



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark Two: A Biblical Understanding of God

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Last week we looked at the subject of expository preaching as the first mark of a healthy church. It's the central component of a word-centred ministry. And, at least in theory, if we get biblical preaching right, everything else should follow naturally—although it will take some time. But that doesn't mean we're done. It's not just *how* we should approach and preach God's word, but we need to spend some time looking at what the content of biblical preaching is. So today I want to begin with a look at how biblical preaching should be giving us a biblical understanding of God. That's the second mark of a healthy church: a biblical understanding of God.

Now that might seem like a no-brainer. We're Christians, so of course we're going to be committed to a biblical understanding of God. But if you start looking at what's going on around us, it doesn't take long to see that it ain't necessarily so. The song of that title written by the Gershwin brothers for *Porgy and Bess*, highlights the problem. If you're not familiar with it, it's a litany sung by a drug dealer, casting doubt on the stories of the Bible. He ends, "They tell all your children/The Devil he's a villain/It ain't necessarily so". That drug dealer thought that maybe it's God who's the villain. He's always spoiling everyone's fun, after all—or at least that's how it seems to a lot of people. Maybe the devil's actually the good guy. Some people think that way, although it's usually more subtle. More often than not what it seems

we've done is to swap their roles. Ask someone on the street—or one of your non-Christians friends—who God is and they'll describe a non-judgemental man in the sky who just wants you to be happy. Ironically, this has more to do with the lies the devil routinely tells than it does the God we meet in the Bible.

It used to be "liberal" Protestants who rewrote the God of scripture. Like the Jesus Seminar folks who wrote that all the warm and fuzzy stuff in the gospel is what Jesus really said, but all the stuff about sin and judgement—that was added later by men who had forgotten who Jesus really was. But it's not just liberals. Many parts of Evangelicalism, particularly amongst younger people, have come to be dominated by a belief system that's come to be called "Moralistic therapeutic deism". In short, it's the belief that God wants people to be good—although the bar is pretty low; that God wants us to be happy and to feel good about ourselves; that he's distant, but available when you've got a problem; and that if you're good, you'll go to heaven when you die. Brothers and Sisters, this is not the God of the narrow way that leads to life; this is the devil of the wide gate that leads to destruction.

This is what you get when you stop preaching the word and, instead, preach pop-psychology, current events, and feel-good fluff. It's what you get when you preach human-centred sermons instead of God-centred sermons. We've shifted the culture of the church. John 3:16 used to be the best known and most oft quote verse of the Bible: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". These days that pride of place goes to Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, lest ye be judged," quoted loudly by folks who have no idea about its context or what Jesus meant when he said it. They just don't want anyone telling them what to do and have embraced a false god who

indulges their every desire. Our culture, like the pagan cultures of old, and not a few within the Church, have recreated God in our image. The antidote is the faithful preaching of God's word.

And the culture will not be happy with it. Post-modern culture hates meta-narratives. Meta-narratives are those big stories that give meaning to life, the universe, and everything. And today such things are said to be oppressive. And being "oppressive" is the absolute worst thing anything can be in post-modern culture, where everything is about the individual and the individual being whatever he or she or they or them or ze or zir wants to be. But if we believe the Bible is God's word to us, then we can't escape the Bible's meta-narrative, its grand story running from Genesis to Revelation with Jesus at its centre, the story that does, in fact, give meaning to life, the universe, and everything. And so it makes sense, then, that the God who has given this great narrative that runs from beginning to end describes himself as the Alpha and Omega. Get the story right and you actually get to know the God behind it all from beginning to end.

So we can't cover every aspect of a biblical understanding of God in a single sermon, but we can hit some high points—and especially the points that are often so challenged by our culture today. So what does the biblical story tell us about the God behind it?

Well, let's start at the beginning. The story starts with Creation. "In the beginning, God created..." is how Genesis begins. St. John opens his gospel with those familiar words reminding us that it wasn't just "God" in some generic sense that was there in the beginning, but the Triune God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Right at the beginning, the first thing the story teaches us about this Triune God is that he is a creator. He is the great initiator. There was

nothing and it pleased him to make *something* of it. And not just something, but a world. And not just a world, but as Genesis 1 shows us, a word that is good *because* it is suitable for human life. And God finishes his great creative act by creating human beings—and he does so for a purpose. He created us to be his image bearers—to act as his regents, his stewards, his priests in this world he created.

But notice that God’s creative acts don’t end there. As I said last week, his word gives life and so he continues to speak. Humanity rebelled and sinned. We gave up the vocation for which we were created and had to be removed from the garden-temple. And things went from bad to worse. It took only a single generation before the first murder happened and only a few generations later we have men boasting of slaughtering their enemies. The Lord causes a flood to wipe sinful men from the earth and he speaks, calling forth Noah so that he can spare him, start over with him. But again, human rebellion goes from bad to worse and so the Lord speaks again into the darkness and calls forth Abraham and from Abraham he makes a people for himself. And as we read the story of that people, it’s full of ups and downs, of faithfulness and rebellion—mostly rebellion. But the Lord repeatedly speaks his word and sustains the life of that people and at its lowest points he promises new life in the future. And then we meet Jesus, the word incarnate, who fulfils those promises himself and *creates* a new Israel. The god of the great biblical narrative is a creator.

