

IN WHAT KIND OF A GOD DO YOU BELIEVE

INTRODUCTION

If I were to hand out paper and pencils to all of you sitting here this morning and ask you to set down in your own words in a paragraph or two your conception of God, how would you make out? What would you put down? It might be an interesting thing for us to do sometime; however, don't become worried or nervous for I'm not going to ask you to do it. You and I believe in God. We come here Sunday after Sunday (at least most of us do) and together we repeat the great affirmations of faith which declare our belief in God. I think it's safe for me to say that nine out of ten people today in our country believe in some kind of a higher power, but it seems to me that a great deal depends on the kind of God that we believe in. Our convictions about the nature and character of God are among the most potent convictions that we possess. Our whole outlook on life is bound up with the answers that we give to such questions: who is God? What is his character? What is he like? Our behavior is linked to our beliefs. Our thoughts of God shape and mould our character, the character of nations as well as of individuals.

What do you mean by God? I'd like to have you ask yourself that question this morning. Think about it in the privacy of your own thoughts. Formulate your own answer. It seems to me that there is a great deal of contemporary thinking about God that is vague, confused and even chaotic. A ministerial friend of mine at a prayer meeting in his church not long ago ask those who were present to describe their ideas of God. One good member, when his turn came, responded by saying that his idea of God was "a kind of oblong blue".

DEVELOPMENT

Not only is our thinking about God vague and confusing but at times it is also childish and somewhat naive. It's really surprising how many adults, up to date and well informed in other fields have crude and immature ideas of God. In their minds they picture him as a magnified man, having bodily form and seated on a throne millions of miles away in the sky. They still cling to the childish conceptions. It reminds me of a story that I heard while on vacation last month. The minister who told this story is from Springfield, Massachusetts and I'm sure he wouldn't mind me borrowing from his illustration. It seems that there was an elderly gentleman, a widower for some years, in his church. This past spring he took a trip back to his hometown somewhere in the mid-west. He hadn't been there since he was a young man. Before he left on the trip, he told his minister all about his plans and mentioned that part of his reason for going back to his hometown was to visit a childhood sweetheart. She had been one of the most beautiful girls in their class. She had had that peaches and cream complexion. And he had heard that for some unknown reason she had never married. After he returned from the trip he went to see his minister in order to tell him all about it. "I went to visit this friend of mine that I told you about. I was terribly nervous when I rang the door bell. And do you know that when she answered the door, I got the shock of my life. Why she was an old woman!"

Yes, I'm afraid he was clinging to some of his boyhood ideas, and I'm afraid that you and I often do the same sort of thing with some of our ideas about God. Every so often some one will come to me and say: "Why don't you choose some hymns that we know. We never sing the good old hymns in our church". I suppose every minister will run into people

who criticize him for his choice of hymns. I think I've finally hit upon a method to keep them quiet. As soon as they say "We never sing the good old hymns" I say to them "What hymns would you like to sing?" I put them right on the spot. It takes them by surprise. They're quiet for a moment thinking of a hymn and then will invariably suggest to you something like this "Jesus Wants Me For A Sun Beam" or "Jesus Loves Me This I Know". Hymns of childhood.

Not only is our thinking about God confusing and vague, not only is it apt to reflect our childhood conceptions, but also it is apt to entertain certain ideas about God that are slanderous to his character. That is to say that we have ideas concerning God's character that are unworthy of Him. Once again an illustration may help to emphasize what I mean. I'm sure that all of you here this morning remember the Saturday night a few weeks ago when an airplane disaster was just barely avoided at Idlewild Airport. You'll remember how the landing gear in one of those giant jet planes became jammed shortly after take-off and how the pilot instead of proceeding across the Atlantic turned around and came back to New York and for several hours circled the city in order to use up the gasoline so that when the landing was attempted there would be less possibility of an explosion. Remember too how the field was flooded with foam in order to cushion the landing; how the situation was broadcast over the radio and TV bringing hundreds and hundreds of New Yorkers to the airport to witness the anticipated disaster. Finally, of course, when the landing was made it was made without accident.

I think it was the next evening that Jack Parr in his late evening television show was commenting upon the event. He mentioned how Charlie Weaver, one of the regulars on the show who enjoys a reputation for being an heavy drinker was out at Idlewild early next morning blowing the foam off the field. Some of you I know are familiar with the Jack Parr show. For those of you who have never watched it perhaps I ought to say it comes on at a rather late hour, too late for you to be up watching television. It's a rather informal, witty, light and humorous show. This same evening he was interviewing a young actress or a celebrity connected with show business and they got to talking about the incident at Idlewild the night before. Apparently they had been talking about it before the show went on the air because Parr said to this young actress "I wish you'd tell how audience what you told me before we went on the air". And she replied "Oh I'd rather not". But Parr insisted and finally she consented. "It was such a lovely thought. Tell it to our listeners". What she said was something like this: "I'm sure that God had a hand in preventing that disaster last night". "I'm sure he heard the prayers of those on the airplane. Perhaps there was a person on the plane who had had a quarrel with another person and God wanted to give him a chance to patch up that quarrel. Or perhaps there was some person on the plane who has something very beautiful to give the world and give wanted to save him in order that he could do it." Parr interrupted her and said: "Isn't that a beautiful thought". "What a beautiful thought". He said it three times. "Isn't that a beautiful thought".

