

"I DON'T WANT A GOD WHO..." WHEN GOD ISN'T WHO WE THINK HE IS

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An electric atmosphere filled the Augustana College gymnasium in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as 5,000 young adults, mostly aged 18-25, held their hands up, closed their eyes, and mouthed the words to "Same Love" with American rapper Macklemore:

"... we paraphrase a book written
thirty-five-hundred years ago ...

If you preach hate at the service
those words aren't anointed

That holy water that you soak in
has been poisoned."¹

After the concert one student at this selective liberal arts and professional college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wrote in her blog that as a Christian she "was forced to choose between the love I had for my gay friends and so-called biblical authority. I chose gay people. ... I said, 'If the Bible really says this about gay people, I'm not too keen on trusting what it says about God.'"²

Fallacious Reasoning

Fallacious reasoning like this has been around for a long time, **especially in conversations about God**. For example, the false dichotomy of being "forced" to choose between love and so-called biblical authority offers two options that are seemingly mutually exclusive, ignoring alternatives. What if it is possible to love gay friends and still uphold biblical authority?

Warped pictures of God have been around for millennia, going back to the Garden of Eden. These misunderstandings of the nature of God reveal themselves in such statements as:

I don't want a God who would be
less merciful than I would be.

I don't want a God I can't say 'No,
thank you' to without penalty.

I don't want a God who would look after my needs
while allowing a whole nation of men, women,
and children somewhere else to be destroyed.³

I don't want a God who doesn't make sense.

I don't want a God who ... (fill in the blank).

Perceptions of God

How do we develop our perceptions of who God is—or if He even exists? Research has confirmed that parent-child relationships and childhood experiences, particularly traumatic experiences, have an effect on a person's understanding of the character of God.⁴

Misperceptions of God can come from other sources as well—self-proclaimed "Christians" who act hypocritically, seemingly unanswered prayers, abusive priests, pastors and other spiritual leaders, cold and uncaring churches, unbiblical teachings such as an eternally burning hell, the theory of evolution with its denial of an all-powerful, loving Creator, and many more.

Adding to the confusion are human-made images of God, perpetuated by various faith and secular communities. Some of these distortions include:

1. The "distant/indifferent God," who exists but is not concerned about our day-to-day lives.
2. The "judgmental God," who scrutinizes human behavior, waiting to reprimand anyone who steps out of line.
3. The "all-loving God," who is too kind to reprove or judge anyone—ever.
4. The "despot God," who rules with an iron fist, sending tragedies on the earth and wiping out life at will.

With views such as these, no wonder books such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* could stay on the New York Times best sellers' list for 51 consecutive weeks!⁵

Who Is This God?

These images are not the God of the Bible. **They are distortions born of human misunderstandings.** Sometimes these images arise from well-intentioned but misguided attempts at finding God. But there are also cases in which the images have been deliberately twisted, even caricatured, by ill-informed skeptics or (worse) former believers now hell-bent on destroying the faith of those they once went to church with.

I (Clint) was one of the ill-informed skeptics. Then one day someone gave me a copy of *The Great Controversy*. Scanning the table of contents, I decided to read the chapter "The Origin of Evil." Suddenly I was confronted with a very different view of God from the deity my teenage Christian friends warned me about—who would throw me into an eternally burning hell if I didn't accept Him.

In contrast, the author of this intriguing book seemed to be speaking directly to me right from the start: "[Many] see the work of evil, with its terrible results of woe and desolation, and they question how all this can exist under the sovereignty of One who is infinite in wisdom, in power, and in love. Here is a mystery of which they find no explanation."⁶ I discovered that "sin is an intruder"⁷ originated by Lucifer, who was the highest and most exalted of the angels until he tried to make pride and self-exaltation into a virtue.⁸

It made sense to me that if Satan had been instantly vaporized after introducing sin into the universe, "the inhabitants of heaven and of other worlds" "would have served God from fear rather than from love"⁹ and that a better way of dealing with evil was required. But what was that better way, and who was this God who would deal with it?

That question led me to earnestly study the Bible for an answer. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," I read in Romans 10:17.¹⁰ I learned that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and that love and justice constitute the foundation of His throne (Ps. 89:14) and the essence of His law (Mark 12:29-31). Almost imperceptibly I came to know the God of the Bible and to love and trust Him.

Is God a Moral Monster?¹¹

Admittedly, though, the Bible does contain some troubling images of God, but faith helps us grapple with these, too, rather than turning a blind eye, wishing they didn't exist. Let's briefly look at two of these possibly problematic pictures of God.

What about when God commanded the extermination of the Canaanites (see Deut. 20:16-18)? Doesn't this prove the God of the Bible to be a cruel, heartless tyrant?

When reading of this divine command, we need to remind ourselves of some important, closely connected biblical and historical facts: 1. As the immediately preceding verses show (verses 10-15), the normal procedure was to avoid war if possible, and if not, to spare the women and children. 2. Canaan was the land to be populated by God's people, which could have included the six nations that inhabited it as, during the time of Abraham and his descendants, they were given four centuries to repent while their cup of iniquity was not yet full (see Gen. 15:16). 3. Unfortunately, their stubborn worship based on gods of sex¹² and violence (as the Ras Shamra tablets describe)¹³ meant that their remaining in the land would hinder His plan for Israel and be a continuing stumbling block for them. 4. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze. 33:11); to the contrary, His will is that all would repent and be eternally saved (2 Peter 3:9)—including the Canaanites—but even as the Israelite armies demonstrated their overwhelming superiority with victories in what is now the country of Jordan, nearly all the inhabitants of the land chose to fight rather than accept the God of Israel.

