

Fostering a Biblical Understanding of God In a Postmodern World

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A few years back, Abigail Van Buren, author of “Dear Abby,” provided a reader with some so-called advice for handling religious differences. A few weeks later, another reader responded to the advice given by writing the following:

Your answer to the woman who complained that her relatives were always arguing with her about religion was ridiculous. You advised her to simply declare the subject off-limits. Are you suggesting that people talk about only trivial, meaningless subjects so as to avoid a potential controversy?...It is arrogant to tell people there are subjects they may not mention in your presence. You could have suggested she learn enough about her relatives’ cult to show them the errors contained in its teaching.

To this criticism, Abby responded, “In my view, the height of arrogance is to attempt to show people the ‘errors’ in the religion of their choice.”¹ This response of Abby defines the state of America today: to think that the only error in a particular religion is that it calls another religion erroneous. There are no errors. Whatever you regard as truth, is truth. Such an attitude has been labeled *postmodernism*.

So what does this little “Dear Abby” article have to do with dogmatics? How is postmodernism relevant to the subject we have been studying for the past few months? This first quarter we have been studying the doctrine of God: who is he, what are his attributes, what is his will, etc. We study dogmatics so that as pastors, God-willing, we will be able to present a picture of God which is in harmony with Scriptures.

Here is where we run into conflict with today’s society. One can preach or teach according to Scripture but so many people today will simply say, “That’s nice. I’m glad

you're happy with your understanding so you can comfort yourself. But as for me, this is what I believe." Postmodern thought tolerates religious differences, as long as we don't shove our differences down another's throat. The result is that many people are clueless when it comes to a correct understanding of God. Because God has become so subjective to the world, it is all the more crucial that we grasp an objective understanding of God as revealed in Scripture since "from the Scriptures, and from no other source, we have obtained all that is known of God and divine works, from the beginning of the world."² With the help of God, we then can proceed in fostering a biblical understanding of God among those who carry postmodern ideas.

The first step in battling postmodernism is to learn of its consistence. Postmodernism is a reaction to modernism. Modernism in general placed human reason, science, and technology at the forefront. The idea was that somehow man could engineer his own great society. And such thought spilled over into religious circles so that Pieper was even led to comment on modernism. The dogmatician writes, "In the interest of its self-righteousness modern theology has reduced Christianity to an ethical religion; in the interest of the alleged omni-competence, Modernism has adopted the so-called scientific method in religion. This is an open disavowal of divine revelation, of Christ's vicarious atonement, and of the Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity."³

Everything had to make sense. Man's reason was the ultimate authority and if anything was beyond man's reason, this obviously had to be some mistake. So one is not surprised to see that doctrines of the church were often rejected for their failure to

¹ Leffel, p.1

² Pieper, p.380

³ *ibid.*, p. 407

correspond with man's reason. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity was discarded since "the doctrine of the Trinity can be understood and proved only from the Word of God."⁴ The age of modernism could be linked with Job who failed to realize that "God is greater than man" (Job 33:12).

But modernism's reign also saw its end. While modernists were engineering a "Great Society," the rest of the world entered war—twice. While modernists were constructing a society of peace, the sixties brought about an era of rebellion. While modernists were designing the fastest cars, others discovered that the fuel from these cars burned holes through our ozone layer. Modernism did not hold all the answers. Modernism did not provide truth.

And then we can hear the most familiar question, "What is truth?" However, instead of digging for an answer to this question, the new era let the question be the answer. "What is truth?" has become the trademark of postmodernism. Truth is not a "what," but a "whatever." Truth has become indefinite. This, too, has flowed over into religion. In fact, some have even been so bold as to say Christians shouldn't even worry about what truth is because being a Christian does not require acceptance of a certain philosophical account of truth, justification, and 'reality.'⁵

Another example of one downplaying the importance of objective truth is William H. Willimon, dean of chapel at Duke University. He contends that those "who argue for the 'objective' truth of Jesus are making a tactical mistake."⁶ Willimon continues that Jesus never said, 'You need to believe propositions about me: number one: I was born

⁴ Pieper, p.400

⁵ Mohler, p. 67

⁶ Willimon, p.21

of a virgin; number two: Scripture is inerrant...”⁷ It is true that there may be fundamental articles and non-fundamental articles of faith, but this does not give men like William H. Willimon the license to deviate from Scripture. For Jesus warns in the Sermon on the Mount, “Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Mt 5:18).

