

D. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND AUTHENTIC EVANGELISM

It is probably in the realm of Christian evangelism that presumption concerning the character of God is most prevalent. The amount of printed material available that proposes either to declare the gospel of the grace of God or explain how this saving message ought to be communicated is vast indeed. The attempts to employ novelty, relevance, artful persuasion, and attention-getting media seem to be endless. Yet concerning this huge literary and communications deposit, you will search with more success seeking for that proverbial “needle in a haystack” than the discovery here of a substantial and distinguishing explanation of the nature of the only true and living God. Yet how beguiling, even seductive, this approach so often proves to be. When we enthusiastically commend our prospective life partner to friends, how very careful we are to give a detailed description of that person’s attractive characteristics, their virtues and distinctive strengths. Yet when we desire to commend to a sinner the greatness of God’s gospel, we assume that the person we are witnessing to has a sufficient understanding of the Almighty. But how fatal such a supposition can be, for while a person may confess their belief in “god,” and the person who is witnessing takes this confession to mean “God,” the possibility of meaningful communication, based upon agreement of meaning, becomes an impossibility until both are talking about the same “God.” And the only way there can be agreement here is when the person witnessing makes clear the distinguishing marks of “God.” The looseness, indeed irreverent use of the name of “God” today, makes such clarification all the more important.

Hence, to truly know the God of the Bible is to be under constraint to tell of His glorious and unique being, whether one be a Moses (Deut. 32:1-4), or a Paul (Acts 28:30-31; Rom. 1:15-16). At its heart, the Christian gospel is concerned with what God is like with respect to man as an inveterate sinner. On the one hand, unrighteous man learns that God is absolutely righteous in his being and demands (Ezra 9:15), while on the other hand man in his consequent guilt learns that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). The great question then is not how a man might be reconciled to himself or a neighbor, but how he might be reconciled to God (Job 4:17; 9:2; 25:4; II Cor. 5:20). This is the supreme issue of life today that is increasingly hid from view because of the obscurity that man-centered, relational theology injects. It is true an unbeliever may have a basic and biblical understanding of the God of the Bible. But today, it is becoming less likely that such a perspective is to be expected, especially that which engenders awe and reverence. Hence, the proclamation of the gospel must involve a telling of godless humanity of what God is like. Without this essential content, evangelism degenerates into sentimental abstraction at a horizontal human level, or evangelism that describes a god other than He who is alone revealed in the Bible. Sad to say, it is to this point that modern evangelism has fallen. Tozer writes in this respect:

The gospel can lift this destroying burden [of obligation to God] from the mind, give beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. But unless the weight of the burden is felt the gospel can mean nothing to the man; and until he does see a vision of God high and lifted up, there will be no woe and no burden. Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11.

1. Evangelism starts with the God of the Bible.

Of course the gospel means “good news” or “glad tidings,” and Scripture makes it quite plain that this wonderful message is sourced in God. It is indeed “the gospel of God,” or more specifically, (a) the gospel “belonging to God,” (b) the gospel “about God,” (c) the gospel “sourced in God,” and (d) the gospel “sent by God” (Rom. 1:1; cf. 15:16; Mark 1:14; II Cor. 11:7; I Thess. 2:2, 8, 9; I Tim. 1:11). What exactly is the gospel? Why then the gospel? For what purpose was the gospel ordained? What is the prime saving work that the gospel accomplishes? Any answers to these questions that do not focus upon the fundamental necessity of reconciliation between God and man are grossly inadequate. Hence the Christian gospel commences with God, and that God is uncompromisingly the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the prophets, the only God of Israel, the God of the Gentiles, the only true and living God of the Bible. Consequently any proclamation of this good news from God demands that, in a pluralistic society, the character of this God be distinctively and emphatically made plain. This means that to proclaim God’s gospel as the Bible declares it is, at the same time, to declare that gospel’s God. To make this point even clearer, let us consider four passages of New Testament Scripture that focus on God’s gospel *and* that gospel’s God.

a. John 3:16.

