

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

Series: True Spirituality
Number: 6
Text: I Tim. 6:15, 16; Deut. 4:12-24
Date: February 22, 2009 (a.m.)

Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

TRUE SPIRITUALITY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Christian Theology is organic in character. It is inter-related or inter-locked. What this means is that a defective understanding of one of the key Christian doctrines will directly impact the rest. This is particularly the case with the Biblical understanding of the doctrine of God. Noted New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie wrote, “The relevance of a right doctrine of God for an approach to NT theology may be illustrated as follows. A God who cares for his creatures is the God who acts to redeem them. A true understanding of the incarnation and therefore of the person of Christ is impossible if a wrong notion of God is maintained.”¹ Indeed, a wrong notion of God will not only have a devastating effect on the critically important doctrines of Christ, sin, and salvation, but will also prevent us from seeing doctrines in their proper significance. Kuyper long ago declared, “The knowledge of God alone teaches you to distinguish between eminent, common, and less important interests in the Scriptures.”² Swiss theologian Emil Brunner has alerted us to the danger of *theologism*, i.e., the danger of putting theology in the place of personal faith.³ Simply lining up our theological ducks in a row is no guarantee that our faith is genuine saving faith. B. B. Warfield, addressed this when he said, “It is sometimes said that some people love theology more than they love God. Do not let it be possible to say that of you. Love theology of course; but love theology for no other reason than this: Theology is the knowledge of God—and it is your meat and drink to know God, to know Him truly, and, as far as it is given to mortals, to know Him wholly.”⁴ I alluded to the best selling “Christian” novel *The Shack*, by William P. Young in our last installment in this series. Since its debut on the market last year, *The Shack* has generated quite some buzz – both positive and negative – within a number of Christian circles and has maintained its No. 1 spot in the Paperback Trade Fiction category of the New York Times Best Sellers list for more than 8 months.⁵ The book also recently reported a significant growth in sales in December while overall book sales dropped. “This most unlikely of stories, as told in William Young’s *The Shack*, has become a runaway bestseller and it is easy to see why,” states the product description for Randal Rauser’s *Finding God in the Shack*, which hit bookstores on Feb. 3. Fast on the heels came Roger Olson’s, book by the same title. I will be reviewing Olson’s book for an upcoming issue of *Modern Reformation*. Both books end up concluding that *The Shack* presents a Biblical picture of God. *The Shack* tells the fictional redemptive story of Mackenzie Allen Phillips, who receives a note, supposedly from “God,” inviting him back to the abandoned shack where evidence of his daughter’s murder had been found. When Phillips accepts the offer and returns to the shack, he enters into a kind of spiritual therapy session with “God,” who appears in the form of a jolly African-American woman and calls herself “Papa;” Jesus, who appears as a Jewish workman; and Sarayu, an indeterminately Asian woman who incarnates the Holy Spirit. There are so many problems in *The Shack*’s portrait of God, that it is hard to know where to begin. One of the most obvious errors is that the book presents an extremely distorted concept of the Trinity. The Bible categorically restricts the incarnation to the Son. The Father and the Holy Spirit are *Never* depicted as incarnated. What are the implications when the Biblical picture of God is as badly distorted as it is in *The Shack*.

I. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: IT’S FOUNDATIONAL CHARACTER

The centrality of this doctrine in the early church is clearly seen in the opening statement of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” This doctrine is clearly out of focus today. There is, as Robert Morey has warned, “a battle of the gods that rages all around us today in which the historic Christian conception of God is being challenged by new views of

God. The most important issue of our times is the contest between the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture and modern gods that man has made in his own image. The battle lines are clearly drawn between those who accept the God revealed in Scripture and those who accept gods that man has made on the basis of his own reason, intuition, and feelings.”⁶

II. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: IT’S INFLUENCE ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

“Biblical piety,” wrote Vos, “is God-centered.”⁷ Scottish theologian James Orr once observed, “Christianity, it is sometimes said...is a life, not a creed; it is a spiritual system, and has nothing to do with dogmatic affirmations. But this is to confuse two things essentially different—Christianity as an inward principle of conduct, a subjective religious experience, on the one hand, and Christianity as an objective fact, or an historic magnitude, on the other. But can even the life be produced, or can it be sustained and nourished, without knowledge?”⁸ How can true spirituality be divorced from the knowledge of God (theology)? “There can be no vital spirituality,” writes Donald Bloesch, “without a sound theology.”⁹---and there is no sound theology without a biblically sound doctrine of God.

III. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: IT’S INTERSECTION WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES

Inherent within the nature of this critical doctrine is it’s bearing on other areas of human learning. “God is the God of every man,” wrote W.G.T. Shedd, “and the science which treats of Him and his ways deeply concerns every man, and especially every one who in any degree is raised above the common level, by the opportunity and effort to cultivate himself. It is a great error to suppose that theological studies should be the exclusive pursuit of the clergy, and that the remainder of the literary class in the state should feel none of the enlargement and elevation of soul arising from them. —When the idea of a perfect commonwealth shall be fully realized—if it ever shall be on earth—theology will be the light and life of all the culture and knowledge contained in it. Its invigorating and purifying energy will be diffused through the whole class of literary men, and through them will be felt to the uttermost extremities of the body politic. All other sciences will be illuminated and vivified by it.”¹⁰

- A. Philosophy. Traditionally, ancient philosophy was primarily concerned with questions that were distinctively theological i.e. “What is ultimately real?” The discussion revolved around some sort of supernaturalism and the question of theism. This did not last. Philosophy has become more and more skeptical, and impatient with speculative discussions of abstract issues of truth. However, philosophical theology never entirely disappeared and has repeatedly played an important role in apologetical debate (the late Francis Schaeffer has influenced a whole generation of evangelical thinkers in this field.)
- B. Anthropology. Cultural anthropology has always served as a traditional conversational partner with theology. Questions like, how does a particular culture’s thought patterns bear on its concept of God? Are there distinctly Western and Eastern ideas of God? Is our cultural understanding of God purely subjective?¹¹
- C. Sociology. This discipline usually concerns itself with the manifestation of religion in various social groups and not directly with their particular beliefs. However, relatively recent developments (the last few decades) have played an important role in shaping the theological debate; i.e., feminist theology and the use of inclusive language in Bible translation. In addition to this we are witnessing a massive cultural shift in our society, as we absorb not only concepts from the various world religions, but are increasingly impacted by popular culture and things associated with the so-called New Age Movement. Consequently, we can expect an ever-increasing amount of theological confusion in our churches.

IV. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: THE CHANGING FACE OF EVANGELICALISM

- A. In Evangelism. The first of these is evangelism, where we can note an increasing tendency to make appeals on the basis of meeting human needs. The discussion with the non-Christian is begun on the level of the examination of felt needs.¹² The nature of the offer of salvation, or the appeal to accept Jesus Christ, is on the basis of his ability to satisfy these human needs, as experienced by the person. The other difference is that many persons do not necessarily consider proper alignment with God’s will, obedience to him, and glorification of him part of human need. Consequently, persons may enter the church on the basis of what they perceive to be the answer to their sense of weakness and their need of God’s help, and then discover that they are expected to serve this Christ and obey his commands. The result eventually will lead to disillusionment and resentment.