And yes, so was the story of Cinderella a beautiful story. And so were some of those other fairy stories we learned as children. Tell something like this to the surviving relatives of those who were lost in the airplane explosion over Maryland last May. Or tell something like this to the mother of the young man who was killed in the Pacific

Ocean last spring by a shark. Personally I for one would find it difficult to believe that God deliberately steered the shark out of his normal habitat in the direction of the young man in order to destroy his life because he had done something wrong, or because he had nothing to give to the world. I would find it difficult to believe that God had a hand in the shooting of Lincoln. I think he still had some unfinished business to tend to here on earth. Jesus was still a long ways away from accomplishing his work when he was crucified. You see some of the ideas, popular ideas too, concerning the way that God works that you and I possess are slanderous to his character.

WHAT IS GOD LIKE? What is God like? Thus far in the sermon this morning I've been attempting to point out to you through the use of illustrations that a great deal of our thinking about God is confusing, chaotic, childish, immature and unworthy of the great God of our universe. I don't know whether anything that's been said thus far has been helpful, but I do hope in the remaining time to be able to suggest to you a more positive answer to this question: what is God like?

Not long ago a roving reporter here in the city stopped six people on the sidewalks of Manhattan and asked them what, in their opinion, was the most important event in history. Five of the replies came from adults. The answers varied as you might expect them to. "The settlement of Jamestown by the English". "The defeat of the Saracens at Tours". "The splitting of the atom". "The defeat of the Japanese". "The invention of the wheel". The sixth answer came from a fourteen year old boy who suggested "The birth of Jesus Christ".

This young boy was wiser than he thought. We have seen many influential and important people walk across the stage of life, but by and large the most influential person who ever lived was Jesus of Nazareth. Many reasons might be given as to why this is so. And all of them would be important, but the one reason that rises above all others is that Jesus showed men what God is like "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father". I want you to consider very carefully the implication of that claim. Jesus shows us the character of God. Just as a lake in the mountains reflects the glory of the heavens, so Jesus, within the limits of His incarnation, is the mirror of the very heart of God.

Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book, The Modern Use of the Bible put it this way:

"The word God is only a picture-frame; all its values depend on the quality of portrait which the frame encloses. Into that old frame Jesus put a new picture so beautiful because of his own life; so inspiring and winsome because of his sacrificial death, that men never had so thought of God before and never since have been so moved, melted and transformed by any other thought of him. That is an amazing thing to have done. In this world where so many have groped after God, guessed about God, philosophized concerning God, the Master has lived a life of such self-authenticating spiritual grandeur that increasing millions of men when they wish to think about God can think nothing so true, so satisfactory, so

adequate, as that the God they worship is like Christ. Even Paul, who had been brought up in the Old Testament's noblest ideas of God, gained a new name for him when he had met the Master: The God and Father of the Lord Jesus."

God is like Jesus. Turn that over in your minds, not once, not twice, but many times. God is like Jesus.....as loving, as gracious, as forgiving; as firm and severe, austere as well as gentle. He is a God who has entered into the arena of life, sharing in our struggles and caring for his children. It's a priceless privilege to believe in a God like Jesus, a Christlike God. If that is the kind of spirit behind and within everything, we need not worry. We may fall ill; people close to us may die; the world may descend into the depths of war; but in it all and through it all everything is still in good hands. He cannot save us from all pain and sorrow; but his care goes with us all the way, and will finally bring us out into peace and happiness. God is like Jesus - and therefore God and life are utterly to be trusted.

Dick Sheppard, who for so many years was the ministers of St. Martin's in the fields, in London use to tell a story about a group of men who were travelling home by train. One of the men, sitting in a corner of the carriage, was working on a cross word puzzle. Suddenly he looked up. "A word of three letters with 'o' in the middle meaning man's best friend. What is it?" "Dog" suggested one of the men sitting in the compartment. But dog didn't quite fit into the puzzle. "I think the last letter is 'd'" said the man. But still he couldn't see it. Neither could any of his friends, or else they were to shy to suggest it. You and I can be sure of this that God is man's best friend. Accept what Jesus says about God, what he shows God to be in His life; test everything by Him.