In our familiarity with certain parts of the Bible, we often overlook vital truth and this is certainly the case with this passage, which is so frequently used in the proclamation of the gospel. The subject of this sentence is “the God” [ὁ θεός, *ho theos*] and everything else is subordinated to this glorious fact. The definite article here distinguishes the God of Abraham from all other gods.⁴¹ Thus for the Apostle John, he specifically calls attention to the only God of Israel, and none other; only *this* God sent forth His Son to save sinners from perishing. A study of John’s writings only confirms this emphasis. Robert Cook has given us an excellent study of the doctrine of God in this regard.⁴² In summary he declares:

- (1) John teaches that “God is spirit [πνεῦμα, *pneuma*]” (John 4:24; cf. 1:18; I John 4:12). That is, God is spiritual in His nature. “This is an affirmation that God is transcendent, pure person (in contrast to one who is a compound of matter and spirit or that which is only matter and therefore finite). He is unlimited by space and time and must be understood in spiritual terms. Therefore we must worship Him personally (in spirit) and on the basis of truth.”⁴³
- (2) John teaches that “God is light [φῶς, *phōs*]” (I John 1:5). “[The context strongly supports the view that I John 1:5 is an affirmation of God’s holiness. . . . Fellowship is predicated upon a God who is light sharing common things with children who are walking in light. Since it is sin that mars and destroys

⁴¹ Where ὁ θεός, *ho theos*, is used, “the [definite] article appears when the specific Jewish or Christian God or Lord is meant.” Blass, Debrunner, ed. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, p. 133.

⁴² W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John*, pp. 40-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

this fellowship, the light that makes fellowship possible must be construed as the absence of sin (light is the absence of darkness [I John 1:5*b*]). God's holiness represents among other things His absolute moral perfection. He is totally separated from sin in His essential being. Figuratively speaking, the outstanding quality of light is its purity. This is especially apt here since light is used to picture a moral quality and the appropriate ethical relationship of man vis-a-vis God (I John 1:7).⁴⁴

- (3) John teaches that "God is love [*ἀγάπη*, *agapē*]" (I John 4:8; 16). "God is loving, but John's aim here is to distinguish the activity of love from the attribute of love. The latter is the source from which the former arises. Love in God is that which moves Him to self-communication both within and outside the Godhead. Thus the affirmation that He is love asserts that God is, by nature, One who is wont to share Himself with others, especially His children."⁴⁵
- (4) John teaches that God "the Father has life in Himself" (John 5:26). "This sets forth His aseity, or selfexistence. It sets him apart from every other being, all of whom are dependent in that they have life from a source outside themselves (a concept also implied in the Creator-creature relationship (Rev. 4:11))."⁴⁶
- (5) John teaches that God is, by nature, true (John 17:3; I John 5:20; cf. John 3:33; 8:40). "The term used here is *ἀληθινός*, *alēthinos*, meaning true in the sense of 'real' or 'genuine.' The God of Scripture, about whom John writes, is neither false nor counterfeit nor the figment of some man's or society's imagination. This God conforms to reality intrinsically; in fact He is the source and standard for all that is genuine and real."⁴⁷
- (6) John teaches that God is personal, but especially the Father in relation to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, "the only begotten from the Father" (John 1:14; cf. 1:18; 3:16; I John 4:9). This Son, "is the manifestation, or revealer, of the Father. Although the Father is invisible to human perception, the Son has 'explained' the meaning of the Father for men (John 1:18)."⁴⁸ Further, this God is also the believer's Father (John 1:12-13; 3:1-8; I John).

b. Romans 3:24.

While it may sound like a contradiction in terms, yet the gospel is often presented in a way that is unbiblical in its sole christocentric emphasis. By this is meant the focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ as the beginning and end of the gospel; and again, notwithstanding Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13; but cf. 1:6; 22:18, such an

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 40-2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 42-3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

idea is quite inadequate. Now while this matter will inevitably lead us into a consideration of trinitarian relations, yet it ought to be said that the gospel begins and finishes with God, and more specifically God the Father, and this is no mere fine theological distinction. While John 3:16 has made this matter quite clear, so also does Romans 3:24 as it nestles in the middle of the most concise and yet comprehensive gospel passage in all of the Bible, that is Romans 3:21-26. In fact, with the inclusion of personal pronouns, "God the Father" is spoken of eight times within these six verses.

