

Understanding Faith - God Here and Now

Notes by Ian Bensted

SYNOPSIS

1. The objective is to summarise a wide range of issues related to God's moment by moment involvement in this world, and with individual personal lives within it. This will encompass many key aspects of Christian belief and practice, such as God's transcendence, his upholding and sustaining of the world, the doctrine of the Trinity, the activity of the Holy Spirit, and dialogue with God through prayer and worship. Taken holistically our subject impinges upon associated gigantic topics such as evolution, miracles, the mysteries of imperfection and suffering, and the relationship between the Spirit and the Word of God.

2. Whilst all these topics have, at some time, to be addressed in the same context for the sake of consistency of a total world-view, here we are focusing on such key questions as: "How does an infinite transcendent God express his personality within his creation?"; "Can we gain some insight into the mechanism through which God can and does communicate with his creatures on a day-to-day basis?"; "What is God's normal practical point of influence with his creation, and in particular with his creatures in this world?"

3. God is transcendent - that is he is distinct from his creation. And yet he created the world as we know it, apparently out of nothing. That is why there is something rather than nothing! In the New Testament especially we understand that, unlike a human architect or engineer, who may have no further involvement in his creative work after it is completed, God did not and cannot abandon his creation to fend for itself. Time and again Scripture attributes nature to God's handiwork, whether or not it can be explained in scientific terms. God is continuously present and active in our world, sustaining it by holding it in being moment by moment. This carries with it the awesome implication that, were he to cease this activity, the world would not simply be left to wind down, it would vanish instantaneously out of existence.

4. In God's relationship to his creation we see that there are clear indications of a multi-dimensional structure of the Godhead. Trinitarian ideas in the Bible begin to focus. For: Firstly, a transcendent God cannot enter his space-time creation, either to formulate it in the first place, or to sustain it, without compromising his infinity. Secondly, a transcendent God would have the most fundamental problem in coming into meaningful dialogue with free human beings, because he would know the outcome before that dialogue even commenced.

5. This leads us to three very important Christian theistic truths: Firstly, that the original creative act and the ongoing upholding and sustaining of the universe have to be the work of an agent, on an extended arm basis as it were - God-the-Son, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, through whom God set aside his transcendence in order to create and sustain our finite world. Secondly, that there must be a fundamental continuity between the activity of creation and the subsequent upholding and sustaining of our world. Thirdly, personal, individual dialogue between God and man must also be on an agency or extended arm basis. The vital task of communicating with us as individuals is entrusted to God-the-Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

6. God-the-Holy Spirit challenges us through our deepest feelings. Examples that may come to mind are the delights of human love, friendship and fellowship; the happiness associated with laughter and fun; the joy of sexual union, procreation and bringing up children; the beauty of music and other art forms; the excitement of learning, enjoying creation and exercising our creativity; the fulfilment of achieving ambitions and aspirations that drive us to exploit our talents and to maximise our endeavours into worthwhile outcomes; the sadness of parting from loved ones; the pain of suffering and imperfection; and finally the fear of death, judgment and extinction. CS Lewis summed this up so well where he wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in

our pain: it is his megaphone to a deaf world." Of course these kinds of feelings and experiences are common to all mankind. That should not surprise us because God speaks to everyone in these ways, for "(God) wants all men to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth".

7. But there is another even more personal activity of the Holy Spirit. All of us experience from time to time flashes of insight and inspiration. In common with other thoughts and more generalised experiences, these "strays" have a physical correlate in the brain, because what we call our minds are the experiential correlates of what goes on in our brains. In "Behind the Eye", Donald MacKay speculates about the actual mode of God's communication with individual human minds, "Within the multi-million-fold activity in a human brain", he writes, "if we could, as it were, 'magnify up' regions of activity here and there, what we would find is a stochastic process of immense complexity in which spontaneous transitions are happening all the time." Later he writes, "It does seem to me to be a fair claim that there is nothing whatsoever incompatible between the testimony of religious people down the ages that their experience can take on the significance of dialogue-with-God, and the most tough-minded of mechanistic images of what goes on in their brains as the correlate of these experiences". On this basis the crucial significance of Genesis 2 must be that it is a record of the first such experience in the history of mankind.

8. God communicates with his creatures in either generalized or specific terms via our minds in one of these kinds of ways. They are God's chosen way of direct personal communication with his creatures, and also his normal route into our world on a moment by moment basis. Dialogue with God is a credible Christian experience, through the Holy Spirit. All this is consistent with the Biblical assertion that the Holy Spirit is the major personal player in our world today, illuminating Jesus Christ for us, and his point of entry is human minds. He is active in the minds of non-Christians, as well as in those of Christians in a very special way. As the Apostle Paul put it, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us".

9. Throughout all of this I would want to affirm absolutely the concept of a purposeful controlling hand upon the universe, as expounded by Keith Ward & Arthur Peacocke in recent publications, and also the reality of extraordinarily unusual activity of the Almighty in special circumstances - miracles, most notably the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ!. However, for different reasons, neither of these will yield up any of their secrets in the context of a strictly scientific investigation. Hence we see God's activity in our world today as practically confined to universal general laws - pre-determined at creation and the very stuff of scientific enterprise - together with the interaction that God exercises with human minds through the Holy Spirit.

10. If the heart is representative of the will and the emotions, that is the "real me" and what I want from my life; if the soul is representative of my capability as a human being to enter into a relationship with God which includes dialogue; then the mind is the mechanism that facilitates and enables. I cannot then think of a better way of summarising all this than the first and greatest commandment according to our Lord, Jesus, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind".

Ian Bensted
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