

Revealed or Concealed?:

God's-Self Revelation in Worship, Prayer, and Community

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We know God has been revealed to us through Jesus Christ, but if we—mere mortals—can truly know God, then can God truly be God *Almighty*? How can we know God fully if God transcends us? If Moses—who communed with his Maker as a friend—could only view God's backside, how can we view God fully? And how do we teach our students about praying, worshiping God, and living as a community under God without first struggling with how we get to know God?

I find that whenever I get frustrated with my study of a particular doctrine or don't want to claim a particular point, I'm tempted to throw my hands in the air and cry, "It doesn't matter!" But I rarely let myself off that easily. I also don't let my students off that easily, either. How we worship God, pray to God, and live in community with God's people correlates with who we believe God to be—and we can only know that through our understanding of God's self-revelation to us. And as a minister who wants all of her students to be practical theologians, I have to come back to—although not relegate it to—what does this mean for my daily walk?

So allow me to struggle with you about the doctrine of revelation as it relates to teaching students prayer, worship, and community.

As I find my place within the spectrum of the varying views of the doctrine of revelation, I begin by studying the pitfalls of focusing too much on the doctrine itself. Revelation focuses on what is known. (My initial question, after all, was: "Can we really know God?") So if the doctrine of revelation provides full-blown knowledge of God, shouldn't my initial question be, "How do we get to know God?" But the journey can easily be railroaded if we focus more on gaining knowledge about the *means* of revelation than on revelation itself. But we also must not let the pendulum swing too far back. Faith is built on knowledge, not on a walk in the dark.

A Mysterious God?

There are those who critique the doctrine of revelation, stating that it suggests arrogance. In order to protect the belief in a holy, transcendent God who's completely *other*, they argue that while God can know us, we cannot know God—for God is infinitely beyond us.

I've heard it argued that the worship focus of those in the latter camp is on reverence for Almighty God—but I cannot imagine how this is so. If God is transcendent and completely other, how do we know how to pray and

worship? How can we live in community as God's people if we have no idea who God's people are or how to become people of God? How can we live out the will of God for our lives if we have no way of knowing what it is? There must be some degree of revelation.

This stance also makes a false critique, for those who discuss the doctrine of revelation tend not to acknowledge that we can move toward God to know God—that such a move isn't based on human will. Instead, there is a move from God to allow us to know God.

This stance may seem extreme to many, but there are many ways we may be teaching it to our students. What does your ministry say about your doctrine? Is God so *other* that we're afraid to approach God? And when we do approach the throne, do we clean ourselves up, believing that we shouldn't let God know about our frustrations, desires, anger, or any other emotion because God is too beyond that? Do we present a mysterious God who remains completely and utterly mysterious and often too big for our little problems?

A Revealed God?

On the other side of the spectrum are those who look at the means of revelation—the person of Jesus Christ, God's creation, the Bible, and so on, and argue that we know all there is to know (as opposed to arguing that God is revealed enough for us to be able to know all that we *need* to know). I have several colleagues who either hold this point of view or run their ministry in this way. It fosters a sense of arrogance. How can wives and husbands after decades of marriage still discover new things about each other, but somehow we know all things about the God who created us and existed in eternity before us? This perspective eliminates God's transcendent mystery.

The result? God is our buddy, just like our buddy down the street. Worship, rather than full of reverence, instead becomes akin to "spending time with someone you care about," as a colleague of mine would say. Prayers remove the otherness and more importantly the Lordship of God. Along with this stance is a lack of community—because the individual gets to know God and relationship is based on God and the individual, one to one. As a result of knowing God our world is changed, but the global community remains the same. What's being presented is a God created in our own image.

Both-And

Understanding these two extremes helps me understand the importance of holding both of these perspectives in tension along with all of their complexities. I serve a revealed-but-mysterious God. The Word of God reveals who God is in God's Trinitarian Self before and apart from creation—mysterious. Jesus Christ, God incarnate—the fullest of all revelations. God

captured in humanity taking on many human limitations—mysterious. So I name the paradox that I may not have been able to always articulate (but always believed) and run with it. It is a huge middle ground, and I mean not to demean it by stating that there is only one way to be in this middle ground, or that there are only three ways to view the doctrine of revelation.

I could go on and on about the shades of gray we find in the middle, but to do that in such a short amount of time may not only be utterly boring, with term after term, but will also do violence to the complexity of the issue. Instead, back to the practicality of it all, what does revelation mean in the life of the believer? As we think about where we stand on this issue, ultimately the question is “what does that say about our relationship to God?”

As we worship, we stand in the tension of knowing God and knowing that we can never know all of God. So we pray to Almighty God as one who’s beyond us and therefore requires reverence—and also as one who’s come to us to be known by us and cares about us. So we share our thoughts and desires in prayer, ultimately wanting to know the will of God for our lives through personal revelation. But personal revelation of the One revealed and concealed doesn’t remove us from the important sense of community. We know that the Israelites received God’s self-revelation. And as God’s chosen people, all who fall in that legacy are encouraged to seek God’s face together to stand in communion with God and with one another.

The mystery of God is essential to how we live as people of God, how we commune with each other, and how we commune with God. I know I’ll continue to struggle and tug and nuance (or what some will call nit-pick). And as we all receive more and more revelation about who God is, we’ll all rightly continue to struggle with how we know this God and how we should introduce others to this God—lest the revelation passes us by.

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