

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Pictures of God

Have you ever tried to list all the different pictures of God you get from the worship services you attend? What about the impressions of God you get from hearing Christians talk? What about those you get from news media? I suspect that if you list the pictures of God that you get from all these sources, you'll come up with a surprisingly varied assortment. Some of them may contradict each other, and even among your own descriptions, some may contradict what you say you believe about God.



Several times recently I've been in classes whose members listed all the images of God that class members were aware of. Each time the list was surprisingly long, and even after we thought we'd finished it, still more descriptions of God kept popping up in our discussion.

We picture God mainly as a person

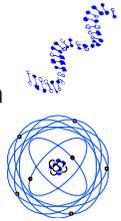
Most of the descriptions of God in our lists portrayed God as a person, even though we claim to believe that God is spirit. Many were adjectives describing a person. These included gracious, merciful, wise, just, good, powerful, perfect, forgiving, and loving. The adjectives that attributed person-like traits to God weren't all favorable, however. People in the groups mentioned that God is sometimes described as wrathful, punishing, and even absent, unnecessary, or dead.

Many of our pictures of God are people God is said to resemble. Throughout the Bible we find God shown as a ruler, and many titles of rulers appear regularly in our worship services as names for God. We find them especially in familiar hymns and rituals and as visual symbols in church sanctuaries.



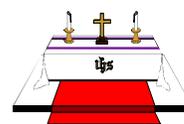
Does reason or merely comfort determine how we picture God?

Some of the pictures of God I mention in this issue of *Connections* seem misleading and unbelievable to me. They seem to contradict much of what is now known about the universe and human beings. Picturing God as a man in the sky does this, for example. Other common images of God—as the writer of a unique book, for example—contradict what scholars have discovered about the Bible and other religions.



I know that many Christians share these observations about typical images of God, yet lots of other Christians feel very differently. It seems to me that many Christians' wish for comfort is what mainly determines what they tell themselves God is like.

Comfort seems to matter most



It seems to me, too, that the comfort-seekers' preferred picture of God is the picture that most worship services present. The main pictures of God we're given in church show God as a person who controls all that happens and who wants only good for everyone.

Presenting only this view of God drives away many Christians who see God differently. Some of them are still hanging on in the church, but in order to hang on they have to tune out much of what they regularly hear there about God. Other Christians were once active in a church but have dropped out, while still others have always avoided the church because they found its claims about God so unconvincing. Losing these thinking people is unfortunate for the church and the world. And, ironically, it ignores a vital part of Christian tradition.



Couldn't we provide for both groups?

I wish our churches would more often present images of God that make sense to today's thinkers, rather than putting so much emphasis on comforting and reassuring the Christians who can't bear to part with yesterday's pictures.

God as a male ruler

Prominent among these ruler images are king and lord. We say that God reigns or is sovereign. We sing about God as the Lord of Hosts, the leader of an army. We describe God as sitting on a throne in heaven, and use the symbol of a crown or scepter. Some of these ruler images present God as the top person in a hierarchy based on domination—on “lording it over” people and overpowering them—rather than as the leader of a community based on the equality and compassion that Jesus taught and demonstrated.



In addition, these much-used ruler images nearly always present God as male, despite our claiming to believe that God has no gender. And of course we also continually emphasize the misleading image of God as male by our constant references to God as father and by our exclusive use of male pronouns for God, in much of what is sung and said in worship services.



God as a 17th-century-English speaker

We constantly see God portrayed as a person who wrote (or presumably dictated) a book in seventeenth-century English. This picture of God is especially powerful because it's presented so often but never explicitly. We get it not just in our churches, from prayers, hymns, anthems, scripture readings, and rituals, but also in secular settings such as news reports that include quotes from the Bible. In addition, much in our worship services presents God as a person who must be spoken to in seventeenth-century English. Oddly, this picture of God fills not only so-called traditional services but also many services labeled “contemporary.”



God as Trinity

My class members came up with a wide assortment of pictures representing God's actions. Some spoke about God watching and judging us. Some mentioned God's suffering. Our list included numerous helpful, comforting roles attributed to God: shepherd, comforter, advocate, counselor, sustainer, healer, servant, and friend. Interestingly, these are

roles that are more often attributed to Jesus or the Holy Spirit when Christians distinguish between the three “persons” of the traditional Trinity. Having them listed among images of God reflects our tendency to think of God exclusively in terms of the Trinity, no surprise for groups composed mostly of churchgoers.



Some in my groups specifically mentioned the Holy Spirit as an image of God. That's understandable because in the church we portray the Holy Spirit as the spirit of God and also as the spirit of Jesus.

Many, of course, mentioned Jesus as the main picture of God. One person even mentioned “Christian” as an image of God. Those images were no surprise, as many Christians equate Jesus with God. Most probably see Jesus as the best picture of God that could exist in human form. Many see Jesus as the only instance of God's having appeared in human form. But that view makes it easy to think of God as exclusively Christian, which seems untenable.