LET US PRAY:

Look upon us O God with thy favor. Let this time of worship be for us a time of renewal, when doubt is dispelled, hope revived, and faith quickened and confirmed. Teach us more and more to wait upon Thee that we may renew our strength, mount up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary and walk and not faint. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we seek Thy grace in the fellowship of prayer. For strength to meet the demands of life we pray. Let us not shrink before its difficulties or shirk its responsibilities or yield to self-pity and fretful complaint. Teach us in the spirit of the Master to live without anxiety, and when each day we have done the best we can help us to leave the issue to Thee.

Send the spirit of Thy Son into the dark places of the world's life and arm it with the piercing power of Thy grace. May it reach the heart of every oppression, still the noise of strife, bring order out of confusion. Let it kindle our minds and stir up our wills that we may find the way to a just and equitable society where all can have work and happiness, security and peace.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

MUSIC:

"Faith of Our Fathers" — Traditional

"All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" — Episcopal Hymnal, 1940

"O Holy Father" — Episcopal Hymnal, 1940

"Fairest Lord Jesus" — Episcopal Hymnal, 1940

"The Lord Bless You and Keep You" — Lutkin

Music was by the Choir of Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania; directed by Dr. John Raymond, with John Saeger as organist.

In What Kind of God Do You Believe?

APRIL 19, 1959

Nearly everyone believes there is a God. Practical atheism is all too common, people living as though there were no God, but theoretical atheism is the exception rather than the rule. According to a recent study of popular attitudes to religion nineteen persons out of twenty will tell you that they believe God in some sense exists, and while the twentieth may deny that there is a God with the top of his mind the chances are that he believes in Him all the time at the bottom of his heart. How many convinced atheists do you know?

The real question is not whether God exists but what He is like. You and I believe in God, but so much depends on the kind of God we believe in. If we were given pen and paper and were asked to set down in writing, in a paragraph or two, our conception of God, how would we make out? I ask that because our convictions about the nature and character of God are among the most potent convictions we cherish. There are people who tell us that beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, don't matter; behavior is what counts. But that is thin, superficial talk which the events of recent years have totally discredited.

Beliefs lie back of behavior as its source, and in the long run there is nothing more influential either in the

life of an individual or a nation. What happened in Germany and Italy when Fascist ideologies were fanatically avowed is a reminder of this. Yet there are those who still say: Why trouble about beliefs? If we are brotherly to one another it doesn't really matter how we think about God. But what of the person who says, (it is in effect what the Nazis said from 1933 on), If I do not believe in the universal Fatherhood of God, why should I believe in the universal brotherhood of man? And when he goes on to translate what he does believe into action — for Nazism was a faith, as Fascism and Communism are — what happens? Well do we know what happens. With our own eyes we saw what happens. Society is shaken right down to its foundations, and the crust of morality that seemed so solid is split apart.

No! Our convictions as to the nature of God are among the most potent convictions we cherish. It is no exaggeration to maintain that our whole outlook on life is bound up with the answers we give to such questions as — Who is God? What is His character? What are His purposes for us and for all men? If history demonstrates anything it is that by men's thoughts of God character is shaped and moulded, the character of nations as well as of individuals.

What then do you mean by God? Ask yourself that. Formulate your own answer. There is so much thinking about God that is vague, confused, even chaotic. That sort of thinking, remember, affects character just as deeply as thinking that is clear and well-reasoned. At a prayer meeting in a certain church the minister asked those who were present to describe their idea of God.

A member, when his turn came, responded that his idea of God was "a kind of an oblong blur." Just as candid was the student who in reply to a questionnaire, wrote: "Ordinarily the image of God is gray and formless. In prayer, the face of Dore's Christ, which does not speak, prompts something in me to words." Many never attempt to form any mental picture of God at all. They acknowledge that there is some sort of Force or Mind or Principle behind the Universe and seem content to leave it at that.

Worse than thinking about God that is vague and confused is thinking that is childish and naive. It is surprising how many adults, up-to-date and well-informed in other fields, have crude and immature ideas of God, envisage Him as a magnified man, having bodily form and seated on a throne millions of miles away in the sky. They have separate, self-contained compartments within their minds and are somehow able to retain as genuine and real inconsistent conceptions, going from one to the other almost at will and carefully shutting the door behind them. Frequently they have not thought about the matter enough to be aware of any contradictions in their ideas. But the other side to all this is that there are those who, as they come into touch with science and philosophy, live more and more in a conceptual world, feel the necessity of logical rather than emotional and imaginative beliefs, and find that the ideas about God absorbed by them in childhood have lost all reality and faded into the realm of Jack Frost and Santa Claus.

