of venomous snakes attacked the Israelites. God told Moses to fashion a 'fiery serpent' made of bronze and erect it on a pole. All those bitten who turned their gaze toward the bronze serpent were immediately healed. The image represented the healing love of God and is used to this day as a logo in the medical world.

Unfortunately, the statue of the bronze serpent was later repurposed for idolatry. By the time of King Hezekiah, the people had named the bronze serpent 'Nehushtan' and begun to worship it. Thus, the king had to destroy it as part of his anti-idolatry reforms (2 Kings 18:4). Even so, the lesson is *not* simply to abandon all imagery of God, but to cleanse it and refocus it on Christ. Jesus himself modeled the use of divine imagery by recalling the bronze serpent during his moonlit chat with Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14-15).

And so a negative theology urges us to keep asking the both/and questions. We say God is present. We pray that we may experience this presence, "Make your face shine on me!" But we also ask, "Why is he absent?" And we pray through genuine crises of absence, "Do not hide your face from me!" Using 'face' as an image of God, we reflect, "How is each statement true and how is it not true?"

Or again, we proclaim, "God is close," and then follow up with, "How is God far?" Paul says God dwells in *unapproachable* light, but Hebrews invites us to enter the Holy of Holies boldly and *draw near* to God's throne with confidence! How can God be near and far at the same time? If we can rise above either/or assumptions and assertions that would box God in, we'll be able to remember and recount our personal both/and experiences of God.

Basically, for every quality of God's self that we uphold, we can

learn even more of him by asking, “How is God *not* like that? And does the opposite also hold true somehow?”

What God is . . .

Negative theology seeks to avoid boxing God in, but we do also need a positive theology. For God to be God, and not mere nonsense, we declare some truths by faith for which the opposite is *never* true:

- God is *good* and is never evil. He is the perfection of all we call goodness.
- God is *love* and every other aspect of God must align with his love.
- God is *light* and in him is no darkness whatsoever (1 John 1:9).
- God is perfect *beauty* and in him is no ugliness at all.
- God is perfect *truth* and let no one call him a liar.
- God is perfect *justice* and in him is no injustice at all.

Theology texts sometimes list God’s goodness, love and justice among his ‘attributes,’ and dedicate chapters to describing God according to these attributes, almost scientifically. These descriptions can be quite dry and sterile, ascribing human ideas, concepts and analogies to God in a way that is pretty philosophical and, frankly, limiting. This is what negative theology had hoped to overcome in the first place. Negative theology sought to retain the majesty and mystery of God beyond our manuals and categories.

The Apostle Paul and his later theologians address this sterility by introducing another more dynamic phrase: *divine energies** (*energeia*).

Energeia is also translated in the New Testament as ‘power’ (Eph. 1:19), ‘working’ (Eph. 3:7; 4:16; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:29) and ‘operations’ (Col. 2:12). We see God’s energies at work when Paul

‘Divine energies’

are God himself at work. They are not merely attributes of God, but rather, God himself in his actions, in his activity, in his self-revelation to us.

We’ll never penetrate the infinite depths of God’s *essence*, but God’s *energies* do penetrate our lives and our world.

Another phrase we use for these energies is ‘the grace of the Holy Spirit.’

says, “That energy is *God’s energy*, an energy deep within you, *God himself* willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure” (Phil. 2:13 MSG).

Note that the *energies* are not merely considered attributes of God. The energies are God himself in action. Later theologians would specify this, speaking of them as ‘uncreated energies.’ In other words, when we say “God is love” or “God is good” or “God is light,” we aren’t merely describing his characteristics. We are saying *God is* love, goodness and light in his *energies*, just as we say *God is* Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his *persons*.

Why ‘energies’? Because they describe who God is in his *actions*, in his *activity*, in his self-revelation. *God is* love experienced; *God is*

goodness revealed. *God is* beauty, truth and justice—coming to us, manifesting himself in our lives. The uncreated energies are God himself, touching us, filling us and transforming us. We will never penetrate the infinite depths of God’s *essence*, but God’s uncreated energies penetrate our world and our lives. We use another phrase to describe this phenomenon: ‘the grace of the Holy Spirit’!