Mutually exclusive pictures

Some qualities that in church and in other settings are said to belong to God don't fit together. All-loving, all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful are qualities we constantly hear attributed to God, but if one of them is true, some of the others can't be true. This problem has been recognized for centuries but we rarely acknowledge it in the church.

It's comforting to believe that God is all-loving. We like to believe that God wants only the best for each of us. But only by doing some elaborate mental contortions can we hold on to that belief when someone becomes the victim of cancer, a disfiguring or fatal car wreck, or a home-destroying tornado. If God were both all-powerful and all-loving, wouldn't God prevent such things from happening to anyone?



To avoid facing the impossibility of all these claims being true, some Christians quote the scripture that says “all things are possible with God” (Matthew 19:26 and elsewhere). Other Christians quote the similar scripture, “all things are possible



to the one who believes” (Mark 9:23). They’re inferring, “if you were really a Christian, you wouldn’t question this.” We’ve heard similar reasoning used by some well-known evangelists, too, claiming that people died in a tidal wave or avalanche because they weren’t Christians.

God as the cause of everything

Another way in which Christians try to explain why bad things happen to some people and not to others is by picturing God as individually and deliberately choosing everything that happens, including every aspect of each person’s life. That picture may seem comforting at a glance, but it doesn’t hold up to scrutiny.



I heard about a children’s sermon in which the pastor told the children, “God personally chose everything about you—the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, the family you’re in.” I wondered how that pastor would apply that to a child with Down’s Syndrome, or to one who was being abused by a parent. This picture can make God seem deliberately mean and cruel. We get it often, however, from popular presentations, such as Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. These can help us see that our lives have purpose and that we need to pursue that purpose and make good use of whatever our individual traits may be. But using this picture to hold God responsible for everything is misleading as well as unhelpful.

Comforting but unreasonable pictures

The picture of God choosing all that happens also becomes unbelievable when two people are in the same car wreck and one survives but the other is killed. We may try to justify the apparent capricious-



ness of such outcomes by claiming that God still had something important for the surviving person to do in life, but what does this say about the value of the one who died? It’s unconvincing if not actually cruel.

Still another way in which many Christians try to justify seeing God as personally responsible for everything is by claiming that God has an all-encompassing plan that we can’t see. God’s plan is totally good, this view of God claims, and we would recognize that if we could only see the whole picture.

We often hear such claims when someone dies unusually young. Friends and family say that because this person was so wonderful, God wanted his or her company. This belief may be comforting in a situation that is horribly painful and doesn’t seem to make sense, but it doesn’t seem to fit with what is known about disease, human behavior, or the other workings of nature.

Ironically, among my classes’ descriptions of God were “has a plan and we can know it,” but also “has a plan but we can’t know what it is,” and also “is the author of a perfect plan that we don’t understand.” This discrepancy shows up often in the ways that many of us talk about God. At times



we glibly say what God’s will is, as if we could know exactly what it was, but at other times we dismiss destructive events as “acts of God.”

God as mystery

A few of the images on my classes’ lists didn’t portray God as a person. They were words like mystery, spirit, light, and love. They included adjectives like infinite, holy, sacred, and awe-inspiring. They included phrases like “wholly other,” and “more than

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

everything we know or can imagine.” These images reflect uncertainty, ambiguity, and thus humility, rather than the arrogance of claiming to know everything about God. These images acknowledge that God is our name for something that isn’t exactly like any thing or person, that can’t be fully described, and that we can’t completely know.

These non-personal descriptions reflect how I see God. I know they represent the understanding of many other Christians too. They also represent a view of God held by many Christians throughout history. I wish our



churches would more often portray God as mystery. I wish that in our churches we’d acknowledge that picturing God as having personal characteristics can be helpful to some extent but that it can also be misleading and can’t be taken literally.

Because we’re human we often picture God as having human characteristics. That’s what many writers of the Bible did, too. However, if God is spirit and is unlimited, as we claim God is, then God isn’t exactly like any person. I wish we’d hear that more often in the church.

Barbara



Connections

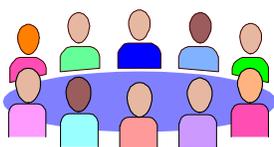
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Our pictures of God— reasonable, or just comfortable?

April 2007

What makes a Christian a Christian?

In the same classes I refer to in this *Connections*, in which attenders listed all the pictures of God they got from the church and other sources, they also listed what they saw as the requirements for being a Christian. These covered a wide range. Some were based only on behavior in the world. Some were based mainly on belief. Some were based on relationship to the church. A question raised about all of them was, “Does God care whether we meet these requirements or not?”



About the same time, I was in a thought-provoking conversation about being a Christian. In it, a prominent theologian said, “Learning about the historical Jesus never persuades anyone to follow Jesus Christ.” I disagreed with that. Since then I’ve talked with many other people who disagree with it. This theologian also spoke about the Eucharist and the concept of the Trinity, instead, as ways in which people were led to follow Jesus. My experience and observation tell me that’s not true for all Christians.

I’m still thinking about all of this. In another issue of *Connections* soon, I’ll share some of my thoughts about it and invite you to ask yourself how they compare with yours.