- (1) Free justification, or full and righteous acquittal through faith in Christ's atonement, is sourced in "His grace," to the total exclusion of human merit. The pronoun "His" here must, in context, refer to God the Father in v. 23. Hence, it is God the Father who is moved by infinite mercy to reach down to man in his hopeless predicament. In other words, it is God the Father who is the prime mover in the establishing of the gospel, even as Romans 1:1, 5 support.
- (2) Therefore, in true biblical evangelism there must be a clear declaration about the character of this God and His demands upon man. Such characteristics are disarmingly presented in the preceding teaching of Romans 1:18-3:20, as the following categories indicate.
 - (a) God is angry, wrathful, 1:18; 2:5; 3:5.
 - (b) God is invisible, 1:20.
 - (c) God is eternal in power, 1:20.
 - (d) God is divine in nature, 1:20.
 - (e) God is glorious, 1:23.
 - (f) God is incorruptible, 1:23.
 - (g) God is true, 1:25; 3:4, 7.
 - (h) God is blessed forever, 1:25.
 - (i) God is just and a judge, 1:32; 2:2-3, 6, 11, 16.
 - (j) God is kind, 2:4.
 - (k) God is forbearing, patient, 2:4.
 - (l) God is faithful, 3:3.
 - (m) God is righteous, 3:5.

- (3) By way of illustration, consider Romans 8:31 where Paul encourages the believer with the rhetorical question, “If God is for us, who is against us?” So J. I. Packer asks concerning this verse:

Who is [this] God? Paul speaks of the God of the Bible and of the gospel, the Lord Jehovah, “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6), the God whom “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared” (John 1:18). This is the God who has spoken to announce His sovereignty: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose’” Isa. 46:9 f., RSV). This is the God who showed His sovereignty by bringing Abraham out of Ur, Israel out of captivity in Egypt and later in Babylon, and Jesus out of the grave: and who shows the same sovereignty still every time He raises a sinner to spiritual life out of spiritual death. This is the God of Romans, the God whose wrath “is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18), yet who “commendeth His love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8). This is the God who calls, justifies and glorifies those whom from eternity He “predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son” (8:29). This is the God of the first Anglican [Church of England] article, the “one living and true God, everlasting . . . of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.”⁴⁹

c. II Corinthians 5:18-21.

Here Paul exhorts those who have been reconciled to God, as a consequence, to be ministers of reconciliation. Including pronouns, God the Father is referred to nine times in these four verses; the name of Christ as mediator is mentioned six times. However, the dominant concern of Paul is that those reconciled to God the Father through Christ should in turn exhort sinners to likewise be reconciled to God the Father through Christ.

- (1) At the risk of being misunderstood, the point here is that evangelism is not simply about “being a disciple of Christ” or “coming to Christ” or “being a follower of Christ.” Rather, the purpose of becoming a Christian is that the sinner, as an enemy of God, might become a friend of God. The following list of references makes this point overwhelmingly clear (Matt. 5:16; John 13:31; 14:6, 13; 17:1, 4; I Cor. 15:24, 28; Rom. 15:5-6; 16:27; Phil. 2:5-11; I Pet. 3:18; 4:11; I John 2:1).
- (2) However, when Paul writes of being reconciled to God and commends Christians to this ministry of reconciliation, who is the “God” that the Christian is to proclaim? He uses the term “God” with the assumption that he is describing the exclusive God he defines in numerous places in II Corinthians. It should be noted that the following list of attributes indicates Paul’s integral use of these characteristics rather than a systematic listing.

⁴⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 237.

- (a) God is living, 1:9; 2:3; 6:16.
- (b) God is gracious, 1:12; 8:1.
- (c) God is faithful, 1:18.
- (d) God is glorious, 4:6.
- (e) God is righteous, 5:21.
- (f) God is powerful, 6:7; 13:4.
- (g) God is love, 13:11, 14.

d. I Peter 3:18.

The great end of evangelism is, “to bring us to God.” Selwyn describes this as “the be-all and end-all of religion.”⁵⁰ Manton comments that this reconciliation, “is not fully done till we live with him in heaven; this is the end of our faith (I Pet. 1:9); this is the prime benefit offered to us in the gospel, to which all others tend.”⁵¹

(1) Thus Jesus Christ’s great saving design was “to bring us to God [the Father],” that is acceptance by Him, the enjoyment of His presence, the beholding and praise of His glory. But again, the question to ask in today’s pluralistic society concerns the exact identification of the God who Peter speaks about. I Peter leaves no doubt in this regard.

