

Finding Faith: Do You Seriously Expect Me to Believe God is an Old Man with a White Beard?

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

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Today is the third part of a four-part sermon series called Finding Faith, based on the book by the same title by Brian McLaren. Each sermon builds on the previous one. If you did not get a chance to be here last Sunday I encourage you to listen or read it on our web site. To summarize the first message was that when people reject their faith what they are often really doing is rejecting bad faith, not good faith. The second was about how faith grows and the four stages: Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Humility.

Today we talk about popular images of God. Right now at this moment you have an idea about who God is. You may not have given it much thought but you have an image of God based on how you were raised, your reading of the Bible, and your life experiences. Are you comfortable with your present understanding of God? Do you want your image of God to be as real as possible? In other words do you want your concept of God to be as close as possible to who God really is?

You've heard the story of the blind men holding on to a part of an elephant. One man held the tusks and claimed that elephants are hard and smooth. Another had his arms wrapped around a leg and said that elephants are round, rough, and leathery. Still another had hold of the tail and stated that elephants are small and hairy. Each man encountered a certain part of the elephant but still made sweeping statements about elephants in general.

When we experience God it is always just a part of who God is. The Bible says that we see as in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. God is like the most beautiful diamond in the world, a diamond so big that we cannot possibly view it all at the same time. And so we examine a facet of the diamond, appreciate it, contemplate it. The temptation for many is to take that one facet and claim that we know all there is to know about the entire diamond.

But down through the ages people have made sweeping generalizations about God. J.B. Phillips, an Anglican minister wrote a book called "Your God Is Too Small" in 1961. He suggested that we need to allow God to be God, not a small, confined image of God. The first "too small" God is a familiar one in popular culture: the Grand Old Man. This God is a fatherly, white-haired grandfather God who sits on a throne in heaven. The popular idea that goes along with this kind of God is that as long as I'm good, mind my own business, and never kill anyone, the grand old man in the sky will be pleased with me.

In his book "Divine Conspiracy" Dallas Willard describes this kind of too-small-God this way, "Some think that God is a Wizard-of-Oz or Sistine-Chapel kind of being sitting at a location very remote from us. The universe is then presented as, chiefly, a vast empty space with a humanoid God and a few angels rattling around in it, while

several billion human beings crawl through the tiny cosmic interval of human history on an oversized clod of dirt circling an insignificant star.”

Phillips talks about another concept of God he calls Meek and Mild. This image of God conjures up pictures of a God who would avoid trouble wherever possible, someone of a placid temperament who is almost a stranger to the passions of red-blooded humanity, someone with his head up in the clouds and is no earthly good in facing the real gut issues of life. For years whenever Hollywood portrayed ministers in their films they were usually the meek and mild type. The typical image of clergy is spineless, wimpy little man.

A farmer lived alone in the Irish countryside except for a pet dog he had for a long time. The dog finally died and he went to the parish priest, saying, "Father, the dog is dead. Could you possibly say a Mass for the poor creature?" Father Patrick told the farmer "No, we can't have services for an animal in the church, but I'll tell you what, there's a new denomination down the road apiece, and no telling what they believe in, but maybe they'll do something for the animal." The farmer said "I'll go right now. By the way, do you think \$50,000 is enough to donate for the service?" Father Patrick replied "Why didn't you tell me the dog was Catholic?"

Perhaps the kind of religious jokes we tell say something about what we believe about God. Does our humor affect our image of God?

Other types include the God of Absolute Perfection, God in a Box, and Managing Director God. To this list I would add Star Wars. Many people like the idea of God as the Force in this classic science fiction movie. Basically these images of God evolved because people took one piece of the elephant and enlarged and magnified it. Most people don't appreciate when others do this with us. You may be a mother working at home but this role does not define all of who you are. You may be an athlete but this doesn't mean you don't have a mind to talk about intellectual matters. You may be a giving person but this doesn't mean others can walk all over you.

Brian McLaren titled a chapter "Do You Seriously Expect Me to Think of God As an Old Man?" In this chapter he answers three questions. 1. Is God a personal or impersonal God? 2. If God is personal why would God be relational? 3. Why speak of God as male? Why not female? Let's take a look.

