

Speaking specifically about God

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Readings: Acts 17:16-33 and Heb 1:1-4

In the children's talk, the children (in their wisdom) were rightly confused when Marie spoke of "Chris" without specifying which Chris she was talking about. In our post-Christian age, it is increasingly the case that at weddings and funerals that prayers are offered to unspecified deities – for example, "Life-giving spirit" or "great god of all". These prayers are very seldom offered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians, we need to have the child-like wisdom to be confused by this too – which 'god' is being spoken of here?

Christians are called to speak of 'God' (this is what theology means).

This was reasonably straightforward in the very early days when Christians addressed only Jewish audiences – for Christians; the God they worshipped was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But even among Jews this caused problems because Christians insisted that this God must be understood in the context of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the "reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3).

Within a few short years the gospel had spread into the Greco-Roman world of religion and philosophy and these people also spoke of 'god' and 'the gods'. But this was not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It involved a whole host of deities, the worship of which pervaded popular culture and was nurtured by the Empire as a civil religion to unify the population – "may the gods bless the Roman Empire!" "God" was also understood by the different philosophers to mean various things – the prime mover, the ideal, the life force that animated the world, etc.

In this environment the early Christians were called "atheists" because they refused to honour these gods. They were thought to be exclusive and intolerant because they had a very specific idea of who God is and they refused to acknowledge any conception of God not rooted in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

I think that Christians today need to recapture some of this exclusivity and intolerance towards the idea of "god in general" and the 'gods' that are honoured by popular culture today. Christians need to recapture the specificity of who the God of Christian faith is and is not.

Tom Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, is well known for speaking with people about God. Often they will say "I don't believe in god" to which Wright responds "tell me about the god you don't believe in". Once they have concluded Wright generally replies "I don't believe in that god either".

- Christians should not believe in impersonal philosophic constructions of an abstract and aloof god – a creative life force, a ground of being, a prime mover or whatever.
- Christians should not believe in romantic and sentimental constructions of an indulgent and congenial god who is present in everything – a god of peace and love, the life-giving fecundity of mother earth, a spirit guide within or whatever.
- Christians should not believe in grotesque and terrifying constructions of a god who derives pleasure from suffering and joy from condemnation and judgement – a god

only concerned about sin and his honour, passionate only about hell-fire and brimstone, a watcher of people only so as to punish them justly or whatever.

- Christians should not believe in nationalistic constructions of a god of civil religion, the purpose of which is to generate patriotic fervour intended to unite the population behind some war or national cause or whatever.

Unless we attend carefully to God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as it is attested in Holy Scripture, all of our constructions of god will be idols – ideas that we have dreamed up ourselves. Ideas that will always be false and ideas that will always disappoint us.

It has often been the case that well-meaning Christians have defined god as a kind of photographic negative image of themselves.

We are	weak	so God must be	powerful and omnipotent
	limited		infinite and all-knowing
	temporal		eternal and omnipresent
	imperfect		perfect
	changeable		changeless and immutable
	physical		spiritual
	prone to suffering		unable to suffer

When pushed too far, this kind of thinking results in the construction of a god that:

- Cannot truly become human and suffer with us and for us
- Cannot truly come near to us and relate to us and have genuine compassion on us
- Cannot genuinely bring saving power into our lives and be concerned about the real detail in our lives and make a difference at that level
- Cannot reconcile and redeem us
- Can only remain aloof and undisturbed by our situation. A god who is concerned ultimately only with himself and the vastness of the cosmos.

Christians ought to be atheists in regard to these sorts of constructions of god. We are not called to speak of these gods. We ought to feel no obligation to defend, uphold, bear witness to, or to believe in these sorts of gods.

Who then is the God of Christian faith?

“Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being” (Heb 1:3). “In Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:20). “In Jesus the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9).

Christians only speak of God in the light of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. The specificity of who God is, his character, his purposes, his attitude towards us and the world is made known to us in Jesus Christ as this is attested in Holy Scripture – “he is the exact imprint of God's very being”. It is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that Christian knowledge of God is found.

The God of Christian faith is not some vague force, earth spirit, or cosmic power. God is not some principle, concept or symbol representing some virtue that appeals to us such as love, peace or joy. Whenever God is thought of in this way it is always human ideas of love, peace and joy that are projected onto the construction of God that we have made. All this is idolatry.

The God of Christian faith is the being who is called “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”.

This God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of Rahab, Esther and Mary. He is the God of the prophets and Israel. He is the God of the apostles and the church. He is the God who comes near to us in Jesus Christ.

The God of Christian faith is mighty and glorious – this God is the creator and judge of all that exists. The God of Christian faith is a humble servant on behalf of the human creatures whom he has created for fellowship and whom he loves beyond measure. In Jesus Christ, this God has moved into our poor neighbourhood, come near to us and has taken our burdens upon himself. In his death and suffering upon the cross, Jesus has taken our brokenness and sin to the one place where it can be destroyed forever. In this, Jesus reflects the very being of God – who God is and what God is concerned about and values.

A “life force” or “prime mover” or “world spirit” cannot have compassion on us. Such a construction of ‘god’ cannot grieve over our brokenness and sin and cannot rejoice over our repentance. Such a ‘god’ cannot discipline us for our good or in judgement speak the truth to us about who we are and who God is. Such a ‘god’ can never save us.

I believe that it is time again for Christians to think of themselves as atheists. We are a people called by the true God to stand up and declare that we do not believe in false constructions of God. We are called to bear faithful witness to the true God who, in Jesus Christ, is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. Jesus is the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Some important applications that flow from this:

- When people speak of ‘god’ we should not assume that they mean by this word what *we* mean by this word. We must be clear that “God” is only truly understood in the light of Jesus Christ. Every other construction is therefore an idol that ought to be identified and rejected. We should not encourage people to believe in a construction of ‘god’ that is false. But this must always be done in an attitude of humility and love – never in arrogance.
- Many unbelievers have instinctively rejected false constructions of ‘god’, but have done so thinking that the god they have rejected is in fact the true God of Christian faith. I think that Christian evangelism, at this point, is better to affirm their unbelief rather than to try and persuade them back to faith in a ‘god’ that is in fact false. We need to ask “tell me about the god you don’t believe in (anymore).”
- We are under no obligation to defend ideas about ‘god’ that are not specifically rooted in Jesus Christ who is the exact imprint of God’s very being. We are called to bear witness with our words and our lives to the reality of God who has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.
- It is in Jesus Christ who is Emmanuel – “God with us” in whom the true nature of God is disclosed.