

BAD RELIGION AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT GOD - Part one

Sunday, June 10th, 2012, 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #1567

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BAD RELIGION BELIEVES GOD IS WHATEVER YOU CONCEIVE HIM TO BE

Art Linkletter saw a small boy scribbling intently on a piece of paper with a crayon. Always on the prowl for a cute saying from a child, he asked the boy, "What are you drawing there?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," the boy confidently replied. "Don't you know nobody knows what God looks like?" said Linkletter. The boy stopped, looked directly at Linkletter, and then said, "That's because they haven't seen my picture yet!"

One simply must decide where one will get his information about God. How shall we determine what He is really like? Everyone will have some opinion. How shall we judge and measure between them? Shall we go by the latest near death experience testimonial? Shall we listen to the angel who spoke to Joseph Smith? Will we be enlightened by the philosophers in our universities?

In our society the statement, "I believe in God" means almost absolutely nothing at all. Deists are a dime a dozen. The only question of importance is "**What God do you believe in?**" Or, "**What do you believe about your God?**"

Where do we get our information about God? **Karl Barth** was surely right when he said there are only two approaches to attain knowledge about God: One is to start with **man** and reason upward. The other is to start with **God** and reveal downward. This second approach is the only one the Christian can take. We would know almost nothing of saving importance about God were it not for the revelation of the Scriptures.

There is a **givenness** to the information God has given us of Himself. We don't get to vote on the content of God's revelation of Himself. It just comes. We can accept or reject it, but we can't rearrange it to suit our own tastes and inclinations.

Of course, in our politically correct, tolerant age, many, even in the church, have come to the place of feeling confident enough to **remake** and **redefine** God after their own likeness. We all know of Alcoholics Anonymous and the famous step of recovery where the recoverer admits the existence of a supreme being, "**whatever I conceive Him to be.**"

"**Whatever we conceive Him to be.**" That's a classic example of starting with man and reasoning upwards. This is the heart of idolatry. Erwin Lutzer says, "**Idolatry is giving respectability to our own ideas about God.**" That's it exactly. Paul says the essence of our sinful nature begins with our attempt to **pare God down to more manageable proportions**. Sinners can't live with God as He is, so they habitually manufacture a God they **can** live with.

Of course, we would all like to think we're just objective seekers of truth when we form our notions of God. But it's really not true. We manufacture our own god's for several reasons:

- a) **We do it when we get impatient with God - Exodus 32:1 - "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'"**

This is a profound little introductory verse. It tells us a great deal about the root of idolatry. "**When the people saw that Moses delayed...**" That's when they made their idol of gold. "**We don't know what has become of Moses!** We can't wait. We've got stuff to do. We've got our own lives and agendas. Who knows how long it will be before Moses comes down with word from God!"

God seemed too **distant**, too **uninvolved**. He seemed **silent** when they were in a hurry. This is so contemporary. You've heard the question a thousand times: "**Where's God when people are crushed in collapsing towers or earthquakes? Where was God when my spouse died of cancer? Why didn't He do something?**"

O, they may not manufacture a statue of gold to worship, but over and over again, people **give up on the true God and give their devotion to something else**. They put their trust in something more visible, something more under their control.

But there's a second reason for the redefining of God that's probably even more common today:

- b) ***We want a God who is more tolerant and less judgmental.*** We make the fatal mistake of defining God in terms that are less demanding to our own actions. We make a God who is just like us, only a little better:

Psalm 50:18-21 - "If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers. [19] "You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. [20] You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son. [21] These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you."

These people aren't living right. They're wrong both in their **actions** and in their **associations** ("**....you keep company with adulterers**"18). Why did they continue in these sins? What put their consciences to sleep? **It was their recreation of God.** "You thought I was just like you," God said. "You got used to sin so you thought I got used to sin. You tolerated sins in others so you thought I tolerated sins in others."

This is the very first step toward **unholiness**. The very first sin - the sin that makes room for all the other sins - is the **redefining of God in our own image**. True, God does **love** us. He loves us enough to redeem and transform us. But He is not at all **like** us.

