



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Who Is God?

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A lovely lady is the immediate stimulus for my decision to write this Paper. Some months ago, in response to my request for people to suggest subjects they would like for me to treat in write BURNEY'S PAPERS, this lady wrote to ask me to deal with the subject, "Who is God?" She was thinking about her grandchildren, and wanted to be prepared to respond to them when they asked questions about God.

I was thinking about this question when I was invited to preach at Shallowford Presbyterian Church on December 29, 1991. It occurred to me that it was an appropriate question to address at Christmas time. So I decided to use it as the topic of my sermon, and to make this Paper an adaptation of the sermon.

The scripture on which the Sermon and Paper is based is John 1: 1-18, (The New Revised Standard Version) and the text is John 1: 18, "NO one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

In other words, if you want to know God, get to know Jesus.

However, knowing God and knowing who God is may not be the same issue at all.

I'm inclined to believe that the only really accurate answer to the question, "Who is God?" is, "I don't know." That seems to square pretty well with what we find in the Bible, and with our ability to "really know" who anyone is, much less God.

Let me try to illustrate. Suppose, for instance, that you come to me and ask me, "Who is Miriam?"

Miriam is my wife of fifty years – fifty good years, I might add. That's a long time to live with one person – long enough, one would suppose, to know who a person is. But if you ask me, "Who is Miriam?" and I answer accurately, I have to say as my first answer, "I don't know."

Yes, I've know Miriam for fifty years and more. We've shared in depth over that time. I know a great deal about her. I can tell you what a wonderful wife and mother she is. I can tell you about her warmth and generosity. I can tell you about her pleasing personality.

I can tell you about Miriam's artistic ability, and about how well she takes care of our home. I can tell you about her strong and consistent support through the years of my ministry. I can tell you many things about her, but I can't tell you who she is – not with any accuracy. Everything that I say to you about her is very subjective. It is my point of view. It comes out of me – my conclusions – as I deal with being in relationship with her, of experiencing her. And I end up not able to tell you who she is, but only who she is to me.

Interviews in the counseling office also illustrate this. A couple, having some kind of difficulty in their relationship with each other, comes in. Almost without exception, at the first interview, whichever one is talking tells me about the other person – usually in negative terms. Then the persona will often say, “I’m afraid I’m painting a very negative picture of my spouse.”

And to that I reply, “I don’t know anything about your spouse from what you have said. I know your experience and your interpretation. I know how you put it together and how you react to it and what you do with it. I know about you, not about your spouse. In reality, you cannot tell me who your spouse is.”

I can’t tell you who God is.

Maybe I’m beating a drum that doesn’t need to be beaten. Maybe what I’ve said is very self-evident. Even so, let me repeat.

You ask me, “Who is God?”

My first answer is, “I don’t know who God is. I don’t know how to tell you who God is.” And then, after that, I can tell you a very great deal about God. That is, who God is to me; how I have experienced God; what I have observed and learned and put together and concluded and come to believe about God.

You might well say to me, “I don’t care who God is to you. I want to know who God is, not your experience.”

And I repeat, “I can’t tell you who God is. I can tell you who God is to me. The very meaning of my life is at stake in who God is to me. So you see, I deal, not with who God is, but who God is to me; how God evinces, manifests God’s self to me; what my observations and my experiences are; and, hence, my conclusions and my knowledge about who God is to me.”

Where do I find that evincing of God, that manifestation of God, that disclosure about who God is to me? How do I know about God? How do I find out?

I have at least two sources. I turn to the Bible as one. I also observe and study what happens with people in their relationships to each other. I am one of a multitude who answer, “I do not know.” to the question, “Who is God?” Among them are the Hebrews of old, the ones who are responsible for our Old Testament coming into being. They, among other things, used names to designate who they understood people to be, and so they chose a name for that one that we refer to as God that describes who God was to them. And you know what that word means?

The word “God” means “I am.” Just that.

Who is God?

Those Hebrews of old said, “We don’t know who God is. WE just know that God is. We can’t explain or define who God is. God is.” And then they go on to tell many of their experiences and many of their conclusions about the nature and characteristics of God. They described God as, among other things, Creator, Lover, Judge, Punisher. They talked about God’s steadfastness, mercy, forgiveness, and understanding. They saw God as personage. They believed they could approach God as a being with whom they could be in conversation, and who, indeed, they could manipulate, persuade, inveigle into being involved in the ways they happened to want God to be.

I suppose a classic example is that of Abraham trying to save the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. “God, will you destroy them if I find a hundred righteous, etc.?”

You know the story. You can read it in Genesis 18:16-33. Abraham believed that he could converse with God; that he could present his case before God; that he could turn God to his point of view; that he could persuade God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

But Abraham did not try to explain who God is. He knew God was beyond such explanation.

We can refer to all kinds of examples about who those Hebrews of old saw God to be, meaning who they experienced God to be in their own subjective experience, and who they, therefore, believed God to be. Through it all, they knew that God was beyond defining but not beyond experiencing. They were sure that they were in relationship with God.

It is much the same in the New Testament, except that the focus and attention is on the life and teachings of Jesus. The strong suggestions there is, “If you want to know who God is to you, who God can be to you, turn to Jesus. Learn about Jesus. Jesus shows you God.”

John 1:1-18 is a case in point.

In the concluding sentence of the passage, the writer wrote, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (Jn. 1:18)

No one has ever seen God. It is Jesus who has made God known.