Worst of all are the impossible ideas entertained

about God, ideas that are a slander on His character. That He is withdrawn from the world and indifferent to it, so far away that He cannot have anything to do with us and we cannot have anything to do with Him. That the world is governed by an impersonal Fate which takes no account of good – or ill-desert, which is above all our distinctions, is neither good nor bad, neither true nor false, or if you want to put it that way, is both the good and the bad, both the true and the false, and lifts up or treads down with complete indifference. Pascal says somewhere that it is “the pathetic fate of God to be everlastingly misunderstood.”

Dick Sheppard used to tell a story about a group of men who were travelling home by train. One of them, in a corner of the carriage, was busy with a crossword puzzle. Suddenly he looked up. “A word of three letters, with ‘o’ in the middle, meaning man’s best friend?” he inquired. “Dog,” chorused everybody. But ‘dog’ didn’t quite fit into the puzzle. “I think,” said the man with the pencil, “that the last letter must be ‘d.’” But still he couldn’t see it. And neither apparently could any of his companions. Or, if they did, they didn’t like to suggest it. Yet surely man’s best friend is God.

When Joseph Fort Newton as a growing lad found himself revolted by the narrow dogmatism of the preaching to which he was listening Sunday by Sunday he was fortunate in being able to make a confidante of his mother. His difficulties had to do chiefly with the conception of God as angry, vindictive, revengeful. This was what his mother said to him: “My son, accept what Jesus says about God, what He shows God to be in His

life; test everything by Him — forget the rest.” For a youth bent on thinking out the implications of belief and refusing to make his judgment blind that was sound advice.

A century ago, a great biblical scholar was much troubled as to whether Jesus was really sent by God. One day, brooding over the question, the thought suddenly flashed upon him, God means us to know His mind. Precisely. That is why He sent Jesus. And when Jesus came what did He say? “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.” Consider carefully the implication of that claim. By all that you see in Jesus you can read the character of God. Just as a little moorland pool will reflect all the glory of the heavens, so Jesus, within the limits of His incarnation, is the mirror of the heart of God.

Martin Luther never wearied of insisting that the worst of all heresies is that which distinguishes between the disposition of God and the disposition of Jesus. The New Testament certainly supports him in that. The thing it tell us, the thing it keeps repeating and reiterating is that Jesus discloses to us the very heart of God and that God sent Him that we might know His mind. It is what the writer to the Hebrews means when he declares that Jesus is the reflection of the Father’s glory and the express image of His person. It is what Peter means when he says exultantly, “We by Him do believe in God.” It is what Paul means when he tells the Corinthians, “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined into our hearts, to give the light

of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

A small girl, on being asked the question, What is God like? replied, God is like Jesus. She made a far profounder reply than she realized. A theologian, steeped in the doctrine of God, could not have improved on it.

You have seen a photograph that has been taken out of focus, and what do you find? All the lines are clear and another without any distinctness. Beside it you place another photograph of the same person taken in perfect focus, and what do you find? All the lines are clear and convincing; the portrait is a living likeness immediately recognized and named. That is what Jesus has done for us. If I may put it so, He has brought God into focus so that we may know Him with a new clearness and speak of Him with a new assurance and conviction.

God is like Jesus — as loving, as gracious, as forgiving; as firm and severe, austere as well as gentle, terrible as truth exposing a lie, implacable as pure love must sometimes be, the scourge of humbug and hypocrisy. God is like Jesus — and therefore God and life are utterly to be trusted.

When you have seen Jesus you know what God is like, Jesus who said so emphatically, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to them that ask Him?” Think of God in terms of the highest and best you know. Turn over in your mind not once, nor twice, but many times, what Joseph Fort Newton’s mother told him: “Accept what Jesus says about

God, what He shows God to be in His life: test everything by Him."

Prayer

Look upon us, O God, with Thy favor. As now we seek to realize Thy presence incline our wills and affections towards Thee. Grant us the lowly heart which is the only temple that can contain the Infinite. Let this time of worship be for us a time of renewal, when doubt is dispelled, hope revived, and faith quickened and confirmed.

Forgive us that we talk so much and are silent so seldom; that we are in such constant motion and are so rarely still; that we depend so implicitly on our own efforts and endeavors and so little on the power of Thy Spirit. Teach us more and more to wait upon Thee that we may renew our strength, mount up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

MUSIC:

"Faith of Our Fathers" — Traditional

"O Master Let Me Walk With Thee" — Episcopal Hymnal, 1940

"The King of Love" — G. Schirmer

"Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" — Episcopal Hymnal, 1940

"The Lord Bless You and Keep You" — Lutkin

Music was by the Choir of Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania; directed by Dr. John Raymond, with John Saeger as organist.
