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JESUS OF NAZARETH: THE FINAL REVELATION OF GOD

Thomas N. Smith

Q. 4. *What is God?*

A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Thus the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines God.¹ The great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, called this “probably the best definition of God ever penned by man.”² A myriad of Reformed thinkers since Hodge has nodded their approval of this assessment. This is striking in that Hodge is a *Christian* theologian, while the “definition” in question is not distinctively Christian at all. Aristotle could have written it. In fact Aristotle did have a hand in its composition, in that the Puritan divines sitting in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster were all trained in the Aristotelian philosophy, logic, and rhetoric of a late-medieval university education. The influence of alien philosophies (such as Aristotle’s) upon Christian theology has continued to bedevil us to this day.

This is true even among the friends of the Bible. It happens like this. We want to talk about God; we begin with an idea of God. (The answer to Question 4 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is as good as any and better than some.) We go on to discuss the existence of God, the attributes of God, the decrees of God, the works of God, etc. Before we do any of this, perhaps we should begin with epistemolo-

gy: how we know, and, particularly, how we know about God. This leads us to questions of natural revelation, special revelation, the Bible, its inspiration, etc. After we have dealt with the questions of creation, providence, sin, etc., *we finally come to Jesus Christ*. Sadly, the whole agenda is set by a philosophical methodology alien to the Bible.

The mention just now of methodology is important because all this has to do with method. You will have already gathered that I believe that this particular method is flawed, fatally flawed. This is true at least from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, this method has dominated Reformed theology long before Hodge and long since.³ The result has not been a happy one, either for Christian thinking about God or for Christian proclamation of God.

What I am advocating is this: The God who is the true and living God cannot be known in truth apart from His final and full disclosure of Himself. This revelation has been made in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.



Nor am I advocating the abandonment of systematic theology. What I am advocating is this: The God who is the true and living God cannot be known in truth apart from His final and full disclosure of Himself. This revelation has been made in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Every prior

revelation made by God was made by *this* God, and presupposes this ultimate revelation. The revelation of God made in the person and work of the Christ of history is the true and full revelation of God. Jesus Christ is the revelation, the Word of God. Thus we cannot begin with biblical statements about God's sovereignty, omnipotence, and immutability without recourse to what the New Testament says about Jesus Christ. If we go down this road we shall inevitably wreck on the landslide of human reason.

Put another way, we may say the Christian idea of God is never abstract. And thinking about God that is truly Christian cannot be permitted to become abstract. This is because the taproot of idolatry is the human penchant for invention, the human tendency to construct ideas of God which we think are right, proper, and logical while they lack altogether a basis in God's own self-disclosure. On the other hand the heart of Christian piety is submission to the revelation of the God who has revealed and named Himself, and has done this ultimately and decisively in the incarnation and naming of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Christ. We are bound to what God has said about Himself, to what He has said definitively in Jesus, and we must curb our curiosity, bridle our imagination, and control our tendency to extrapolate, lest we add to the words God has spoken about Himself. When we do this we distort God's revelation and endanger our souls.

Well, then, who is this God? What can be said about Him? What does it mean to know God? How do we know Him?

"NO MAN HAS SEEN GOD AT ANY TIME"

Ultimately, God is known only to Himself. He is the "hidden God" of classical Christian theology. This is the idea behind the "mystery" language of the Bible. A divine mystery is something known only to God unless and until

He sovereignly and graciously chooses to reveal it. Indeed, we may even go further and say that a divine mystery is something that cannot be known unless it is revealed, and cannot be fully known even when it is revealed. And paramount in the divine knowledge is the knowledge of Himself. This is the truth of 1 Corinthians 2:11: "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God." It is the exclusivity of this self-knowledge that is being guarded when God responds to Moses' impious request to see the divine glory in the immortal words, "But He said, 'You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!'" (Ex. 33:20). Moses' knowledge of God will be limited to God's own "proclamation" or revelation of His name (v.19; cf. 34:6).