That God is the creator also tells us that we can’t pick and choose the parts we like from this great story. The first major heresy in church history was that of Marcion, who cut the Old Testament out of the Bible so as to dump all the things about God he didn’t like. And this problem crops up repeatedly. A couple years ago,

popular pastor Andy Stanley preached that the Church must “unhitch” itself from the Old Testament. Again, people want the warm-fuzzies, they want the welcoming message of forgiveness, but not the judgement or the wrath or the call to repentance. But the grand biblical narrative shows us that it’s all connected. The story doesn’t make any sense if you hack it up. Forgiveness loses meaning when there’s nothing to be forgiven. It’s all connected and biblical preaching reminds us of this truth.

But, too, there’s more to God’s creating than just speaking and creating. In the story of his people we begin to see something we first saw a glimpse of with Noah. For the Lord to create is also for the Lord to *call* and to *choose* or to *elect*. He chose Abraham out of all the people on earth. And, again, he chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. When it came time for a King, he would choose young David over his older brothers. And Jesus chose twelve out of all his followers from which to build God’s new people. And we look at that and we think, “Wait, that’s not fair!” Brothers and Sisters, that’s when we need to go back to the story and remember that the Lord didn’t have to create anything at all. He created in the first place to manifest his glory and to show his love. And when we rebelled against him he didn’t have to begin this great act of new creation that would eventually cost his own Son. But he did. Because he is good. Because he loves. Because he is wise. The big story reminds us repeatedly that he is all these things, and that reminds us that when things don’t make sense or when they seem unfair *to us*—with our limited perspective and knowledge—we can trust him. This also reminds us—against the popular view of things today—that God does not exist to serve us, but we to serve him—and knowing his goodness assures us that this, too, is good.

Second point: The great narrative of the Bible reminds us again and again that God is holy. Most people like to ignore this, because for something to be holy means that there really are things called “right” and “wrong”. It means that if God is holy, then he also has expectations for us. Post-modern culture is built around that idea that we’re each the centre of our own universe. We make our own truth and we each define our own happiness. You can do whatever you want and be whatever you want. If you want to do drugs or have promiscuous sex, that’s your truth and your happiness. If you’re a man, but you want to be a woman—or a cat—woe to anyone who says you can’t or that there are objective standards. And this is why our culture has created a false god that just wants us to be happy and is never judgemental.

But there at the beginning of the story we’re reminded that Adam and Eve were forced to leave the Lord’s presence because they rebelled against him, they sinned. And then we see throughout the story this theme of holiness. Humans do what they want and everything goes from bad to worse. We like to say that it’s okay to do what you want as long as you don’t hurt other people, and that may be our only political option in a pluralistic, modern society, but the big story shows us that this doesn’t work in the end. And so when the Lord created a people for himself, he not only delivered them from a life of slavery, he also gave them a law—a way of life that not only included all the dos and don’ts, but a system of offerings and sacrifices, means of atonement for their sins, so that they could live in his presence and he in theirs. The tabernacle in the midst of Israel was a reminder of the holiness of God and the need of sinners for redemption. There it was, the Lord’s dwelling place in the centre of the camp. The Lord lived in the midst of his people. It was a powerful reminder of how things are supposed to be—as they

were when Adam and Eve lived in the Lord's presence in the garden-temple. *But* it was also a powerful reminder that even in Israel, things were not as they should be. The Lord dwelled in their midst, but he dwelled in a place they could not go. The holy of holies, glorious and beautiful and filled with the cloud of his glory resting on the ark of the covenant, was off limits. The relationship between God and human beings was still broken—and the brokenness was not on his part, but theirs. Again, we see his love and his grace and his mercy. Through the law and the sacrifices he gave the people a means of drawing near, of truly being *his* people, while at the same time reminding them of the seriousness of their problem, of the sinfulness of sin, and that something greater was needed to finally restore full fellowship with him. The tabernacle (and later the temple) was an abattoir where continual animal sacrifices were offered to atone for sin. Those weren't the only offerings. The people came to offer their thanks to the Lord as well. But the blood sacrifices overshadowed everything else—a reminder that the problem of this broken fellowship is on our end, not God's; that it is not his holiness that is the problem, but our sin. They were a reminder for Israel of the mercy of the Lord—that he desires to be reconciled with sinners—but also that sinners must come to him on his terms and not our own, and that there is a great gulf between holiness and sinfulness. And so the story of Israel and her covenant with the Lord prepared the people of God for Jesus. Every Sunday you and I come to his Table and are reminded that the son of God gave his life as a once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sin, his blood given in place of ours, to bring atonement, to restore us to the presence of the Lord—because of his great love for us. And again, that reminder is there that we come to God on his terms and not our own, because he is holy and apart from him we are not.