So, while negative theology is a line of inquiry worth visiting—and we will—it cannot satisfy our hunger to *know* the living God. Doesn’t the Bible show us a God who wants to be known and is always

committed to making that happen? In negative theology, something is missing, even beyond the energies I've listed above. Or rather, *someone!* I'm referring to Jesus of course. To see the *only perfect image* that bears the fullness of 'the Good,' of love, light, beauty, truth and justice—on earth as in heaven—we turn to the '**Incarnation**'* (literally, the 'enfleshment') of God. We proclaim as truth the *good news* that God *has* revealed his character and nature in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Through Christ, we can know God.

God is like Jesus

The Christian faith, at its core, is the gospel announcement that God—the eternal Spirit who created, fills and sustains the universe—has shown us who he is and what he's like—*exactly* what he's like—in the flesh and blood human we sometimes call Emmanuel ('God with us'). Conversely, we believe Jesus has shown us the face and heart of God through the fullness of his life on earth: revealed through eyewitness accounts of his birth, ministry, death and resurrection. We regard this life as the decisive *revelation* and *act* of God in time and space. That's still a faith statement, but for Christians, it is our starting point. To look at Jesus—especially on the Cross, says 1 John—is to behold the clearest depiction of the God who is love (1 John 4:8). I've come to believe that Jesus alone is perfect theology.

'Incarnation'

refers to the great truth that in Christ, God became human.

As John 1:14 says, 'the Word became flesh.' When we use the word Incarnation, some mistakenly reduce this to the initial event, the birth of Jesus. But the Incarnation refers to the whole life of Jesus and to Jesus himself. That is, Jesus *is* the Incarnation of God.

When I say that God is *exactly* like Jesus, I don't mean we can reduce all that God is to a first century Jewish male. Nor would we claim anyone who encountered Jesus Christ could know all there is to know about God in his transcendent essence. But as we'll see, Jesus Christ is the perfected and perfect revelation of the nature of God because he *is* God. There is no revelation apart from him.

I don't shy from the word '*exactly*' because Scripture claims Christ is "the *exact* representation of God's being" (Heb. 1:3). Paul does assure us *all the fullness* of the God was pleased to dwell in Jesus' human body (Col. 1:19; 2:9). And we will repeatedly return to the truth that to see Jesus is to see God the eternal Word, who assumed flesh without ever once ceasing to be *fully* God.

Rejecting the un-Christlike God

I've also been pleasantly surprised how this proposition—the message that Jesus shows us what God is like—is often well received by those who don't profess Christian faith. If I say, "God is love and Jesus was love incarnate," no problem! Jesus is seldom the issue, even for a rabid, self-avowed 'non-Christian' such as satirist Bill Maher. His primary attacks are not against Jesus at all, but against Christians whose religion does violence in the name of the Prince of Peace. He castigates:

If you're a Christian that supports killing your enemy and torture, you have to come up with a new name for yourself. ... 'Capping thy enemy' is not exactly what Jesus would do. For almost two thousand years, Christians have been lawyering the Bible to try to figure out how 'Love thy neighbor' can mean 'Hate thy neighbor.' ...

Martin Luther King Jr. gets to call himself a Christian, because he actually practiced loving his enemies. And Gandhi was so f-ing Christian, he was Hindu. But if you're endorsing revenge, torture or war, ... you cannot say

you're a follower of the guy who explicitly said, 'Love your enemy' and 'Do good to those who hate you.' ...

And not to put too fine a point on it, but nonviolence was kind of Jesus' trademark—kind of his big thing. To *not* follow that part of it is like joining Greenpeace and hating whales. There's interpreting, and then there's just ignoring. It's just ignoring if you're for torture—as are more *Evangelical** Christians than any other religion. You're supposed to look at that figure of Christ on the Cross and think, "how could a man suffer like that and forgive?" ...

I'm a non-Christian. *Just like most Christians.*

If you ignore every single thing Jesus commanded you to do, you're not a Christian—you're just auditing. You're not Christ's followers, you're just fans. And if you believe the Earth was given to you to kick ass on while gloating, you're not really a Christian—you're a Texan.³

Maher's unbelief is actually biting hatred directed against un-Christlike perversions of God, the projections of religious fundamentalists. Audiences find this commentary comedic because the irony is tragically accurate and laughably contradictory. Instead of reacting defensively or hanging our heads in silent shame, why not hear his indictment as a clarion call back to explicit Christlikeness.

'Evangelical'

when capitalized, refers to the movement associated with Protestant, Western Christianity, especially its conservative and revivalist forms.

