God Is [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 8 October 2017 - 19:19



Read time: 7 minutes
It is Sunday morning. The small boy is shuffling around on a cold, hard, wooden pew. The service has not yet started; there is still a hushed murmur hanging over congregation as they wait for the *dominee* (pastor) to arrive through the almost secret door in the wall next to the large, relatively ornate wooden pulpit. The boy looks at his mother, who is staring intently in front of her, and so he also casts his glance forwards and upwards to the still empty pulpit. Like every week before, his eyes again catch the gold coloured embroidered wording on the crimson coloured altar cloth. It reads: "*God is Liefde*" (God is Love).

This is a fairly typical experience for many Afrikaans people who grew up going to church. Whether on an altar cloth, on a sign outside of church, on a booklet or cast on a wall by a projector projector, the message is firmly planted: *God is love*.

This is of course true. Indeed, as I have written previously [2], love is not merely an attribute of God: God fully encompasses love and good, and therefore there is no love or good apart from what emanates from God. This is a profound statement which forces us to re-evaluate our conceptions of God, love, and what we think of as love.

But there is one very important thing that we need to keep in mind: God does not reveal Himself as (only) love. In Exodus 3:14, He reveals Himself to Moses by His personal Name, which encompasses His character as well:

> God said to Moses, "I am who I am," and He said, "You shall tell the children of Israel this: 'I am has sent me to you."'

In Hebrew, "I am who I am" is God's personal name, YHWH. Revealing Himself in this way, God indicated that He is the originator of all being. And so when we think of God, we need to think of Him as not only love, but His other attributes as well: truth, justice, majesty, beauty, etc.

This might seem like a small thing, but I believe that it has a profound impact on how we think about God. It also shapes our attitude about Him. If we tend to think that God is only love, then aspects of God's character such as justice and truth stands in service of love, as opposed to being co-equal. This, in turn, can lead to a twisted view of these qualities. They become "lesser", standing

subordinate and in the service of love. This can pervert the view that we have of truth and justice. For example, if a word of truth will make someone sad, angry or unhappy, then that is not loving, so then rather omit that truth. Or if someone is overwhelmingly nice, then the loving thing is to forego a just ruling against them, while the person who is overwhelmingly bad does not deserve forgiveness and a second consideration (because they did not show love to others).

These scenarios run contrary to God's character. In the Old Testament, for example, we see God pronouncing harsh judgements on various peoples for their sin. We may associate with those people, so we are uncomfortable by such judgements, because they would apply to us, and we see ourselves as essentially good, so there must be something "wrong" with the God of the Old Testament.

Jesus is also widely respected, except for His harsh sayings (truths), such as "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Truth and justice can be bitter pills to swallow, especially in the light of our sin. But if we only ever speak of love, then in the light of sin we might only see God's forgiveness, and there are no unpleasantries with which we can be confronted. Love becomes narrow and reflects our expectations and desires. Other qualities of God can also be distasteful in the love-only view of God. God demands that we see the beauty of all people, because all people are created in His image. But if we do that, it challenges our pride, our prejudices and our snobbism. We might believe that God loves the poor, sick and downtrodden, but His love for us also precludes that He has any expectation that we get involved in their lives and take care of such people; God will do that for them (and if He does not then they probably do not deserve it anyway).

I saw this with a friend who also grew up in the Dutch Reformed church. Without going into details, he one day was confronted with the basic gospel message: that we are fallen people, that we stand in judgement, but that forgiveness and salvation is available in Jesus, who requires a total surrender to Him. My friend complained to me (he received this message from someone else), and when I confirmed what he heard, was disgusted by this message. He was disgusted, because in his view of a loving God, there is no room for judgement (except for really bad people), sin is not something which he needs to worry about, and God certainly does not place demands on people.

We must be careful to not form a simplistic view of God. Of course, we cannot understand Him fully, but we need to have an appreciation for Him in His greatness as He revealed Himself to us through the Bible. God is love. God is just. God is truth. God is beauty. And many more things. If there is ever an apparent contradiction in these attributes, we should not default to the one which we prefer. Rather, we should understand that there is not a contradiction, but that one quality flows into another. God shows grace because of love. God exercises justice because of truth. Grace is possible because God executed justice on the person of Jesus who took our sins upon Himself. There was beauty in the sacrifice which was necessitated by justice. This is the truth of love.

God is not an abstract quality. He has a manner and a personality. And this determines His attributes (love, just, truth, etc.). It can be uncomfortable to have to change your view of someone, especially of God. But He could be inviting you to get to know Him in a more personal manner, so that you can understand, fear (in the sense of reverence) and love Him more. Let Him speak for Himself.

- . Photo credit: Willo Eurlings [3].

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