

“Recovering a Sense of the Holy”

The editor of a Christian magazine, Kenneth Wood, told of a friend who visited a church, and the person offering the morning prayer began this way, “Good morning, Dad!” How would you respond to this? The magazine editor’s response when his friend told him this was, “This casual approach to God shocked me, because I have always felt that if a person understands the Biblical picture of God and the Creator-creature relationship, we will approach God with a feeling of awe.”

Anyone remember the film, “Oh God”. John Denver was in it. Remember who played the part of God? *George Burns!* If you saw the film, do you remember how you reacted? I had mixed feelings. After the initial shock, I thought, “Well, when God came to earth in human form, most people had trouble believing that the fullness of God resided in a blue-collar working man – a carpenter – from the hick village of Nazareth. So maybe it’s not a total stretch to think God could have resided in someone like George Burns. But there was (and still is) an uneasiness about that film. To reduce the God of all creation, the God of the Old and New Testaments, to a small 80 year-old comedian with big round glasses and a cigar – I don’t know about that!

Contrast this with how the ancient Hebrews viewed God. Devout Jews regarded God’s name and character as being so holy that they would not even say the name “God”. The gospel writer Matthew – a Jew writing to Jews – in his gospel would not refer to the kingdom of God as “the kingdom of God”, but rather “the kingdom of *heaven*”. In the Middle Ages, when copyists were laboriously copying the Scriptures by hand, before writing the name “God” on a scroll, they would go and ceremoniously wash their hands!

Compare that with typical life today. On any given day or night, the TV airwaves are filled with people treating God lightly: comedians cracking jokes about God, films filled with profanity, sitcoms with the characters saying, “Oh my God....!” I recently decided to try to watch more movies. So I did. Movies streamed on our TV. Probably half of the films I’ve ditched after a few minutes. Every other word is the “F” word. Using the name of our Savior flippantly, cursing. The world of the internet is no better!

Even Christians, and those who believe in God, can sometimes get too cozy-wozy with the Almighty! God is “the Man upstairs”, or our Buddy, our Pal.

I heard a song years ago called “The Farmer and the Lord”. It starts:

“I was resting one evening By the side of the road
When I saw an old farmer In a field he had just hoed.

His face was brown and all wrinkled By the sun and the wind
And he was talking to the Lord Just like he would be talking to a friend.

‘Well sir’, he said, With a voice calm and quiet
‘Them corn tassels need sacking And I ain’t got no string to tie it.

Hadn't rained in so long The fields are mighty dusty
It's been so unbearable hot That the kids are even getting fussy.”

After a little more complaining, he says, “You’d think I wasn’t grateful”, then he proceeds to thank the Lord for some good things happening. The song ends with the farmer saying, I’m going to mosey home, and not take more of your time, and

“Evening to you Lord and watch over us tonight
And don't you worry about us none, Lord
No Sir, because everything is going to be all right...”.

Well, isn’t that sweet! “Don’t you worry, Lord!” (Isn’t that like a role reversal)?

I heard a song recently that’s kind of an update on *The Farmer and the Lord*. It’s a lively little country song. The refrain to this song is something of a classic:

“Me and Jesus, got our own thing goin’
Me and Jesus, got it all worked out
Me and Jesus, got our own thing goin’
We don't need anybody to tell us what it's all about”

And isn’t that sweet, too! I think you get the point! Keep in mind the ancient Jews who would not even *say* the name of God, and the ancient copyists who would wash their hands before they wrote the name of God in the manuscripts of the Bible.

Many years ago, Gerald Kennedy, a bishop in the Methodist Church, spoke about this: “There has been a tendency in our time to minimize the transcendence of God...it makes me cringe to hear advertising men, businessmen, and go-getting preachers try to make God one of them and not above them. The orthodox Jew often went to the other extreme...and at times they probably carried it too far. But they were nearer right than we are. God never became for the Jew an errand boy or a pal...we need to recover a sense of awe and fear and trembling in His presence.”