Exodus 33-34 is the definitive revelation of the divine name in the Old Testament. Witness the subsequent Old Testament references to God's "name," His "lovingkindness and faithfulness," His "mercies," etc. As such it becomes the foundational revelation-proclamation of who God is and what can be known of Him. Furthermore, it becomes the background of God's final definitive revelation-proclamation of His Word in Jesus Christ (see John 1:1-8, esp. vv. 14-18). Again, we are served the precautionary reminder, "No man has seen God at any time." The rest of the New Testament is not without this same humbling declaration of God's transcendence in the face of our finite and fallen humanity. In Revelation 4-5 we are given a great apocalyptic vision of God. But the God we see on the throne is as hidden as He is revealed. John clearly borrows from the Old Testament apocalyptic tradition of Isaiah, Zechariah, and especially Ezekiel, which goes back to the revelation given to Moses and the elders of Israel in Exodus 24:9-18. The glory of God, again, is not seen directly. But when we come to John's account of the Lamb everything is changed.

We see Him, and He and His accomplishment are explained to us. The mystery is not dissolved, but in the Lamb who is worshiped with God we see God.

The realization of God's hiddenness is necessary for us who customarily "rush in where angels fear to tread." It chastens our pride and undermines that sense of power which such knowledge tends to foster in our hearts. It reminds us of our idolatrous tendency to invent our god rather than to trust in the God who reveals and names Himself. It warns us against every tendency to speculate on the nature and character of God. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us" (Deut. 29:29).

ONLY BY SELF-DISCLOSURE

In all personal relations, knowledge of someone depends on the willingness of that person to share himself with others. Most of us can remember the painful experience of an adolescent love affair that failed because the person we had a "crush" on did not return our interest. As adults, we have perhaps wished to know someone we greatly admired, i.e., a famous teacher or sports personality, only to have our letters or our personal introduction to him treated like a thousand others. Each of us knows what it is like to be approached repeatedly by someone who wishes to be intimate with us when the feeling is not mutual on our part; we withdraw, rather than reveal, ourselves.

We cannot know the true and living God unless He chooses to reveal or disclose Himself to us. Forsyth was right: "The God of the Bible is not discovered. He is not forced into the light, even of love, by any power outside Himself, not even by our misery."⁴ The mystery of the hidden God must be given to us in the grace of revelation. When the seventy disciples returned from their mission rejoicing that demonic powers were subject to them, the

Lord cautioned them that they should reserve their joy for a greater reality: that their names were recorded in heaven. Whereupon Jesus broke into a charismatic hymn of praise, saying, "I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes." Then He went on to explain: ". . . no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:17-22).

God is not discovered any more than He is invented by us. The religion of the Bible is a religion of grace and freedom wherein the personal God who knows Himself chooses to share facets of that knowledge with sinful men and women. Without His gracious initiative, we remain ignorant and what the Bible calls "in darkness."

A SACRED HISTORY OF SAVING ACTS

The method God has chosen to reveal Himself to men is that of historical intervention. From creation to the call of Abraham, from the Exodus to the return of the exiles from Babylon, from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God has disclosed Himself by entering human history—human history with all its weakness and sin, its killing and dying, its pomp and pitiableness, drenched in alcohol, burdened down with greed, seething with malice, obsessed with sex and power. God has entered our history in an electing grace that calls, forgives, chastens, and preserves those He chooses to vouchsafe with the knowledge of Himself.

The Bible is the record of this sacred history. It is an inspired record. Indeed, it is revelation. But it is also at a remove from the facts of this history, from the reality of these divine encounters with the human objects of His grace. The Bible is the written content of this sacred history of saving encounter with the God who wills to know and to

be known by man. It is because of this that the men and women of the Bible loved to rehearse these historical and historic encounters in praise and proclamation (see Psalms 105-107 and Acts 13:16-41).

"THE BIBLE IS GOING SOMEWHERE"

Karl Barth said, "The Bible is going somewhere." The current and flow of the Bible in its record of these saving acts is moving from the A of creation to the Z of redemption or new creation. The force of this current is a person, at times dimly, at other times more clearly, revealed. The preachers and writers of the New Testament saw these promises and hopes fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:13-36; 7:2-53; 13:16-41). They entertained the confidence that in Jesus God had entered history in a decisive act of salvation, the salvation of the world. They conceived of this as a new Genesis (Mark 1:1; Matt. 1:1ff.; John 1:1). They interpreted it as a new creation (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 4:6; Phil. 1:6; Eph. 2:10). They saw it as the creation of a new race and a new Israel (Matt. 10:1-5; 21:33-43; Col. 2:8-15; 3:9-11; Gal. 3:23-4:31; 6:16). They anticipated its consummation in a new Eden whose paradise would encompass the heavens and the earth (Rev. 2:7; 21:1-7).