Have you seen the church web sites lately? I talk to pastors regularly who won't even preach about the holiness of God or the wrath of God or His hatred of sin in their churches because they know **people don't want to hear about that anymore**. We have come to call it "**contextualizing our message**." People don't like to **picture** God like that. That's not the way to build bridges with the other religious groups. We don't want to sound narrow-minded or intolerant. So the church is increasingly becoming **consumer driven**. We package messages around a more popular notion of God, the kind of God people create in their own minds.

Check this out for yourself. I see more and more church web sites that feel a compulsion to tell people all the staff's favorite television programs and favorite movies. Really? Here we are speaking to our communities. And we're not listing our favorite Scripture verse, or the more important thing we've learned from our Lord about growing in Him, or even a clear re-statement of how the gospel can change lives. No. "My favorite show is 'Dancing With the Stars!'"

Let me give you some modern examples of the **man-created gods**:

1) **THERE IS THE NORTH AMERICAN GOD OF WEALTH AND PROSPERITY**

Given our preoccupation with success, leisure and material prosperity it's not surprising that we've developed a god with the same priorities. **Gloria Copeland** has written: "**The Word of God simply reveals that lack and poverty are not in line with God's will for the obedient....Allow the Holy Spirit to minister the truth to your spirit until you know beyond a doubt that God's will is always prosperity.**" And she means **material** prosperity - diamonds, BMW's, boats, summer homes, cruises, etc. That's God's will for everyone.

The problem with making that kind of theology so air-tight and absolute is it really only plays well in certain parts of the world. Jesus told his disciples He had no place to lay his head. Most of the first followers of Jesus were starved, burned, tortured or executed. Paul told the church at Corinth that God hadn't called very many noble or wealthy people. This western picture of God still doesn't play very well in Haiti, or Afghanistan, or Bangladesh.

2) **THERE'S THE MODERN GOD OF MY EMOTIONAL NEEDS**

It's almost embarrassing to go through the Christian bookstores anymore. We must be the most messed up people on earth: "How To Have Peace of Mind," "How to Deal With Worry," "How to Relate to Your Spouse," "How to Manage Your Money," "How to Handle Fear," etc.

Now, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with receiving help in those areas. That's not my point at all. But after awhile, when we're bombarded with emotional and psychological help in the name of Christianity, however good it may be, a new and different image of God begins to form in the mind.

The subliminal message in all of this is that God is here to help me live a little better in this world than I could all by myself. My problem isn't my sin or my rebellion against God. Those needs are minimized in the face of more immediately **felt**

needs. My immediate need isn't repentance. It's my emotional baggage, or my bad self-image. This new non-judgmental God will help me to accept and love myself more and become more at peace with myself and at harmony with the world around me. And however helpful that may *feel* (and it certainly *does* feel helpful), it's not the New Testament Gospel.

Noted historian *Joseph Haroutunian* writes: ***"Before, religion was God-centered. Before, whatever was not conducive to the glory of God was infinitely evil. Now, that which is not conducive to the happiness of man is evil, unjust and impossible to attribute to deity. Before man lived to glorify God; now God lives to serve man....Spirituality is no longer good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along in the world. And I am the judge of its worth."***

3) THERE IS THE GOD OF MY PERSONAL SELF-AUTHENTICATION

Remember the big seller, *Conversations With God*, by *Neale Donald Walsch*? In it he was actually not so much in conversation with God as he was *taking dictation* as God spoke to him.

What did God say? Well, nothing that should surprise you if you can see the way we are making God in our image these days. Walsch quotes God directly:

"Your will for you is God's will for you. You are living your life the way you are living your life and I have no preference in the matter. This is the grand illusion in which you are all engaged, that God cares one way or the other what you do. I do not care what you do, and that is hard for you to hear....Listen to your feelings. Listen to your highest thoughts. Listen to your experience. Whenever any one of these differs from what you've been told by your teachers, or read in your book, forget the words. Words are the least purveyors of truth....There is no such thing as right or wrong, good or bad, better or worse....There is only what serves you and what does not."