- (a) God has foreknowledge, 1:2.
- (b) God is merciful, 1:3; 2:10.
- (c) God is powerful, 1:5.
- (d) God is holy, 1:15-16.
- (e) God is just, 1:17.
- (f) God is radiant, 2:9.
- (g) God is omniscient, 3:12.
- (h) God is patient, 3:20.
- (i) God is gracious, 4:10; 5:10, 12.
- (j) God is powerful, 5:6.

⁵⁰ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle Of St. Peter*, p. 196.

⁵¹ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XII, p. 198.

- (k) God is glorious, 5:10.
- (2) So Peter points us to needed course adjustment in ourselves concerning the desire to be faithful in evangelism. Like Paul, the character of God is dealt with integrally rather than systematically. That is, the person of the definitive God is woven into Peter's writing, and likewise his preaching. To meet this man would be to conclude that, "there is so much of God about him; his passion is wholly God; everything in his life is grounded upon God." And to agree with this priority is not only to be mentally exercised concerning the knowledge of God, but also moved in the soul and affections. A. W. Tozer writes of this dominant and pervasive emphasis as follows:

As the sailor locates his position on the sea by "shooting" the sun, so we may get our moral bearings by looking at God. We must begin with God. We are right when, and only when, we stand in a right position relative to God, and we are wrong so far and so long as we stand in any other position. . . . So let us begin with God. Back of all, above all, before all is God; first in sequential order, above in rank and station, exalted in dignity and honor. As the self-existent One He gave beings to all things, and all things exist out of Him and for Him. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11).⁵²

In other words, true biblical evangelism starts with my own relationship with God so that proclamation of the "good news" is reflective of my own encounter. Thus personal evangelism will be as full of God as is the evangelist.

2. Evangelism in Athens.

The arrival of the Apostle Paul in Athens during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:15-16), is highly significant with regard to the proclamation of the character of God. While he had recently ministered in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, especially to audiences with some exposure to Judaism, yet in witnessing at the Areopagus or Mars Hill, his preaching is particularly notable because it involves the first major gospel presentation to a gathering that is solidly pagan and lacks any substantial Jewish or Old Testament background. Hence, the distinctive emphasis that is quite obvious in Paul's sermon here is a matter of the greatest importance insofar as evangelizing the ignorant pagan masses of this twentieth century.

a. The priority of God at Athens.

Notice that Paul's message in Acts 17:22-31 is remarkable in that Jesus Christ is proclaimed only in the concluding verse. In other words, in vs. 22-30 we find detailed exposition of the nature of the only true and living God. Specifically, God is described according to His numerous attributes as follows:

⁵² Tozer, *Pursuit Of God*, pp. 101-2.

- (1) God is the creator of all things, v. 24.
- (2) God is sovereign over heaven and earth, v. 24.
- (3) God is transcendent, not confined, v. 24.
- (4) God is independent, self-sufficient, v. 25.
- (5) God is benevolent, giving life and all things, v. 25.
- (6) God is wise in His ordering of creation, v. 26.
- (7) God is immanent, not far from any of us, v. 27.
- (8) God is life-giving, hence living, v. 28.
- (9) God is immaterial, hence spiritual, v. 29.
- (10) God is forbearing, patient, v. 30.
- (11) God is righteous and just, v. 31.
- (12) God is omnipotent, v. 31.

b. The response at Athens.

However, some have maintained that Paul's attempt to address the Athenian intelligentsia on their own philosophic level proved to be a failure, so that at Corinth he expressed deep regret and was entirely different in his approach (I Cor. 2:1-5). Representative of this opinion is James Strahan who fancifully speculates that Paul, "departed [Athens] with a crushing sense of failure. . . . All that he said to the philosophers of Athens was true, but ineffective."⁵³ But surely this hypothesis is to be roundly rejected, for Acts 17:34 describes the significant conversion of Dionysius as well as other members of the Areopagite audience. Further, Eusebius, the early church historian, records that this same Dionysius became the first bishop of the church at Athens.⁵⁴

c. The lesson of Athens for today.