And here the God of Scripture clashes with the false god we so often create for ourselves. We're like petulant children who get angry when our parents lay down rules. "You don't love me if you won't let me do whatever I want," we shout at them. But they know better. Our parents know things that we don't, and so they give us rules when we are children, not because they're mean, but because they love us. As adults with hindsight we see our foolishness. We knew other kids whose parents let them do whatever they wanted and we'd foolishly think that those kids' parents loved them more. Now we're adults and know better. Brothers and Sisters, we do the same thing with God. He created us out of love in the beginning, he delivered Israel from her Egyptian bondage out of love, he lived in her midst out of love even when she was so often unfaithful. He taught her how to be holy. He gave her instructions for sacrifices as a means of atonement. And like petulant and ungrateful teenagers Israel went after other gods instead. But the petulant and rebellious teenager is a modern phenomenon, not the one used by the Lord when he spoke to his people. When he spoke to them of their relationship with him, she was his beautiful and beloved bride who turned to adultery and unfaithfulness. That's a much darker and troubling image than the rebellious teen. But as we read Israel's story, we see that the Lord never abandons his bride. The prophecy of Hosea may be one of the most profound witnesses of the Lord's love for his people, despite their unfaithfulness. Hosea wrote:

"In that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens,

and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD."
(Hosea 2:16-20)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, as Jeremiah wrote, and his mercies never end (Lamentation 3:22). And we see this as the great story eventually leads us to Jesus, who, as St. Paul writes:

...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
(Philippians 2:6-8)

And St. John reminds us so poignantly:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins...We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:9-10)

The great story reveals the faithlessness of human beings to the one who has loved us from the very beginning. No matter how great our rebellion, our idolatry, our sin, our unfaithfulness to him, he has loved us from the beginning and he will love us to the end and has given his own life to restore us to his presence and fill our hearts with love for him. Again, we love because he first loved us. The God of the Bible is a God of love.

Now, there are lots of things we can say of the God of who reveals himself in the Bible. He is patient, for example. Or he's sovereign. The list is long and all of these things are interrelated. He is patient, because he is loving. The fact that he is a creating, calling, and electing God means that he is also a sovereign God. We have confidence in prayer, because we know that he is sovereign and has the power to answer. And we have confidence in his answers, because we know he is wise and good and loving and so on. But I want to close on a different point and that is that the God of the Bible is a faithful God. More than anything else, this is the aspect of God we need to grasp as we struggle to trust him.

The great story reminds us of God's faithfulness from beginning to end. We see his faithfulness in that he didn't give up, wipe everything out, and start over when we rebelled. Instead, he has lovingly, patiently, graciously, and mercifully stuck with us. If it weren't for his faithfulness he wouldn't have called Abraham, he wouldn't have rescued Israel from Egypt, he wouldn't have given his law or a king, he wouldn't have disciplined his people, he wouldn't have spoken through the prophets. He wouldn't have made promises—or might have, but he wouldn't have kept them. If he were not faithful, he'd be like the gods of the pagans—fickle, unreliable, unknowable. And, of course, we see the faithfulness of God fully revealed in Jesus. In Jesus he shows his faithfulness to us, even when we are unfaithful. In Jesus he fulfils his promises. As St. Paul wrote to Timothy:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. (2 Timothy 2:13)

It's who he is. God cannot be anything other than faithful and we know it because of the Scriptures. In

the Bible we have the record of his character—of his goodness and wisdom and righteousness and holiness and everything else that comes together and culminates in his faithfulness. One of the things I like best about the Psalms is their repeated acclamation of the faithfulness of the Lord to his people, to his covenant, to his promises. They sing out his mighty deeds for Israel and remind the people not only that they have every reason to trust in him, but that they would be fools not to. And if that was the case for Israel in the Old Testament, how much more is it the case for us, his new Israel. We have known Jesus and the Spirit as the fulfilment of all that he promised. We have been plunged into this life in our baptism and we come, week after week, to his Table. We bear in our baptism his mark—the gift of his own indwelling Spirit—and here at the Table we participate again and again in those events—the death and resurrection of Jesus—through which God has delivered us from our bondage to sin and death and made us his own. Brothers and Sisters, this is the God whom healthy churches proclaim, this is the God whose mighty and saving deeds we sing, this is the God whom we make known to the world. This the God in whom our future hopes rest. As St. John wrote:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

As I say so often, in Jesus and the Spirit—at the cross and in the upper room at Pentecost—our God did the hard part. His word tells us and our baptism and the Lord's Supper serve as perpetual reminders of his faithfulness. He is the Alpha and Omega, the one whose faithfulness knows no bounds and is as long as eternity itself. It is in him we trust and it is him we preach.

Let's pray: Holy, loving, sovereign, patient, faithful Father, we give you thanks for revealing yourself to us in your word—for who you are, for what you have done, for showing us that you are worthy of our love and worthy of our trust. By your word and through your Spirit you give us the gift of faith. We ask that as we continue in your word and as we share in your sacraments, as our knowledge and experience of you grows, that our faith will deepen. Purge our hearts of fickleness we pray, that we might set aside every idol and every false idea we might have of you. Give us your great grace, that we might ever more each day trust in you and love you more as we steep ourselves in your word and each Sunday as we come to your Table to be reminded of the great love you have shown to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of your Spirit. Amen.