You know, that is a way of describing what Christmas is all about. God gave God’s self to us in the person of Jesus, called the Christ, who lived among us, fully human. He is God in our midst. He is God, a human being encountering with other human beings. Jesus has made God known. I can’t tell you who God is, but, by observing Jesus and learning from him, I can tell you a great deal about who God is and

can be to me. And somehow, it seems even more important to observe that, in the process of learning about who God is as seen and experienced in Jesus, the Christ, I can learn who I am, and who I can be.

Think about it. It is through the scriptures about Jesus that Jesus shows me God, and, indeed, shows me myself.

What do I know about God from John 1:1-18?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” (Jn. 1:1-12)

One thing I can know is that God is manifested through the Word, and Jesus is the Word. The Word signifies and symbolizes for me the communication of being, the communication of who and what and how. God communicates with us. God makes God known to us through the communication. It is the Word.

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (Jn. 1:3)

Another thing I can know is that God made or brought into being all things through the Word, through Jesus. God is Creator.

This is not the end of that revelation. What Jesus, the Word, brought into being was life, whatever that may mean to me. And the lie that Jesus presents is the light in the world - the light of all people, the light for all people, the incomparable and inextinguishable light. He is the light that discloses who God is, who we are, who we can be, what our world is, and what it can be. Jesus, the Word, is Life, and the Life is the Light. This is yet another thing I can know about God. (see Jn. 1:4-5)

I imagine myself to be in a place of total darkness – in the depths of a cave, where no light can reach me. It’s as if there were a cover over my eyes, over my head, over my mind. I can’t see anything. I can’t visualize anything. I sense that there’s something out there, but I cannot conceive of what it is, not in that total darkness.

And then the cave is flooded with light.

Suddenly, there are dimensions. There are colors. There is form. There is space. There is solidness. There is something tangible that I can perceive and grasp. I can see the cave. I can see what is in it. I can see what I could not see before. There is light. The light overcomes the darkness. What a tremendous difference the light makes.

Jesus, the Word, brings life, and the life is the light that enlightens all people, that enlightens my life, that lets me see how it is, what it can be, and how it can be.

I am not passive recipient of the Word that is life and light. It isn't as if I have nothing to do with it or about it. I choose. I must choose what I do with it. This is something else that I can know about God. God created me as one who chooses. I can't do otherwise.

Jesus is God in the world. And the scripture tells me the world chose not to know him. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." (Jn. 1:10)

It is hard for me to imagine people choosing not to know God, but I know that it happens. They did with Jesus. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (Jn. 1:11)

I can know about God. I can know God. I can express who God is to me. And I can refuse to make the choice.

Again, I refer to Miriam to illustrate.

I observe and experience Miriam. WE share in many ways with each other. In that sense I know her. I express who she is to me. And I have a choice. I can be in that relationship or I can be out of it. But I can't be in it or out of it without making the choice to be in or out.

I observe and experience Jesus. I see it that we share in many ways with each other. In that sense I know him. I express who he is to me. And I have a choice. I can accept him or reject him. I can be in that relationship or out of it. Jesus, the Word – flesh – living among us – full of grace and truth – offered to me that through him I might know God and myself. But I choose. I have to choose. I can't not choose.

I can't tell you who God is. I can't see God. Only, interestingly enough, I can see God. Jesus has made God known. And when I allow myself to know – and I can allow myself to know – what happens to me? What difference does it make when I allow myself to know who God is through Jesus, the Christ?

It makes an astonishing difference to me. If I choose, I can learn about God by learning about Jesus, and then – then – I can choose to be as Jesus was and is, and in that sense, as God is.

In my growing up years, and long into my adult years, the teaching was clear. To suggest that one could be as Jesus or God was to commit to blasphemy. I could not be like Jesus, and, certainly, I could not be like God.

I believe differently now.

Think about it. Jesus is the consummate human being, given to us so that we have the opportunity to know who we are by the creation and power of God. And sine Jesus

lived among us as God is, the invitation to us, the invitation to me, is to learn from Jesus about God and to live my life as I come to know and experience who God is; and to be God-like, if you will, in the life that I live as creation in the image of God.

I must deal with a major question. And it is, “Do I want to be God-like?” Because if I decide that I want to be, I set a particular course for my life. I take on the life that is set before me by Jesus.

I don’t have to be God-like. God doesn’t twist my arm. God doesn’t impose upon me. God doesn’t require of me that I be like God. I am free not to know about nor to know Jesus. I am free not to accept him. But if I choose not to be God-like, I forfeit my role as a child of God. I am created in the image of God. AS I come to know God, I choose to be like God, or to refuse to be. If I refuse to be, then I refuse to be God’s person.

Let me try to illustrate. Suppose that I billed myself as a counselor. I announce, “I am a counselor.” Then I refuse to make use of the information and resources available to train me to be a counselor. I say to myself, “I don’t have to know those things. I don’t have to accept them. I don’t have to make use of them. I can ignore everything available to me about being a counselor.”

That is pretty obvious, isn’t it?

By the same token, if I choose not to be a child of God, I forfeit being a child of God.

God the Word, became a human being and lived among us, so that I could see my life, my fullness, my being a child of God, and seeing it all, be who I am created to be, that is, if I choose to be. It is in being child of God that I am most blessed, and Jesus has shown me how to be that child.

Who is God? I don’t know. I don’t know how to tell you who God is, not in any absolute, objective, external sense. However, I can get to know who God is by looking at Jesus and learning all I can about them. God is known to me through Jesus, for Jesus has made God known.

And I can learn about me in the same way.

So I know God, and I know me. By studying Jesus, I learn both who God is, and what my life can be. More than that, I learn how to go about living it. Whether or not I do is for me to decide.

And that’s the real key. What I do about it is for me to decide.