



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#4 – A Knowable, Good God

With Study Questions

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Remedial Thoughts Regarding the Knowledge of God

Having discussed what the Bible is and why we should believe it, we now turn to the main topic of the Bible—God. I have only three goals in this present section. To show: (1) that God is knowable, (2) that the quest for knowing God is reasonable and noble, and (3) that God is good. This seems simple enough. But we remedial Christians are capable of taking even the most simple and straightforward concepts and twisting them into theological pretzels.

A Knowable God

There are many things Christians encounter regarding our knowledge of God that require remedial instruction. First we are often presented with a God who may not be worth knowing. Another is a God who simply can't be known. He can't be known because He thinks so differently from us that in our interaction with Him; we can't really know which end is up.

A Contemporary God

Today the church is very hip on viewing God as a contemporary. In a certain sense it seems that God desires this. We read, **“So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11)**. Jesus taught, saying **“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15 NASB)**.

So God is our friend. But when Moses spoke to the people on behalf of God his face shone in such a way that the people were afraid to come near (Exodus 34:30). And even though Christ called His apostles friends, they never used that title for themselves. Instead they referred to themselves as servants or slaves of Christ. Peter's response to one miracle of Jesus accurately portrays man's proper response to Christ: **“When Simon Peter saw *it*, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8)!**

In our headlong pursuit of seeking to make Christianity significant, we often bring God down to a level where He is so knowable that some reckon He is no longer a God worth knowing. Instead of a God who is to be revered and worshiped, He is a super-psychologist, a phenomenal friend or the parent or spouse we never had. If I'm happy with my life, friends, family, or marriage, what use is God to me? I don't need another friend.

The Unreachable God

Another popular remedial view is that God is not knowable at all; He is so above us that He operates in a realm that is unknowable, and perhaps even

contradictory, to mankind. With a sort of false humility, or cop-out (since if there is a God He no doubt has a certain claim on our lives), we reckon that there is no point in trying to extend our thoughts to such an infinite being. But God's infinite nature does not make Him unreachable. Paul writes,

But what does it say? "*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:8, 9).

So, in our remedial thinking, God is either my buddy who may, or may not, be worth knowing or He is so far in outer space that even the Hubble can't pick Him up. If we could somehow put these two together, we might be closer to the truth. God is both immanent and transcendent. He is the God who is among us *and* the God of heaven and eternity. Either way, God, though incomprehensible, is knowable. I'll explain.

An Incomprehensible God, A Knowable God

Who is God? How does the Bible define God? The question itself seems so arrogant. I've always found it a bit disquieting to hear people talk about God. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable talking about God myself. For men to seek to define God is like plankton seeking to define the nature of the whale that's swallowing it. I am not sure at what level plankton might know things, but there does seem to be a certain aspect of the whale to which they are privy. Christians believe that there are certain aspects of God that He has revealed to His creation.

Let us, in all humility, acknowledge the incomprehensibility of God. But let us also recognize that simply because God is incomprehensible, in terms of His immensity or vastness (quantitatively), it does not follow that God is entirely unknowable in any sense whatsoever. In other words, the fact that I don't know everything about God does not mean I don't know anything about God. Most of you could not give me an all-encompassing, comprehensive definition of baseball but that doesn't mean that you don't know what a strike-out is.

A Logical God

It's also important to recognize that the limited number of things I do know about God are as true for God as they are for me (qualitative). In other words, when I learned that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), I had to understand that lying is to God what lying is to me. If two plus two equals four for me, it equals four for God. If parallel lines don't intersect for me on earth, they will never intersect for God in heaven. It might be said this way, "When I know the truth, I know the mind of God (in a qualitative but not quantitative sense)."

I don't mean for this to sound overly philosophical, but a few quick explanations can reveal the importance of recognizing the knowableness and

reasonableness of God. After all, if God is not reasonable, He certainly is not knowable; you can't know nonsense.

The truth is the truth on earth *because* it is the truth in the mind of God. Some have asserted that parallel lines may intersect in heaven – after all, God is above logic (supra-logical); seems harmless enough, even humble. It's also an easy method to explain away difficulties in theology; we have a problem, we merely consign it to a supra-logical God. But we must realize that the reason parallel lines don't intersect on earth is due to the fact that they don't intersect in heaven (if by heaven we are speaking of the economy or rules of God).

Allow me to bring this closer to home. If parallel lines intersect in heaven, we must acknowledge that God can be a God of contradictions. If God is a God of contradictions, "yes" may mean "no" and "trust" may mean "doubt"; "believe and be saved" to us may mean "believe and be damned" to God.

We established the Bible to be our starting point of knowledge. Since God is the author of the Bible, it makes Him our starting point of knowledge. The Scriptures declare that **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7)**. The Apostle Paul writes of **"the Father and of Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2, 3)**. Implicit in these statements, and the hundreds like them in Scripture, is the assumption that knowledge proceeds from God and that we can have access to that wisdom and knowledge. It is no wonder that the serpent's initial assault on humanity was **"Indeed, has God said" (Genesis 3:1)?**

A Reasonable Quest

So Many Disagreements

Now to our second point, this, my friends, is the ultimate quest of humanity – to know God. A common argument against organized religion (as if unorganized religion has any less difficulty) is that there is so much disagreement regarding what the Bible teaches about God.

Just recently I was discussing some theological disagreements with a Christian friend within earshot of a non-Christian friend. My non-Christian friend commented, "It's amazing how the church still disagrees on so many things" (again, as if the non-churched all see things eye to eye). The tenor of his statement betrayed his thoughts on the futility of pursuing something of which no one can seem to agree. But we should not be discouraged by the fact that there are disagreements in the church.¹ There is a great deal of disagreement on how we should approach treating cancer and heart disease; this does not mean these pursuits should be abandoned.