Here’s the thing: When we lose that sense of the holiness of God, the *transcendence* of God – the God who is over and above us, to whom we are accountable - I believe that eventually *life is cheapened, and the goodness of life is eroded*. In a sense, nothing is sacred anymore.

A number of years ago more than 50 theologians, church historians, and church leaders representing 11 different traditions (Protestant and Catholic) gathered at the University of Notre Dame. The theme for the gathering? *The loss of the sacred in society, and how to recover it*. Although representing different Christian views and practices, they agreed that both society and the church had strayed from the sense of the “holy” – that the world was stuck in a moral and spiritual quagmire, created by the loss of a sense of the presence of God. And that if we were to recover from this moral and spiritual quicksand we must recover a sense of the holiness of God,

and our accountability to Him. That meeting was at the end of 1979. Have things gotten any better since then?

Running like a thread through the Old Testament and the New Testament is the truth and reality, that *God is holy*. There are so many Scripture verses and passages that drive home this point that I'll just mention a few:

1 Samuel 2:2 "There is none holy like the Lord."

1 Samuel 6:20 "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?"

Psalms 99:1-3 "The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble...let the earth shake...he is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise your great and awesome name - he is holy."

Exodus 15:11 "Who is like you, O Lord...majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?"

Hebrews 10:31 "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

In the Lord's Prayers, Jesus told us to address the Father by saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed be thy name*." i.e. Your name and character is holy!

What does it mean when we say God is "holy"? The root of the word "holy" in the Bible means "separate", "different", "other". God is separate from us and the rest of His creation. God is the "mysterious Other". He is Creator; we are the created. God is God, and we are not God! Hosea 11:9 says, "I am God, and not man, the Holy One among you."

When we are truly confronted with the wonder and mystery of God, the Divine Other, the normal response is to bow down in reverence, fear and trembling. When Moses is confronted by God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai, God says to Moses, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). Then it says, "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Exodus 3:6).

The prophet Isaiah one day had a vision of the greatest and awesomeness of God in the temple. The place shook, and Isaiah heard heavenly beings saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). How did Isaiah respond? "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!*

I believe that any person, any church, any community, any nation who can gain a sense of the transcendence and awesome holiness of God will find healing, and life, and sanity! *It provides a moral compass for living*. As I've already stated, when God is left out of the picture, morals and

manners decay. (Are we not seeing some of this in our culture)? The renowned psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, wrote a book with a surprising title for an author who is a psychiatrist: *Whatever Became of Sin?* In this book he made a plea for us to acknowledge our accountability to God, and to assume responsibility for our own failures and shortcomings. *Recovering a sense of the holy provides a moral compass for living.*

It also provides a proper setting for worship. I believe churches should be warm and friendly. A place to talk with friends, even enjoy some humor. But Christian worship is more than just chummy socializing! The main purpose of worship is to praise God, to give God the glory due His name! Hopefully, when we come here, there are moments at least when we can lift our eyes beyond the material world, and sense that we are in the presence of the Holy One, the mysterious Other – who created us, and redeemed us from our sins in Christ.

But, after saying all I've said about recovering a sense of the holy, here's the kicker: *When we bow in reverence before the God who is high and lifted up, holy beyond measure, it is then that we can find Him near.* It's kind of a paradox, a seeming contradiction. Acknowledging God's "otherness" brings Him near. Trivializing God, treating God casually, keeps us distant from the true God. Isaiah 57:15 puts it powerfully: "For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit." God is near to the humble, to those who recognize their status as sinners, in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

It is in Jesus Christ that we see most clearly both the transcendence and the closeness of God. Jesus was *God* in human flesh, and those who followed Him eventually began to recognize His holiness, and worshiped Him. But Jesus was also fully a man, a humble carpenter, a brother and friend. Those who walked with Jesus felt the nearness of God. In fact, God was so near that He actually *abided within* those who came to trust in Christ.

In Jesus, both the *otherness* and the *nearness* of God came together. And any of us willing to believe in Jesus, and follow Him, can also experience the mighty God of the universe, living in us! As Stuart Hamblen put it in one of his songs: "He's big enough to rule His mighty universe, yet small enough to live within the heart."

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