

What is God really like?

What is the predominant image we have of God? What is the predominant image **you** have of God? What is the predominant image **I** have of God?

What is the predominant image of God we get from the OT?

A difficult question because, in an English translation, it's well over half a million words, so I'm asking you to (a) know it well enough and (b) sum it up in a few words!

What is the predominant image of God we get from Jesus' words and actions?

Easier – the Gospels are only 80,000 words.

What is the predominant image of God we get from the rest of the NT?

That's 97,000 words.

Finally, what is the predominant image of God that we project to people around us?

This, in a sense, is what I've been wrestling with these past months, and I do so because I want to follow my namesake – "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." That is my heart, that is my passion.

For me, now, the predominant image of God is all-loving, better than the very best human father or mother, willing to go to any lengths to heal, to restore, to forgive, to draw us back into that loving relationship that is God, the Holy Trinity. That's why I'm so excited – it's all such good news!

But I hope you've picked up that I still very much see the cross as the centre of all this – probably more so than I ever did – but what is the predominant message of the cross, as presented by 21st century Christians?

God is holy and cannot abide sin. God punishes sin. You are a sinner, so God will punish you, but... Thankfully, God is also all-loving, so he sent Jesus and, as a substitute, Jesus takes the punishment we deserve, so the wrath of God is set aside, and he is then able to accept us into that loving relationship.

If that is 'the gospel', then what is the **predominant** image of God that we are giving to those we love?!

To me, this gives the wrong image of what God is like – a wrathful God seeking someone to punish, and so punishing the Son he loves, instead of punishing us. You can argue the niceties of the theology of this explanation – penal substitution – but to the outsider, it's simple: God is killing his son instead of killing us. How can that possibly be good news?!

I've desperately tried to find a better explanation within the pages of the Bible, but each model I have looked at, whilst it is clearly there within the Bible, it doesn't give a precise explanation. Take, for example, the idea of redemption, clearly a very biblical image that is used again and

again. It sees us as redeemed from the slavery of sin (making a payment to free a slave would be a very contemporary image in NT times), but who paid who? Did God (Jesus) pay the devil? It's an illustration, a metaphor, but it only gives one aspect of the cross – it falls down if you push it too far.

I've struggled to find an explanation that is contemporary! And I've appealed to you, dear readers, to help me find a better, more helpful explanation, but together we've drawn a blank. Indeed, I've been warned about sliding towards universalism (i.e. thinking that everyone will be saved, anyway) and of the danger of preaching 'another gospel' against which my namesake gave some very severe warnings!

But hang on! The idea behind the gospel explanation above (penal substitution) didn't **start** to be talked about by Christians until (I think) the 11th century. So how did they 'make disciples' for the first thousand years or so?!

Then while I was trying to write this essay, I began to wonder if the real problem is that we're trying to actually 'explain' the cross. We think we've got a way of 'explaining' what God did in and through the cross. We've pinned it down to a nice neat tract-shaped package that we can 'present' to people and, as one Christian I worked with on a penal-substitution-based gospel course said, in essence, "We present them with the gospel, and if they reject it, that's their responsibility; ours is just to faithfully present them with the truth."

I started on this journey two years ago when I 'discovered' the Trinity – I can remember the very sentence, saying that Christianity shouldn't be seen as 'propositional and transactional, but relational and mysterious'.

I think I now have even fewer answers than when I started, but I have a much deeper relationship with God than I ever had; I have a much broader appreciation of what God did in Jesus Christ on the cross 'for us'; I have concentrated much more on what Jesus actually taught; I can give you several illustrations that show various aspects of what the cross achieved; I no longer feel I have to apologise for any aspect of what God has done in and through the cross.

It's our Alpha day away tomorrow, and I'm looking forward to seeing how, through the cross, God will redeem people; God will bring them reconciliation with him and with others; God will bring them forgiveness for their sins; God will bring them healing; God will give them victory over Satan; God will give them confidence in his love for them; God will give them strength to face suffering. So many wonderful things, and I'm sure there's much more that I haven't yet thought of, and all because God was willing to set aside his rights:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Hallelujah! What a glorious gospel we have to proclaim!

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