Forget for just a minute the obvious contradiction of Walsch *"taking dictation"* from God when God tells him words can't be relied upon for truth. We still need to recognize the *reason* Walsch's God is so utterly accommodating and approving of all our lifestyles. No one should be surprised that this God is everything sinful people could want him/her/it to be. This God defines no sin, offers no reproof, tenders no judgment. This is an idol made directly after our own image. ***We keep cows for milk, sheep for wool, and God for continual affirmation and acceptance.***

Lest you think this kind of thinking is only found in some far away corner of spiritual weirdness, let me take the time to give you just one more illustration:

Robert Hicks is a popular Christian author who wrote a book entitled *"Masculine Journey."* In this book he laments that the church doesn't respond properly to young men as they begin their journey into adult manhood. He writes about how the church should respond to a young male's movement through the different passages of life - such as his first drunk or sexual encounter. On page 177 of his book he says this:

"I'm sure many would balk at my thought of celebrating the experience of sin. I'm not sure how we would do it. But I know we need to do it. For example, we usually give the teenagers in our churches such a massive dose of condemnation regarding their first encounters with certain sins that I sometimes wonder how they ever recover. Instead of jumping all over them when they have their first experience with sex or drugs we should look on this as a rite of passage.....At this point the elders of the church could come forward, confess their own adolescent sins and congratulate the next generation for being human...."

Fifty thousand copies of that book were handed out in Boulder, Colorado by Promise Keepers at one of their stadium events.

How different the warning from the true God through the prophet Isaiah - Isaiah 5:20-21 - ***"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! [21] Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!"***

4) THERE'S THE GOD OF OUR NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

Going way back to books like *“The Celestine Prophecy,” “A Return to Love,”* and *“Embraced By the Light,”* books like these can’t even be kept on the bookstore shelves. People are longing for some word of hope as they face their own mortality and the threat of eternity.

It should surprise no one that on to the scene comes a god with just the message they long to hear. **Betty Eadie** writes of her near-death experience and what she learned about Jesus Christ. She says she met Christ in the twilight zone between life and death. She even dedicated her book to Him. Now she says she knows there will be absolutely no judgment at death, just glad admission to the realm which she describes as the place where everyone is nice.

But I’m very suspicious of the Jesus she says she met and spoke to. The Jesus I know - the Jesus of the Scriptures - had something very different to say about what happens after we die:

John 5:28-29 - **“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice [29] and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”**

5) **WHY ALL OF THIS IS OF SUCH GREAT AND URGENT IMPORTANCE TO US**

Remember Karl Barth’s profound words. There are only two ways to gather your knowledge of God. Either you start with man and reason upward, or you start with God and reveal downward. What we’ve been studying are the results of the first approach. When you start with man’s thoughts and work your way up toward God you get a God made in man’s image.

The problem with that approach is graver than we might think. It’s not just that we’re left with empty idols who can’t think or speak. And it’s not even just that we’re left with no moral standards to which we can cling for meaning and direction. Both of those things are true, but the real problem is deeper still. ***Only a God who judges sin can redeem from sin.***

This world must hear God’s word about sin before it can even begin to respond to His message of grace and redemption in Jesus Christ. And the marshmallow god’s we’re peddling these days, sometimes even in the church, are empty of power to save and redeem. We’re getting too much Christianity mixed with water.

Only a God who ***condemns*** sin can ***redeem us*** from sin. There is no hope for salvation from a God who takes sin no more seriously than we do. And people can’t choose to embrace ***part*** of God’s revealed truth. We can’t pick and choose our way through divine truth like food at a cafeteria counter. Jesus came to redeem sinners, and sin must always be defined on God’s terms, not ours.

We need to freshly embrace Paul’s words in his letter to the Colossians: **Colossians 2:6-8, 18-19** - **“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, [7] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. [8] See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ....2:18-19....Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”**