Yes, the fall of modernism was of great delight to us. But when there are these postmodernists like Dean Willimon around, the questions still remain, only in a new realm. The question used to be, “Who is God?” Now the question is, “Who is God for you?” God is no longer a “what,” but a “whatever you want him to be.” If you want your God to be a “grand old man,” that’s fine if it works for you.⁸ If you want your God to be “Mr. (or Mrs., for that matter) Meek-and-Mild,”⁹ that’s great if he fits into your life the way you desire.

The postmodernist does not only ask the question, “Who is God for me?” He also asks, “Who is God for me at this very moment?” God does not have to remain a constant in a person’s life. Rather, God is plugged into a certain context. Thus, some people may quickly jump from one denomination to another with the support, “I tried Lutheranism for a while and it served me well, but now I needed something else at this point of my life.” God and religion have become mere “scarecrows” which the people can move about whenever and wherever they want to place them (Jer 10:5).

⁷Willimom. p. 21

⁸ Phillips, p.19.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.23

With this attitude toward God, it's no wonder that 98% of America believes that God exists.¹⁰ (According to another poll, 85% of these Americans identify themselves as Christians.¹¹) It's easy to say a God exists, when God fits into any definition you want. But to acknowledge that God exists and to know him are two different concepts. For if we say we know him, but do not do what he commands, we then are lying (I Jn 1:4). We really don't know God at all.

The postmodernist may say, "Who cares? What difference does it make which God we know as long as we believe in *a* God?" This brings us to the crux of the matter. We have to know who *the* God is because eternal life hinges on it. Jesus himself prayed that people may know God, because "this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the *only* true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Eternal life does not hinge on simply believing anything; it depends on belief in the one true God.

Pieper expands on the necessity of having a Christian knowledge of God when he says, "The natural knowledge of God cannot deliver us from an evil conscience. The Christian knowledge of God, however, calms the troubled conscience."¹² He goes on to show that doctrines are not just "academic" questions which we address if we want to, rather they are the basis for our salvation.

Even if we know the makeup of postmodernism and likewise have a biblical understanding of God ourselves, how then are we to go about teaching to a postmodern world? How can we claim to have faith in the one true God if the ideas "one" and "true" are foreign terms? How will we convince people that not all religions wind around on

¹⁰ Wells, p.107

¹¹ Guinness, p. 12

¹² Pieper, p.378

different paths which eventually lead to one God?”¹³ Answer: a thorough study of dogmatics and a correct understanding of the doctrine of God are required. Unless today’s preachers and teachers know who God is, the pew-fillers will have no knowledge of him either.

I can put the responsibility on the church workers’ shoulders because, unfortunately, people today rely more heavily on somebody else to teach them the truth about God instead of learning it on their own. This is reflected in the recent poll that shows although 90% of Americans own a Bible, only 17% read it regularly.¹⁴ What more information does one need to see the value and necessity of having our called workers equipped with the correct understanding of God? We mustn’t be preachers who simply preach to the “itchy ears” of our members (II Tim 4:3); we must be presenters of the truth. We must present *the* God as he reveals himself in Scripture.

Grant Osborne offered the following seven suggestions for accomplishing this in a recent issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly*:

- 1) Biblical theology must replace the “if it works, don’t fix it” attitude
- 2) Have the lives of our members be church-driven, rather than culture driven
- 3) We need to get our people back into the Word
- 4) Expository preaching is a must
- 5) Don’t compromise the Gospel when being relevant to the church
- 6) Let the words of Scripture combat materialism
- 7) Balance academic and practical learning in leader training¹⁵

Osborne makes some suggestions here that we will want to take to heart. The common thread is Scripture. In Scripture we find truth; Scripture is truth. No matter what a

¹³ Osborne, p. 2

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.13

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.16

postmodernist tells us, we consistently see throughout Scripture that the word is truth (e.g. John 17:17).

If Scripture alone is truth, what understanding of God does it teach? Obviously, this is a question that cannot be exhausted in such a composition. But there are some highlights to be brought out which apply directly against a postmodernism stance.

James M. Boice in *Here We Stand* suggests that the sovereignty of God is the most important doctrine of God which addresses the challenges of postmodernism. Sovereignty is the chief doctrine in “defining the essence of the struggle against the world and the flesh today.”¹⁶ This is an important point in our battle. To the postmodernist, we will want to show that God is sovereign over all things and we are not. As a result, it is not up to us to determine who God is, for this raises our own selves above God. Rather, let God who is above all reveal himself to us.