I once had a coach who had instructed numerous world record holders and gold medalists in track and field. His knowledge of the sport far exceeded the boundaries of both my intellect and talent. Would it have been reasonable for me to fire him because I was so inept? What kind of tortured logic would

¹ I will address this more deeply when we discuss whether or not Christians should argue.

compel me to dispose of such genius due to my own ignorance and inability? It is unreasonable for humanity to abandon its mission to know and serve God simply because we are poor at coming to the correct conclusions. All this to say that God can be known; it is a promise made by God Himself. **“I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me” (Proverbs 8:17).**

God is Good

A Truncated View of God

My final point is that God is good. This seems so blatantly obvious that it is hardly worth arguing the point. But, as a remedial Christian, I even found my notion of viewing God as good to be lacking. The primary defect in my thinking was that I had a notion of God on one hand, a separate notion of good on the other hand, then came to the conclusion that they matched up okay. Allow me to explain.

God has often been portrayed as a sort of George Burnsish, kindly old man who is seeking to keep the world in good working order. We all like this kindly old man. We thank him at the Golden Globes and Emmy's. But as we read the Bible we see that He demands our allegiance, and even worship. He is a jealous God who exacts His judgments on those who refuse to acknowledge His Godhood. This alter-ego side of God is downplayed in the church. All of a sudden, George Burns seems more like Saddam Hussein. This God is sexist, homophobic, pro-war, and against a woman's right to choose. He also sends people to hell because of sin. That God will never be given a chair, or mention, at the Academy Awards.

The problem lies in viewing God as a mere part of creation; he generally makes the right decisions and picks things that are good. Sometimes, however, people feel He oversteps His boundaries and arbitrarily calls things good which may be evil. It is not uncommon for those in the academic world to question the decisions of this militant, overbearing God.

But God does not pick things, or make laws, because they are good (as if they were good out there all on their own) nor are they good because He arbitrarily decides to say they are good. Goodness itself is defined by the character and nature of God. The old confessions put it this way.

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient...He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.²

² Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC

Hating God=Hating Good

The Psalmist writes, *“You are good, and do good”* (Psalm 119:68). The Apostle Paul put it this way, *“For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen”* (Romans 11:36). In other words, in order to actually say that something is good, it must be in harmony with the character of God. To offend God is to offend goodness. To hate God (a popular saying these days) is to hate goodness. Notice in Proverbs that God equates Himself with life.

**For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord;
36 but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who
hate me love death (Proverbs 8:35, 36).**

To hate God is to hate life. Life, truth, beauty, purity, goodness, justice, and love are not merely qualities that God happens to be good at, or is capable of defining; these things are defined by, and flow from, the very character of God Himself.

I remember, when examining whether or not I wanted to be a Christian, scrutinizing whether or not the Christian faith was really ethical – did it have its act together? Was the God of the Bible truly worthy of my devotion? Was He good? Hopefully now we can see the hubris of such a disposition. Essentially what I, in my over-inflated view of self-importance, was seeking to do was determine whether or not goodness was actually good; and I was the personal oracle of judgment over the essence of goodness and God. Sounds crazy! But it is pretty much the norm of man’s thinking.

Seeking to Know a Good God

According to the Scriptures there is a good God who is knowable by man. There is no greater or nobler pursuit than to seek after this God. He is the sprocket to which all spokes connect. When God is left out of the equation, all things – familial, governmental, relational, ecclesiological (church) crumble. Jesus taught,

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 67:31-33).

And God is not merely good but the fount of goodness itself. To abandon the notion of God is to abandon the notion of good; and have we not seen this to be the case?

God is Good, We are Not

I would be remiss in my duties, at this point, if I did not direct our minds to something painfully clear to us all. Though God is good, we are not good. Jesus states the obvious, **“No one is good but One, that is, God” (Mark 10:18)**. The righteousness, holiness, and goodness of God are so above us that this quest for knowing God in a certain sense, quite frankly, becomes a fool’s errand. There is simply no tower of excellence or ladder of righteousness that man can build to find God. Isaiah teaches us what we already suspected, **“But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6)**.

So what hope have we? Our hope lies not in us finding God but in God finding us. He finds us by extending His love toward us through His Son Jesus,

...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8 NASB).

How clear this should be to us. The only way man can know God is by God extending Himself to us. Jesus, God the Son, became a Man, He emptied Himself, He became sin, He humbled Himself to the point of death that we might have life—life that is found only in union with God. It is by faith in Christ, and Christ alone, that men have hope of reconciliation with God who is good. May God grant us vision to see this truth and may we ever call upon the name of the Savior.

Questions for Study

1. What are the dangers of over-emphasizing God as our friend (page 1)?
2. How would you respond to the assertion that God is not knowable (pages 1, 2)?
3. Does God's incomprehensibility mean He can't be known at all? Explain (page 2)?
4. Why is it important to understand that God is logical or reasonable, as we understand logic and reason (pages 2, 3)?
5. What was the serpent's initial assault on humanity? What, do you suppose, was his reason for this (page 3)?
6. Are disagreements in the church a reasonable motive to avoid seeking after God (pages 3, 4)?
7. Discuss the relationship between God and goodness (page 4).
8. What someone says they hate God, what are they actually saying (pages 4, 5)?
9. If God is good and man is not, what is the answer to this dilemma (pages 5, 6)?