When in the lower case, 'evangelical' refers, in general, to the Christian faith and message of the 'evangel' (gospel) or good news that Jesus is Savior of the world.

At other times, atheism is self-created through some offense. We may despair of faith when a tragedy or disappointment makes nonsense of the God we inherited or imagined. Touched deeply by loss, our misperceptions of who God is, should have been or failed to be for us, can lead us from mere doubt to an active rejection of faith.

Charles Darwin exemplifies this experience. His discoveries about natural selection and the evolutionary process certainly undermined his faith in ‘special creation,’⁵ but they did not ‘kill God’ for him altogether. In fact, Darwin’s theories were not generally

regarded as problematic by key Christians of his day (the great battle comes later in America). Toward the end of his life, he wrote, “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist and an evolutionist.”⁴

‘Cruciform’

means cross-shaped, or in the form of the crucifixion.

A *cruciform* God would be the God whose nature (love) is revealed through ‘Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).

When his precious 10-year-old daughter, Annie, died in 1851, it broke his heart and crushed his faith. Darwin could hold the good purposes of God and the suffering inherent in natural process in healthy tension until he had to endure the terrible suffering of his

little girl. It was too much. Whatever Darwin had believed about God, that belief could not survive his grief.

I wonder. In the case of the sardonic Bill Maher or the broken-hearted Charles Darwin, the real culprit may actually be an un-Christlike image of God. Which is to say, not God at all. If so, I’m inclined to agree with Walter Wink, who affirmed such atheism as a first step toward true worship, because it represents the rejection of an idol. That is, people like Maher and Darwin might be turning

from – i.e., repenting. The next step, which I don't pretend they have taken, is a turning *toward* – i.e., faith. I say a Christlike God is worth turning to.

Trigger questions

When I personally turned my gaze to the God who is completely Christlike, I was confronted with how un-Christlike the 'church-God' or even the 'Bible-God' can be. Setting Jesus as the standard for perfect theology, many of our current Christian beliefs and practices would obviously face indictment. Even significant swaths of biblical literature don't line up well with the Christ of the Gospels. Claiming that God is revealed perfectly in Jesus triggers tough questions about the God I once conceived and preached. Jesus' life and character challenges my religious clichés and standby slogans—especially the rhetoric of supreme power and irresistible force. Christ never reveals God that way in his teachings and especially not in his Passion (that is, Jesus' arrest, trial, torture and death). Yes, he proves victorious, especially in his resurrection, but remember that Paul resolved to preach 'Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). You could resist him, you could mock him and beat him up. You could kill him. And we did. Our God is the *cruciform** Christ, the 'weakness of God' (1 Cor. 1:25) who is stronger than men. Why? Because he operates by overcoming love, not by overwhelming force.

Seeing God this way inevitably triggers a barrage of tough faith-questions—an unavoidable domino effect of objections we're expected to ask with point-blank sincerity.

For example, if God is 'in control,' why the chaos in this world? If God is the loving Father Jesus proclaims, what about suffering and affliction? Why does God allow evil people to have their way? Why doesn't God prevent or protect us from natural disasters? And what's the deal with Jesus' death? Was God really punishing Jesus for our sins? And God's wrath? Why does God seem to over-react and

get so violent in the Bible? Then there are the wars and merciless acts of genocide committed by God and in God's name! Didn't God incite these atrocities? The Bible says he did. How is that Christlike?

'Apologetics'

is not apologizing for faith. It is the study of how to answer objections to faith. The Apostle Peter wrote, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). Sadly, if we don't trust the power of the gospel to ignite faith, we may lapse into apologetics to try to argue people into belief.

Didn't Jesus condemn that kind of behavior as immoral? Or is God beyond morality, unbound to his own requirements of justice and righteousness? "Do not kill, except when I say so." But lethal violence isn't the worst of it. What about hell? "I love you, but if you don't love me back, I will torture you with fire forever and ever!" Good and loving? What are we to think when the 'God of the Bible' seems so un-Christlike? Sometimes even Jesus seems to describe this kind of God. It's not as simple as tossing the Old Testament; God the vengeful king makes a cameo appearance in several of Jesus' parables. Awkward!

For some, these are not genuine questions. They are rhetorical charges meant to destroy faith and kill conversation. And too often, Christians have not faced these dilemmas honestly—we've often been evasive, defensive or aggressive.