- B. In Worship. This same tendency may also be found, to an increasing extent, in Christian worship. We see a movement from worship as adoration to worship as celebration. While the shift may seem small and insignificant, the implications are really quite far-reaching. It may seem paradoxical to suggest that this is a more anthropocentric approach, since much of the music is directed to the praise of God, but the actual focus of the activity is in many cases a reveling in the enjoyment of what God is, stressing the emotions involved. The major emphasis behind *The Shack* is on the qualities of God that are reassuring, rather than disturbing, to individuals like Mac. Primarily, it is power of God, his mighty works, his loftiness, and so on, which are sung about. His holiness, his wrath, his judgment, and the like, are stressed much less. Consequently, expressions of guilt, repentance, remorse, and confession are largely absent. Since the Psalms are heavily utilized, one would expect to find songs expressing repentance, such as Psalm 51, in the repertoire of songs. A search for them, however, is disappointing. God's natural attributes are emphasized more than his moral attributes, and when his moral attributes are examined, it is his love, mercy, compassion, and similarly comforting qualities, rather than more austere dimensions of his nature, which come into prominence.¹³
- C. In Pastoral Care. The perception of the role of the pastor is changing. Instead of focusing on the pastor as a VERBI DIVINI MINISTER (a servant of the Word of God) the pastor is viewed as the CEO or in terms of a psychologist to help people deal with their emotional aches and pains. The question the pastoral counselor concentrates on is not necessarily, "What does God want this person to be?" Rather, it is more nearly the question, "What does this person think or wish to be?" Again, human rather than divine concerns set the agenda and the framework for what transpires. One way of putting this development is the observation that whereas the earlier program of care focused on holiness, this approach is more oriented to human wholeness. The model of the pastor becomes less and less a matter of the spiritual teacher and healer, and more the chief executive, whose task is to build up the congregation, which usually means enlarging it numerically. This is usually related to several factors. One is the personality of the pastor, which often becomes the center of the ministry, message, and appeal of the congregation. Personal charisma, or the ability to attract other persons, is a cardinal qualification for being the pastor of such a church. Further, this type of church is often characterized by "technoministry." The very best marketing methods are employed. Seminars are held by successful pastors of such churches for the benefit of other pastors, who come to learn how to make their own churches successful in similar fashion. The implication is that if properly planned and executed, results can be virtually programmed or guaranteed. One cannot help but wonder what the place of God is in all this, if the results are somehow directly correlated with human plans and efforts.
- D. In Theological Method. There also is an indication of a shift toward anthropocentricity in theological method, namely, free will theism or the "openness of God" school of thought. For those theologians, it is conflict of human free will and divine sovereignty and foreknowledge that leads to the redefinition of the doctrine of God that they are proposing. Further, the very conception of the nature of theology is to be revised. Earlier evangelicalism had tended to define theology as the extraction, interpretation, systematization, and application of the teachings of the Bible, but many evangelicals define it as reflection on the faith of the Christian community. In so doing, however, there is a shift of orientation. Instead of compiling a list of what God has said in the Scriptures, the focus is now on what God purportedly says directly to the individual.

CONCLUSION: The God of Scripture, not the trends of postmodernity (especially the values and lifestyles that constantly parade across the multi-channelled TV that inhabits our homes in poltergeist fashion), must set the agenda of the church. Rather than focusing on being relevant to a culture that has largely lost the very concept of truth, we must return to a Biblical understanding of God. "However much postmodernism affects anyone—whether Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, or others—certain basic theological facts have not changed; they are not generation specific. There is no God but God; idols must be unseated and destroyed; hearts and minds and lives must be modified according to God's standards."¹⁴ *The Shack* is further evidence that what goes by the name *Evangelical* no longer means what it used to. Recently Mike Horton addressed this and observed, "There certainly are signs that the movement's theological boundaries are widening—and I will touch on a few examples in this book. Furthermore, vacuity and liberalism have typically gone hand-in-hand when it comes to the church's faith and practice. Liberalism started off by downplaying doctrine in favor of moralism and inner experience, losing Christ by degrees. Nevertheless, it is not heresy as much as silliness that is killing

us softly. God is not denied but trivialized—used for our life programs rather than received, worshiped, and enjoyed.”¹⁵ The consumers of postmodernity (and especially the majority of those who sit in many of our evangelical churches) need most what they desire least—to be confronted by the awesome (in terms of God’s transcendence) majesty of God as He is depicted in the pages of Holy Scripture.

ENDNOTES

¹ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 115.

² Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1968), p. 332. A failure to recognize this is found in the writings of Open-View theist (Open-view theism denies the historic Christian position that God possesses detailed and exhaustive knowledge of the future) John Sanders. He acknowledges that he has no very satisfactory response to the person who insists that the Bible really does teach the wrath of God, God’s grace and sovereignty in election, crippling human depravity that includes noetic effects, and so forth. But he holds that many such doctrines are exegetically disputable. What is not disputable, he argues, is what the Bible says about the unconditional love of God, full of redemptive purpose. All the apparently exclusionist passages (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12) he dismisses on the grounds that “it is not certain from these passages that one *must* hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from the work.” See his *No Other Name: An Investigation Into the Destiny of the Unevangelicalized* (Eerdmans, 1992) and *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (IVP, 1998) cf. also D.A. Carson’s critique in his *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 285.

³ E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics, Vol. I* (Westminster, 1946), p. 41.

⁴ *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield II* (rpt. P & R, 1970), p. 480.

⁵ LifeWay Christian Bookstores (a division of the Southern Baptist Convention) zealously promoted the book but did so with the caveat. “It is important to remember that *The Shack* is a work of Christian fiction. Christian fiction may be defined as a story or fantasy written within a Christian context. As such, this title is not a teaching or doctrinal book since, by nature of the genre, more creative license is expected in Christian fiction than nonfiction. As with other Christian fiction, this book is not a treatise on the Trinity, salvation or other Christian doctrines, and it would be unwise for people to develop their theological positions based on works of fiction rather than on the Bible itself. In *The Shack*’s fictional story, readers see the loving nature of God depicted in a very different and somewhat unorthodox way. The book illustrates that God wants an intimate, personal relationship with us and demonstrates very vividly the brokenness of human beings who need God to heal their hurts and scars. These aspects of *The Shack* make it appealing to many Christians. However, because of the book’s thought-provoking nature, its unique presentation, and the theological issues listed above, it should be read with extra discernment.” <http://www.lifewaystores.com/lwstore/theshack.asp>

⁶ R. A. Morey, *Battle of the Gods: The Gathering Storm in Modern Evangelicalism* (Crown Publications, 1989), p. 1.

⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1948), p. 154.

⁸ J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 21.

⁹ Donald Bloesch, *Crumbling Foundations: Death & Rebirth in An Age of Upheaval* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 111.

¹⁰ W. G. T. Shedd, *Theological Essays* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 45.

¹¹ Eugene Taylor in his most recent book acutely observes, “The alternative reality tradition has always functioned as a conduit for Asian ideas into the West, and there is no reason to believe that it will cease functioning to do so.” *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America* (Counterpoint, 1999), p. 290. In Buddhism this is believed to be a matter of achieving certain correct understandings and attitudes that put one at peace with the whole of reality. In Hinduism, it is a matter of being mystically united with the larger reality of which one really is a part.

¹² A recent example of this mentality is seen in David W. Henderson’s *Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World* (Baker, 1998) Henderson proceeds in typical therapeutic fashion to psychologize sin in categories of estrangement, alienation, low self-esteem and anxiety. When all is said and done we end up telling people in Clintonesque fashion that “we feel your pain.” Henderson candidly acknowledges: “This approach seeks to begin evangelism not by pointing to God but by identifying which of the seven aspects of the human dilemma is most real to the person with whom we’re speaking. Which of these places of struggle has begun to surface in the life of this person? To answer that takes time, insightful questions, and a willingness to listen” (p. 225). After sharing our common experiences this method then encourages us to point to Jesus as the solution to life’s problems and disappointments. The patently false impression conveyed by this approach is that once you ask Jesus into your heart you become psychologically well adjusted and happy.

¹³ This and the following areas of concern are spelled out in greater detail by Millard Erickson, *God The Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of The Divine Attributes* (Baker, 1998) pp. 26-28.

¹⁴ Groothuis, op. cit. p. 270. This otherwise very good book is marred by Groothuis’ heavy-handed commitment to a form of evangelical feminism cf. his chapter “Race, Gender & Post modernism” pp. 211-238.

¹⁵ M. Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Baker, 2008) p. 24.