God’s sovereignty is closely related to the application of God’s wisdom in the world. For as sovereign Lord, he is in control of creation and its government, salvation and sanctification. By governing creation, God knows our true needs and provides for them. He provides us with wisdom to dwell in this world. He makes us realize that even the wisdom a farmer has is from the Lord Almighty (Is 28:23-29). A postmodernist does not grant this when he claims the definition of God is merely relative to the individual. Our wisdom is not above God’s so that we have the ability to define God. As Romans 11:33 states, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

Admitting that God is wiser than us seems to hit the heart of the postmodernist. Going back to the “Dear Abby” article in the introduction, she claimed it was arrogant for

anyone to make a judgment on our beliefs since it is our choice. In other words, it is arrogant for anyone, including God, to say he is wiser than I am. Luther realized this trait of humans when he wrote, “We are accustomed to admit freely that God is more powerful than we are, but not that He is wiser than we are. To be sure, we say that He is; but when it comes to a showdown, we do not want to act on what we say.”¹⁷

This is not saying that we shouldn’t seek wisdom. For wisdom still has a place in our lives and we are exhorted by James, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

Scripture does not leave us in the dark concerning how we are to obtain wisdom. The psalmist writes in Psalm 111, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (v.10). Also, Paul exhorts Timothy to obtain such wisdom from studying the Scriptures which were “able to make [Timothy] wise for salvation” (II Ti 3:15).

God’s wisdom may be what postmodernists chiefly attack. However, there are other areas of the doctrine of God which are contrary to their thinking, such as the oneness of God. Postmodern thought is pluralistic. Although a postmodernist may claim there is only one God, by saying there are all different roads to get to this one God he sets up idols in his heart. Against such action, the Sovereign LORD warns in Ezekiel 14, “Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices” (6)! The familiar *Shema* of Deuteronomy addresses this problem. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Dt 6:4). It is not permissible for a postmodernist to simply say God is whatever is convenient. Scripture teaches that God is the “only God” (I Ti 1:17).

¹⁶ Boice, p.177

¹⁷ Luther, p.1453

Also, in addressing postmodernism, one must boldly proclaim that God simply is. He does not change for this person or that person on any given day. Rather, he forever was the same and forever will be the same as is evident by his name, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). Postmodern thinking has a God who changes with the passing moment. We have a God who stays the same yesterday and today and forever (He 13:8).

Yet another error of postmodernism is that it denies the *aseitas Dei*. By making God whatever fits his opinion, a postmodernist creates God from an outside cause, namely himself. He looks to his own personal construction for God’s existence instead of letting God be “before all things” (Col 1:17). Postmodernism does not allow God to be absolute.

The omnipotence of God is also challenged by postmodern thought, which limits God to an object of human conception. I cannot completely comprehend who God is and what he is able to do because “he is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20).

But even if I bring up these points about who God is and show them to be in conflict to postmodernism, a postmodernist will simply tell me, “That’s fine. You don’t have to agree with me. Just don’t tell me I can’t believe what I want. I’ll grant you your belief to be true, so let me.” Yes, it’s as if we keep running into a brick wall. According to their belief, they will never have to believe me. So to what will we resort?

The only correct way in trying to foster a biblical understanding of God is to let the Bible explain itself. We must simply trust that the Holy Spirit works through the gospel. The answer to postmodernism is “sound biblical preaching and teaching that centers in the proclamation of God’s law and gospel. Forgiveness of sins purchased by

our Savior's life, death, and resurrection is God's answer to the most basic problem facing the world, sin and sin's consequences."¹⁸

Christ really lived. Christ really died. Christ really rose again. These do not depend whether or not I believe them. But the fact is that God sent his Son. We can live in confidence of our salvation. God in his wisdom worked it out this way. It is the only way. Yes, it may be "arrogant" according to Ms. Abigail Van Buren, but for my salvation it is necessary. Doctrines are not accepted on the basis if they fit our "choice" of religion. In fact, "the question [should not be] whether this doctrine is true, but whether it is found in the Word of God. If it is found there, then be assured that it is true, for God's Word is truth."¹⁹

God is God. God is a who, not a whoever. Postmodernists say we should have tolerance because there are many ways to get to heaven. But to this I have to agree with Sayers who observed:

"In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair...the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die."²⁰

A biblical understanding of the God of Scripture is necessary for our salvation. For it was only the God of Scripture who could devise a plan that would send his son to reconcile lost mankind with its creator. No other "truth" of our mind leads to this conclusion. Therefore, a postmodern world needs to hear that only God himself could accomplish the salvation plan.

¹⁸ Brenner, p.140

¹⁹ Pieper, p.402

²⁰ Carson, p.53

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