We've fired back at 'the enemy' (or at straw men), making ourselves look both mean and foolish. Lack of thoughtful engagement has left the church at large seriously shallow; it's spurred an exodus from our fellowships; and it's preempted many ever from

darkening faith's door. We have also turned on our own, bullying those who wrestle sincerely with these hard questions. Are the questions themselves too dangerous? Does asking them warrant accusations of heresy? Why are we so afraid?

What if Christ is up to the challenge? What if, instead of throwing up our hands and muttering platitudes, we risked undergoing the devastating strength of these problems? What if, after enduring the purging power of our own atheistic doubts, we discovered we have a firm foundation? If Christ is the Truth, then a relentless quest for truth will lead us right into his arms, won't it?

And what if life itself offers us no choice anyway? The whole human pilgrimage through life, death and after-life is a refiner's furnace through which all of us pass. Everything that is combustible will be consumed; anything that can be shaken will be shaken. And what can't be shaken? Jesus, the Living Rock on whom the true house of faith will stand.

Removing boulders

On the ground, in the lives of real people, these questions are not mere recreational thought experiments. There is a critical life-and-death relevance about them. They matter deeply. They're intensely personal. And they're not too interested in a nuanced *apologetics** debate.

Last year, I gave a series of talks at a private Christian high school. I proposed that *if* God is real, then to call him God, he must be good, and the perfection of that goodness is seen in Jesus. I then shared 'The Beautiful Gospel,' which I will share later in chapter fourteen.

After the session a student approached me and asked for ten minutes of my time. We'll call her 'Jess.' She started,

"I am fifteen years old. I rejected Christianity when I was twelve.

But what you're saying makes sense to me. But I have questions. A *lot* of questions." Her eyes were serious, waiting for me to flinch.

"Good," I said. "Questions are good. Fire away."

The teenager's questions are the same ones I've been hearing for years. I've needed to work through them myself, and usually I treat them with a thorough, Bible-based response. But here was a teen with ten minutes and a heap of pain. Behind her questions were untold stories that were about to leak out. You might be alarmed by the frankness and substance of my answers, but the urgency of her situation warranted it. I hope you will stick with me as I explain how I could possibly say these things as the book unfolds. For now, here's a glimpse of our dialogue.

Jess: Why does Jesus seem so loving and God so mean?

Brad: God is not mean. He's exactly like Jesus. And Jesus is not mean.

Jess: Then why does God send people to hell to burn them forever and ever?

Brad: He doesn't. That would be silly. The God who is love, who is like Jesus, would never do that, would he? That would make no sense, would it?

Jess: No. But my Grandma was not a Christian and she died and now some of my family cries and cries because they say she's in hell? [Ah, the story peaks out.]

Brad: Well, I can maybe imagine someone who was truly *wicked perishing*. Like Hitler. But would you say your was Grandma wicked?

Jess: [Tears.] No.

Brad: But Jesus shows us exactly what God is like, do you think you could leave your Grandma in his caring hands?

Jess: [No hesitation.] Yes. [In prayer, she puts her Grandma in his hands. Peace.]

Jess: [A flash of anger.] But why does God command people to commit genocide in the Old Testament? Why would he kill all those people, including their children? And then the 32 virgins that the priests kept for themselves. What do you suppose they did with them? [Oh dear. She's been reading Numbers 31!].

Brad: Sex slaves?

Jess: Yeah.

Brad: If God were like Jesus, would he do that?

Jess: No.

Brad: Well of course not. Because God *is* exactly like Jesus.

Jess: Then why does it say he did?

Brad: You tell me.

Jess: Because they didn't know what God is really like? They just described him based on what they thought?

Brad: Sure. But can you imagine the Father in the Prodigal Son story, or the Father that Jesus prayed to, doing that?

Jess: No.

Brad: Well, then I guess he didn't. [Peace.].

Jess: [More tears.] I still have a lot of questions. God is the creator of everything and he's in control of everything and causes everything to happen for a purpose, so ...

Brad: No.

Jess: Huh?

Brad: Like rape? God causes rape? Rape is for a purpose?

Jess: No!

Brad: No! Rape is just evil. There's no lesson. That's not how God teaches lessons. And he doesn't *do* control. That's why terrible things happen. But we wouldn't want him to control us. Would you?

Jess: [Shakes her head no.]

Brad: So he never causes evil and he doesn't use control to prevent us from doing evil. But he *does* care. He loves and cares and wants to come heal those who've been hurt by evil.