And at the center of all this they saw Jesus of Nazareth, *first born* of creation, of the dead, and of many brothers and sisters (Col. 1:15, 18; Rom. 8:29). They perceived Him in His own self-declaration as "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last" (Rev. 2:8; 22:13).

"THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON HAS REVEALED HIM"

The apostles and prophets of the New Testament viewed Jesus of Nazareth as the final and full revelation of the God of Israel. John's treatment of this theme is illustrative of this general consensus. In the prologue of his Gospel, John proclaims Jesus as the true God of Israel, the

Word of God, the Creator of all things, the God whom Israel rejected as she had throughout her history, yet received by a new family of sons and daughters who are identified, not according to ethnic distinctives, but by a supernatural birth (John 1:1-18). Moreover, in the enfleshment or incarnation of Jesus John saw the revelation of the God of grace and truth, of lovingkindness and faithfulness who had proclaimed His name to Moses on Sinai (Ex. 33-34). Those apostolic witnesses of the life of Jesus have seen the God of glory, whose glory cannot be seen. The Word of God has come in human flesh as God's full and final explanation (exegesis) of Himself (John 1:14-18).

It is in light of this that Jesus can say in answer to Philip's request (not unlike the exchange between Moses and God on Sinai [Ex. 33:18-20]), "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). It is out of this matrix that Jesus can pray, "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (17:3; see also 1 John 5:20). Furthermore, John's portrayal of Jesus' self-conscious use of the "I AM" of Exodus throughout the fourth gospel ("I am the light of the world," "I am the bread of life," etc.), culminating in the intriguing record of John 18:4-8, clearly has as its purpose to set forth Jesus as the revealed name of God, revealed for the salvation of His people.

What we are given in the documents of the New Testament is this revelation of God, a revelation finalized in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Here the mystery of God received its culminating disclosure! Who is God? What is He like? How can we know Him? We are to look no further than Jesus Himself. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). In Francis Schaeffer's classic phrase: "He is

there, and He is not silent." This is because God who has intervened throughout human history to reveal, to speak, to save has now done so climactically in the Lord Jesus Christ!

THE PRIMACY OF JESUS CHRIST

It is the failure to grasp the primacy of Jesus Christ, not simply as "the Mediator," but as the revelation of God that has caused classic or scholastic Reformed theology to fail despite all its wonderful promise. In a sense, this failure goes all the way back to Calvin himself. Many of us have struggled through the first book of the *Institutes* precisely because of this confusion in Calvin. This confusion is the result of his theological method that sees Jesus as the Mediator but fails to do justice to Him as the Revelation of God, the same method that we earlier criticized in the elder Hodge.⁵ Nor is this to suggest that the Reformed tradition—from Calvin to Westminster to Hodge—is not, strictly speaking, Christian. The very idea is as inane as it is arrogant. What I do wish to propose was well said in 1902 by Willis J. Beecher:

The Calvinistic theology is Christocentric in fact, even if not in form. Perhaps some theologian will arise who shall succeed in discovering a dogmatical rearrangement into a system that shall be Christocentric in form as well as in fact.⁶

I believe that such a synthesis of fact and form lies in a new and deeper understanding of Christ Jesus the Lord as the revealer of God's nature and person. Jesus must be seen not simply, or even profoundly, as the Mediator of the New Covenant, but as the content of the New Covenant, the final and full Word of God, spoken by God, spoken as God.

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Notes

1. "It is difficult to conceive of God, but to define Him in words is an impossibility." Gregory of Nazianzus, quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), 31.
2. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1:367.
3. Hodge is a good example of this flawed methodology: see his *Systematic Theology*, I:31-33, and passim. For an example of a theologian working within the classic catholic and reformation consensus, who shows a keen sensitivity to the issues I am raising, see Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity). Four of the projected seven volumes have been published. See especially *God the Almighty* in this series, 17-78.
4. Quoted in Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 59.
5. Sidney Greidanus makes a similar point on the preaching of Calvin. He argues that Calvin's preaching is finally theocentric, not Christocentric: "Thus in his sermons on narrative texts, his homily style of explaining and applying every sentence and clause leads to the loss of the central message of the biblical author for Israel. This loss of focus, in turn, leads to a lack of unity in his sermons, and, ultimately, blurs the Christ-centered focus (*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 151).
6. Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 194.