While rejecting the proposal of Strahan, we believe that Paul knew exactly what he was doing at Athens and that he had no regrets. Certainly he did not explicitly denounce the Greek paganism that surrounded him, but he did politely describe the Athenians as ignorant idolaters, and exhort them to repent. However, when Paul stated, "What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you"

⁵³ James Strahan, "Athens," James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary Of The Apostolic Church*, I, pp. 109-10. While Sir William Ramsay popularized this theory in 1895, he considerably modified his verdict eighteen years later. Refer to E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts Of The Apostles*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ "Dionysius," F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary Of The Christian Church*, pp. 401-2.

(Acts 17:23), he immediately delivered the only firm base upon which any person can repent, and that is a full-orbed understanding of the God of Abraham. It is not enough merely to speak to men of “God,” presuming that they understand what you mean, especially today, since all we may be verbalizing is, for the audience, to use Francis Schaeffer’s term, a “contentless banner.”⁵⁵

J. I. Packer comments concerning this same scene:

We must not be afraid to start with the basic facts about God the Creator. Revealed truth has a structure, and this is its foundation. When Paul preached to the pagan Athenians, he laid this foundation before going further. He had to, or else the point of his witness to our Lord would not have been grasped. For knowledge of sin and salvation presupposes some knowledge of the Creator; nobody can see what sin is till he has learned what God is. That is why [Richard] Baxter directed the seeking soul to fix his mind first and foremost on the nature and majesty of God. In the pagan West today, we need to lay the same foundation as Paul laid at Athens. We complain that our “gospel preaching” (in the modern sense) does not register with those who hear it. May not this be in the first instance because they know nothing about the God with whom they have to do? Have we taken pains to teach them who God is? The irony of our situation is that if we spend time preaching to modern pagans about the character of God we shall be told that we are not preaching the gospel. But the Puritans would not tell us that; nor would Paul.⁵⁶

3. Evangelism in Papua New Guinea.

By way of illustration regarding this principle of necessary pre-evangelistic instruction concerning God, especially the vital relevance here concerning this ignorant modern generation, consider just one remarkable, contemporary missionary experience. In 1978, missionaries from the *New Tribes Mission* commenced pioneering work with the primitive Bisorio tribe in the central highland foothills of Papua New Guinea, a people oppressed with violence, fear of enemies, and personal jungle and ancestor spirits. When reasonable communication was eventually possible by means of Pidgin English and the native language, Scripture was taught to the Bisorio people over a period of eight months before the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was formally presented. The method was as follows:

We began teaching the Bisorios, of course, about God of whom they had no concept. Their god was the sun. . . . We knew that this was where we had to begin, tearing down their previous concepts and beginning to build according to the truth. . . . We began by teaching who God was and who he wasn’t. . . . [We taught] God’s eternity. He had no beginning or end, that He was before anything. . . . As we taught them the Old Testament, we sought to bring out four basic things. [First], God’s holiness and righteousness, [second] man’s sinful condition, [third] God’s wrath against man’s sinful condition, [fourth] and yet God’s grace and His condition for acceptance by faith in His provision for salvation. Now we figured the best way to teach the Bisorios about God was not just giving them a list of dry doctrines, but to teach through Old Testament history where they

⁵⁵ Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Godliness*, p. 169.

could see God in action and appreciate and begin to understand who this God is. . . . We began to share the truth of God found in Genesis 1-2. And we took them through creation bringing out the fact of God's power, His greatness, His almightiness, creating things just with His Word, how He was a God of order, and a God of kindness, how He provided for His creation. . . . One of the things that stood out in this teaching, as we began to develop the character of God before their eyes in Genesis 1-2, was the fact that God was creator and that He was the owner and it stood out immediately in the Bisorio's mind that if God created everything, surely He was the owner of everything, and this really gripped their lives.⁵⁷

Subsequent to teaching on the introduction of sin there followed much of the history of Israel, and the life of Jesus Christ. The ensuing spontaneous responses to the Savior, quite apart from evangelistic pressure, were widespread, leading to the formation of a church, and a ready desire by the new converts to share the gospel with other local tribes.

⁵⁷ George Walker and Bob Kennell, tape cassette, *Bisorio Salvation Story*. New Tribes Mission, Sanford, Florida.