Jess: I have three relatives who were molested, but I wasn't. I couldn't understand because people always say God is in control and everything happens for a reason. [Ah, there's the story again.]

Brad: So no, God didn't cause that in any way. But if God were like Jesus, would you be able to put your relatives in his care? Just like you did with your Grandma?

Jess: Yes. [No hesitation. She does it. Peace. More tears.]

Brad: Can you see them there? [She's nodding.] How are they? [More nodding.]

Brad: What are these tears about? Why are you crying?

Jess: Because I believe you.

Brad: So if God were like Jesus, could you put yourself in his hands, just like you did with your Grandma and your relatives?

Jess: Yes [No hesitation. And she does.]

As I read through that conversation again, I'm struck by how many huge boulders stood in Jess's way to faith. In the space of minutes, she had bombarded me with devastating issues, including hell, death and Grandma, the Old Testament and violence, creation and control, and then she threw in child rape. But through twenty years of pastoring, I can tell you that she is *not* exceptional. She fairly represents the sharp minds and broken hearts of up to ten million people who have left the church (in America alone) since the turn of the millennium.

I was also troubled by how simplistic and one-dimensional my responses sound. I haven't even made a case for them yet. But I risk the vulnerability of sharing this actual conversation in order to make a more urgent case: the desperate need for a thoughtful pastoral theology, an answer for our hope we have (1 Pet. 3:15).

Hopefully we can work toward a more beautiful answer than, “Yes, God is in control; yes, he commands genocide; and yes, your Grandma’s in hell, along with all the rapists and probably you as well, one day.”

The Father’s love revelation

Again, the overarching question that ties *A More Christlike God* together is, “What is God really like?” I believe we’re asking that age-old question afresh for several reasons, some negative and some positive. Maybe the *best* reason we’re asking is because God initiated the re-asking. He is unveiling what he’s like in a new way, which is really an ancient way, the Jesus way.

I’m referring to the way Christ has been refreshing our image of his loving Father, especially in the last thirty years. An ever-increasing proportion of believers have been remembering, preaching, singing and experiencing directly what we call “the Father’s heart.” So much so that a great number have nearly forgotten how threatening, judgmental and condemning the God of our childhood could sound. We really have moved on. Sometimes we forget the multitudes who fled through local church exits decades ago and have yet to receive the upgrade we now take for granted. Or did they flee precisely because, in their own spirits, God was already rehabilitating their picture of him, while the congregations they attended weren’t ready to ‘go there’?

Of course, not all of us cowered before the scary punisher-God—the ‘Mighty Smiter’—but many readers will remember the hellfire messages and moralizing rants of itinerant revivalists and would-be prophets. Their tirades used to sound plausible. Now, having experienced the Father’s heart, they sound more silly than scary, more suited to cartoon mockery. Some will recall the stifling standards of wool-slacks-holiness that set many of life’s joys off limits. We were trained to obsess in indignation over all sorts of

'The church'

as a term has been used for (i) a vague universal idea, (ii) the visible kingdom of God on earth, (iii) any Christian institution or movement, (iv) local or trans-local fellowships or communities, (v) brick-and-mortar buildings and/or their worship activities.

I normally use 'church' to refer to the whole 'people of God' (1 Pet. 2:10) 'in Christ' (2 Cor. 5:17), redeemed by grace through faith in his name' (John 1:12). I will specify with adjectives (ancient, western, local, visible) when referring to particular fellowships or institutions.

'sins'—even ones that aren't found anywhere in our Bibles. According to Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, moral outrage at others' sin is often a confession of one's own deeply repressed cravings. Do we ourselves *need* hell to keep our envy of sinners at bay? One pastor in my city even confessed that without the threat of hell, he would not be a Christian. The grace and mercy of Christ was not enough for him, or, he thought, for his congregation. Throw in the odd witch-hunt and we have a revived Puritanism on steroids. But far from establishing righteousness, fear of the Punisher-God only provoked a disastrous counter-revolution of hedonism. "I'm going to hell anyway. May as well make the most of it."

Behind all of that toxic theology stood a broken or distorted image of God—quite ready to dole

out violence. Repent and all is forgiven. But go and sin no more, lest something even worse should happen. The God perceived this way was harsh and volatile (with chapter and verse provided).

Then along came a new and wonderful epiphany. Or at least 'new' to many modern Evangelicals who had grown up on a diet of moralism and hellfire revivalism—just as it had been new for many of Jesus' first fans. Many were discovering the 'old, old story' afresh, like many previous generations who've experienced renewal.

