

June 2, 2019

Philippians 4:19

Hebrews 13:16

Deuteronomy 11: 26-28

Proverbs 24:21-22

John 17:23

Love 301: God, Others, Yourself “The Evolution of God”

The Rev. Lynn P. Lampman

In one Peanut comic strip Sally was struggling with her Bible memory verse for Sunday. She was absorbed in her thoughts trying to figure it out when she remembered, “Maybe it was something from the book of Reevaluation.”

The last book of the Bible has much to tell us – and Sally might have gotten it right when she remembered not revelation, but rather renamed it reevaluation.

That story and the entirety of Scripture begs us to answer, do we have a faith that is a once and for all decision or is it more like a journey with both its ups and downs, a filled with many decisions to either stay on the road or turn off and go somewhere else?

The declaration of some Christians that their way is only one way to see anything brings me great sadness, and I might add, has brought our world much harm.

And this “one way” thinking has invaded the image and concept of God too. Therefore, I would like to propose to you five different concepts of who God is as portrayed in scripture and Christianity, and the consequences of believing any and all of the four concepts of God to the exclusion of the fifth. And finally, how the fifth explanation of who God is, needs be our

last. For when we come to number five, our reevaluation and God's revelation has been concluded.

Who is God? #1 - Provider: "And my God will supply all your needs according to God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 4:19)

This is often the beginning of the spiritual journey for most of us. **We start out as infants** – for it's all about me. God becomes for us the **Divine Parent**. Face it, as an infant you didn't care whose shoulder you threw up on or whose ear you screamed in, or whose sleep you interrupted for the ninth time in one night. God's job is seen as coming when called, cleaning up our messes, satisfying our demands, kissing our scrapes and bruises, and keeping us as happy as possible as much as possible.

We understand and know God as a God of loving faithfulness who takes care of us as you make our way through life. The **One to whom we run, seek refuge, are protected, and get what we need**. And this concept of God is an important part of the spiritual journey.

Yet, when this is your only concept of God you may wind up with a God you feel you need has abandoned, betrayed and let down when you do not get what you want. Which ends up with us angry and bitter that God hasn't solved all our problems and make all of life cozy and easy.

Who is God? #2. -Sharer "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."
(Hebrews 13:16)

Then we may move on in the spiritual journey to what might be called toddlerhood. One day your parents are feeding you Cheerios and as they watch you take a few gooey pieces out of

your mouth and offer them back to them in your slobbering fist. Your parents are proud for you for doing a generous gesture, for you are now doing what has been done for you.

A while later, after biting your best friend at preschool for three days in a row when he took your stuffed giraffe, you decided to let him play with it, even though you weren't sure that your classmate could be trusted with something as precious as your giraffe.

In addition to God's already existing job of cleaning up our messes and satisfying our demands, God also has the tough job of **calling us beyond selfishness to generosity.**

Who is God?– #3. Rule Keeper “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today.” (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

When we grew older and **went to school**, we entered a new world of rules and schedules. We couldn't leave our seat without permission; we had to turn in our homework on time, whether we felt like it or not. Then, a bit later on there came our driver's license and rules of the road.

The God of rules and fair play has the job of **rewarding the rule keepers and punishing the rule breakers.** God is still meeting needs, and calling us to generosity. Yet, those with God as enforcer of rules and punisher of those who break rules are also those who seem to enforce tradition and punish those who do not keep tradition.

Often missing from this understanding of God is the Christian principles and teaching of grace, unconditional love,

compassion, and mercy. Instead, there seems to be nothing more than the iron fist of judgment.

Who is God? - #4. Us Not Them “My child, fear the Lord and the king, and do not disobey either of them.” (Proverbs 24:21-22)

As we journey onward we fall in love for the first time. After a few breakups and heartbreaks – some of which you suffered, some of which were inflicted by you – you learned that love always comes with a risk of pain. And still, you took the risk. You began to anticipate how your actions would impact your significant other. You learned the art of sacrifice, the grace of granting forgiveness, the humility of asking for forgiveness. You started to think in terms of two.

Your concept of God included adult commitments of service, of teamwork, of sacrifice, of handling money, of dealing with conflict, of citizenship, and social responsibility.

This concept of God is good, but it is not enough. Because what happens is that we end up with a **God who shows favor to us and not to them**. It becomes all about our family, tribe, and nation.

Yes, the God of “we, ours and us” is an improvement of the God as Provider that focuses solely on me, myself, and mine. Yet, the God of “we, our and us” is the also the violent God of genocides which we use when **we** feel threatened or if they have something **we** desire.

Our own nation at its very beginning perpetuated exclusion when it said in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Their “we” and “all men” didn’t mean “everyone” and “all people.” And then, there was the writing of the Constitution

which reads, “We, the people” and yet the “we” excluded women, Native Americans and African Americans. These were not minor oversights! They were done with intention. They were done in the name of the God of our family and tribe.

This concept of God – us not them, worked when it came to small tribes and even global empires of the past. Yet, in this present moment, this very strategy threatens us with mass destruction in light of nuclear weapons. So devastating that the God of the Us Not Them would not be a winner and the we would be decimated.

The problems of our current age such as ecological, economic and political challenges cannot be solved alone. Could it be that the exclusive – “we” strategy that has served us for 130,000 years has now run its course. For the first time in human history the **“God of we, who is the God of us, but not them,** threatens our survival.

Can our hearts expand to embrace a larger, grander, inclusive God who demonstrates solidarity with all rather than hostility to some?

Who is God? - #5. The Inclusive We “I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23)

At this point in the journey we need malware to sort out the viruses that have the potential to destroy our present, as well as our future. And Jesus, is that anti-malware. The God imaged by Jesus exerts no dominating supremacy. In Christ, we see an image of God armed with basin and towel, bringing Good News for all not a select few, who rode not a warhorse, but a donkey, weeping in compassion for people who do not know the way of peace.

In Christ, God is supremacy, but not like the old paradigm of supremacy espoused by some, but rather God is the supreme healer, supreme friend, the supreme lover, the supreme life-giver who self-empties in gracious love for all. The One called king of kings and lord of lords is the servant of all and the friend of sinners.

In the aftermath of Jesus and his cross, we should never again define God's sovereignty or supremacy by analogy to the kings of this world who dominate, oppress, subordinate, exploit, scapegoat and marginalize.

For two thousand years ago, Jesus inserted into the human imagination a radical new vision of God – non-dominating, nonviolent, supreme in service and self-giving. That vision was so radically new and different that we have predictably spent our first two thousand years trying to reconcile it with the old visions of God that it challenged. And so I say today, let's keep working on that – till we get it settled, and live it out.