Too Much Blood?

To some, the biblical sanctuary system with its bloody sacrifices seems to present a similar image of God as bloodthirsty and primitive, but this system is designed to teach many truths, including the seriousness of sin ("the wages of sin is death" [Rom 6:23]). Far from the sacrifices representing human attempts to pay for sin (as they do in false religions), they instead symbolized God's ultimate gift: *providing Himself* as a sacrifice (Mark 10:45; Gen. 22:8)—"the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

The participation of the sinner in offering the animal and of the priest in ministering the blood teaches that God's gift of salvation becomes effective only as I accept that Jesus died *for me, in my place*, and that the purpose of His ministry today in the heavenly sanctuary is to save me not only from the *penalty* of sin but also from its *power* (Rom. 8:1-4).

No selfish human heart could conceive of a God so inseparable from His own self-forgetful love that to uphold it He would lay Himself, rather than us sinners, on the altar, and that only in order to purge the universe of evil forever does He ultimately consent to extinguish those who insist on remaining inseparable from sin. It was this clear and complete picture of God that won our hearts.

Building on the Rock

The world offers many pictures of who God *isn't*. To find out who *God really is*, we must look at the most accurate reflection He has given to us—His Word. The Bible reveals to us the nature of God, the nature of human beings, the nature of sin. It opens to us the history of our planet, the fall, and the plan of redemption. It shows us God's love through the life, death, resurrection, and coming again of His Son, and teaches us how we should treat others. Jesus and His Word are inseparable—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

No wonder that fallen angel Lucifer, the devil, hates the Word of God and attacks it so viciously. However, it would be less than honest to suggest that all questions can be easily answered from the Bible. There are *apparent* contradictions, unclear passages, and unanswered questions. But careful and sometimes painstaking searching of the Bible for answers will solve many problems if we read it through the eyes of faith.

Over the centuries a long list of martyrs sealed their confidence in God and His Word with their own blood. Some suffered because they were determined to give people the Bible in their own language. More recently believers have suffered torture, imprisonment, and death as they smuggle and share Bibles in countries hostile to God's Word.

The Worst Hostility

But perhaps the worst hostility to the Word of God is found not in the courts of infidel governments but in the classrooms and corridors of higher learning, where persons of culture and intelligence presume to dissect the Bible much as one would a cadaver, determining which parts are vital and which are not.

Of course, careful biblical study takes into account the original language, historical context, and literary form of the passage, but these tools alone are insufficient to understand Scripture, which is a *faith-based* book.

Sometimes those not embracing a historical-critical approach are labeled "fundamentalists" who believe God Himself dictated every word of an infallible Holy Book, when in actuality these scholars believe in the divine/human model of inspiration identified in 2 Peter 1:21: "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

Questions need to be raised in the classroom, as we have raised questions in this article; but how are these questions answered? For example, when addressing the question of origins, is evolution given equal or perhaps even greater credence than the biblical account of creation? If God used the process of evolution to eventually "create" human beings, through a process of death, mutation, development, and predation, how does that fit the biblical picture of an all-powerful, all-loving God whose plan and work is perfect? Because the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 is inconsistent with the prevailing scientific worldview and its "findings," even many "evangelical" scholars now question its historicity. Once the biblical account of Creation is undermined, it

is easier to find reasons to reject its message regarding the two original institutions: marriage (between a man and a woman) and the seventh-day Sabbath. This is just one example showing that the way questions are answered is just as important as the questions themselves.

Criticism of God's Word is nothing new. In *The Acts of the Apostles* we read, "As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher critics, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many the Bible is a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's Word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives. By spiritualism, multitudes are taught to believe that desire is the highest law, that license is liberty, and that man is accountable only to himself."¹⁴

There are many voices today claiming to know the way, the truth, and the life, but instead lead to disappointment, discouragement, and death.

Fortunately, there is a God whose Word, like Him, transcends time, place, and culture. His Word is, in many places, simple enough for a child to understand, yet deep enough for the brightest scholar to search. God is not limited in the ways in which He speaks to us, but the clearest way to learn to recognize His voice is by listening to it in His Word. What is your God saying to you today?

1. www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/macklemore/samelove.html.
2. "An Open Letter to the Church From My Generation," dannikanash.wordpress.com/2013/04/07/an-open-letter-to-the-church-from-my-generation/.
3. From "10 Gods I Don't Want," Oct. 27, 2006, www.clusterflock.org/2006/10/10-gods-i-dont-want.html.
4. See Jane Dickie, Amy Eshleman, Dawn Merasco, Amy Shepard, Michael Vander Wilt, and Melissa Johnson, "Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Images of God," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (March 1997): 25-43, www.jstor.org/stable/1387880; Carrie Doehring, *Internal Deseccation: Traumatization and Representations of God* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1993).
5. Peter Steinfels, "Books on Atheism Are Raising Hackles in Unlikely Places," *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2007/03/03/books/03beliefs.html.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 492.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 493.
8. Isa. 14:12-14; *ibid.*, pp. 493, 494.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 498, 499.
10. All Bible quotations in this article are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
11. Taken from Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).
12. These ancient tablets describe Canaanite religious practices including choreographed sexual dramas with music, frequent sexual intercourse with animals, shrine prostitutes (male and female), homosexual acts, group sex, and other "common rites of sexual rejuvenation." See Chapter 3, "Creation Ordinance Versus Cultic Sexuality," in Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2007).
13. In addition to abhorrent sexual practices, the Canaanites also offered up children as sacrifices and worshipped gods they depicted as drinking their victims' blood and engaging in almost unimaginable gore and violence. See Copan, pp. 159, 160.
14. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 474.