Each of us had to experience this good news for ourselves. The revelation included:

- a fresh emphasis on God as the merciful and hospitable Father;
- who wins us by love rather than threats;
- who accepts and adores us while we're still a mess;
- who sees us as we are and heals us with hugs rather than blows.

We were learning at last that it's the "kindness of God that leads to repentance" (Rom. 2:4), and that it is only "the grace of God that teaches us to say no to ungodliness" (Titus 2:11-12).

What *the church** at large needed more than anything—and what the world was more than ready for—is *a more Christlike God*

and, by extension, *a more Christlike church* (because we mimic what we worship).

My impression is that this fresh awareness of the Father's love has become widespread, touching hearts across many nations. I first personally encountered the 'Father's Heart' through teachers at YWAM (Youth With A Mission) and in Vineyard conferences. I began to hear it in popular worship music, such as Brian Doerkson's *Father's House* album. I read it in books such as Brennan Manning's

'The church' (cont'd)

is more than an institution.

Teachers like Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr saw the church as a *race*—the race of Christ in the place of the race of Adam.

Paul saw the church as Christ's *body*, in which we are included through baptism (1 Cor. 12:13).

The church is also a *faith family*, in which we are adopted or reborn as beloved children of God.

The church is also the Lord's *banqueting table*, where we are united by sharing his supper (Christ's body and blood) together.

Abba's Child and Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Most importantly, the message of the Father's love was not only being preached, written and sung; many believers began to 'get it' at a heart-level that renewed their faith and transformed their lives.

My own circle of friends finally noticed that Jesus' favorite image of God was Father (seventy times in the Gospels!). Jesus showed us in the Gospels what fatherhood meant to him: extravagant love, affirmation, affection and belonging. It meant scandalous forgiveness and inclusion. Jesus showed us this supernaturally safe, welcoming Father-love, extended to very messy people *before* they repented and *before* they had faith. Or better, he was actually redefining *repentance* and *faith* as simply coming to him, baggage and all, to taste his goodness and mercy. He didn't seem to appreciate our self-loathing. The repentance he wanted was that we would welcome his kindness into our deepest needs and wounds.

Theologians such as James Alison and Anthony Bartlett taught me how the Jesus-event completely redefined *God* himself! We are rediscovering Jesus' revolutionary vision of *Abba* afresh in our generation. To call God *Abba* was to introduce a religion-shattering shift in how close and intimate we could be with God.

Add to Jesus' depiction of God as Father his startling Last Supper announcement, "If you have seen me, you *have* seen the Father" (John 14:9). Somehow we need to let his words jar us again. Maybe we're too used to the phrase, but it's what I've hinted at in the title. For our own sakes, we might take a break from trying to convince ourselves that Jesus was and is God and to spend this twenty-first century meditating on the truth that *God is like Jesus. Exactly* like Jesus. When the veil that obscured God was torn in two, what did it reveal? A Suffering Servant who hangs on the Cross (Zech. 12:10)! Thus, every human conception we previously associated with 'God' is uprooted, root and branch!

We begin by deconstructing false images—tearing down idols in the tradition of Jeremiah 1—before commencing with the work of construction. To this initial demolition we now turn.

Pausing to think

- What are some images of God common to our broader culture? How might those who don't profess faith imagine God? How do you think they differ from God as he truly is? How might they have developed such an image of God?
- Compare the image of God among various church-cultures and Christian movements. Contrast the images of God in different religions. How might these variant visions of God reflect the worshipers themselves?
- What suspicions do you have about the God of your tradition? Of your personal understanding? If God were bigger and better than those boxes, what is it that God might want to reveal to you?
- If we are prone to distorted or limited images of God, how might we break *out* into a clearer vision? How might God break *in* to show us the truth?
- What was it that Jesus wanted us to see about God? How was his vision of God different than anything previous? How might his vision of God still be different than your own?

Pausing to pray

God, who are you? I want to know you but my vision is so distorted, my mind is so small, my heart is so constricted. How could you live in such tiny boxes? Ah, but you don't! I do! Rescue me from the prison of my puny understanding! Turn on the lights so I can catch a glimpse of the same Eternal Love that Jesus revealed. Give me the gift of Christlike vision that burns through the fog that blinds me to pure Goodness. Lord, let it be!