1. Personal or Impersonal. McLaren talks about the animal world where higher forms of life have more personality. A chimpanzee, for example, has more personality than a frog. If you believe that a creator can't create beings greater than himself, then the fact that personalities exist is for McLaren evidence that the creator must not be below personality. God is personal not in a way less than us, but more.

2. The second is the question of God being personal but non-relational. Why would a big, transcendent God want to be involved in our puny, pedestrian lives? This is the basis for deism, the idea that God created the universe kind of like winding up a clock and then sat back, uninvolved while the clock ticked away. McLaren writes that deism is appealing during times of human atrocities and suffering. This is because deism takes the blame off God's shoulders. If God is just watching the world unfold and can't do anything then it is not God's fault.

McLaren writes, “Deism was against something worth being against, but in the process became for something not worth being for: A distant, uninvolved God whose personal care for individuals is severely limited.”¹

3. Third question is the one of God’s gender. McLaren talks about how the English language has no provisions for referring to inanimate objects as masculine or feminine. Remembering my junior high French I know there are nouns that are viewed as male or female. So they can use pronouns such as he or she. With English the lower an animal is on the personality chart the more likely it will be referred to as “it.” We don’t bother to find out the gender of a housefly. But a golden retriever with lots of personality will be he or she. We would never call a newborn baby an “it” as well.

So we have this dilemma when we talk about God in English. If God is personal and relational we cannot use “it.” But if God is not bound by human personality then God is not bound by gender as well. God is bigger than gender. Wouldn’t it be interesting to learn about how other languages deal with this issue?

I must confess that calling God “Mother” has and continues to be a strange experience. Why is this so hard for people? We use different titles and names for God all the time. Creator God, Heavenly Father, Almighty God. Are we so sure that these names reflect the true and total nature of God? God was not made in our image. We were made in God’s image. So why are we so hung up on seeing God as male with masculine qualities? Doesn’t God have feminine qualities as well? Most of us would do well to simply admit that it is more about our uncomfortability than it is about the reality of God.

At the end of this chapter McLaren tackles the question of why isn’t God more obvious? Why is God so elusive, so hidden? He offers the possibility that God may have reasons for not wanting to be obvious. He uses the example of an online discussion group. He purposely stays in the background wanting others to feel empowered to talk. If he, as pastor, talked more others might feel intimidated.

He writes, “If God’s goal in the universe is for us to develop—for us to make unpressured choices, to become who we will be not because “the Big Guy’s looking” but for other more natural, unforced reasons (like courage, love, integrity, or justice)...then perhaps God is forced to stay “subtle,” behind-the-scenes, present but not too obvious, involved but also ignorable, here but hidden. C.S. Lewis said it like this in “The Screwtape Letters”: “(God) wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away his hand.”²

Of course we must present the other side, the possibility that God’s hiddenness could be our problem. Maybe we are too absorbed with our own interests and wants and desires that we don’t make time to look for God.

A Midwesterner from the farm was visiting his college roommate in New York City. Walking near Times Square one day, the farm boy suddenly remarked, “I hear a cricket.” “You’re crazy,” his city friend replied. “It’s the noon rush hour, and in all of this traffic noise you heard a cricket? C’mon, man!”

“No, I did hear a cricket,” the visitor insisted. Focusing more intently, he walked to the corner, crossed the busy avenue and looked all around. Finally he approached a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the cover mulch, he found his cricket.

¹ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 133.

² Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 138.

His friend couldn't believe what he had seen. But the friend from the farm said, "My ears are no different from yours. It simply depends on what you have learned to listen for. Here, let me show you." He then reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and dropped the coins on the sidewalk. At the sound of the money hitting the pavement, every head along the crowded block turned.³

What voices are you training your soul to hear? Are the sounds of this world so loud that you cannot hear the voice of God? And perhaps you deduce that God doesn't exist? Just because I am not tuned in to the voice of God today does not mean that God isn't present. It does not mean that God isn't real. It does not mean that I can't hear the sound of God tomorrow.

God is much more than our thoughts and images of God. May we give ourselves permission to allow God to be who God really is in the world. May we guard against images that make God a too small God. And may we discover how present and real God is in our hearts.

³ -As told by Donald J. Shelby, Santa Monica, California, Hear Here! 8 September 1991, 1-2.