

Oh for a Sense of God!

Written by Rev John J Murray
Wednesday, 21 January 2015 08:47

"What our generation needs is a sense of God," says David F Wells, who has done more than anyone to analyse the weaknesses of modern evangelicalism. Steeped as we are in atheism and secularism in society and worldliness in the Church, the times cry out for a sense of God. The present situation should vex the souls of the righteous from day to day. Only a movement from heaven is going to change the spiritual climate.

The Reformation was a movement from heaven that turned attention from a man-centred religion to God. *"The Reformation represents a move to place God as he has revealed himself in Christ at the centre of the church's life and thought."* (Carl Trueman) Wells speaks of the Reformation as the era in which Biblical truths were brought into the most invigorating, health-giving focus. What took place then was first seen in the heart and life of the great Genevan Reformer himself.

Experience that is God-related

John Calvin never said much about himself but we get a rare glimpse of his conversion in his Preface to the Book of Psalms: *"God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame ...having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with intense desire to make progress."*

Calvin suddenly saw and tasted in Scripture the majesty of God. He told the Roman Catholic Cardinal Sadolet that he should

"set before man as the prime motive of his life zeal to promote the glory of God."

B B Warfield claimed of Calvin:

"No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he; no man ever more unreservedly surrendered himself to the Divine direction."

" Calvin regularly concluded his sermons by saying,

"Let us fall before the majesty of our great God."

This true religious experience lies at the heart of what has become known as Calvinism. *"It is not,"* to

quote Warfield again,

"first and foremost a theological system; it is more fundamentally a religious attitude, an attitude that gives inevitable birth to a particular, precise but gloriously God-centred and heart-engaging system of theology."

He goes on,

"The fundamental question posed in Calvinism is not, then, 'How can I be saved?' but 'How shall God be glorified?'"

It is that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience. The deepest issue for the Calvinist is what truth or what behaviour will

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"illustrate the glory of God."

Christianity that is man-related

In the light of this we would again say with J Gresham Machen that *"unless there be a place to stand, all progress is an illusion. The very idea of progress implies something fixed. There is no progress in a kaleidoscope."*

This is where we need to take issue with the stream that has swept through evangelicalism in the last fifty or so years. As one theologian observed:

"Evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centred in me and my need of salvation and not in the glory of God."

Evangelicalism became infected with the culture in which it was living. The vibrant objective Christianity of the Reformation has become reduced to a private, internal and therapeutic experience. It is a 'faith' that is individualistic, self-focused and consumer-oriented. Doctrine is considered as an impediment to reaching out to the new generation. Seriousness is regarded as the death knell of successful churches. We have to be likeable, engaging, and light to succeed and aiming to please the marketing model – 'what the consumer wants'.

The truth that is God-related

Truth must be God-related. The cry today is about how to be relevant, but we should first and foremost be relevant to God and his truth. *"My conclusion is that absolute truth and morality are fast receding in society because their grounding in God as objective, as outside of our self, as our transcendent point of reference, is disappearing."*

(David Wells) The doctrine of a transcendent and holy God stands above everything. The Gospel makes sense only in the moral world. It is God, not the consumer, that dictates the terms. The needs sinners have are needs God identifies for them. This is because sinners suppress the truth about God (Rom 1.18). There must be conviction of sin. As J C Ryle declares at the outset of his book, Holiness:

"The plain truth is that a right knowledge of sin lies at the root of all saving Christianity."

J H Thornwell reminds us of a truth that needs to resound through evangelicalism today: "The most successful method of preaching is that which aims at thorough and radical conviction of sin."

The life that is God-related

What behaviour will 'illustrate the glory of God'? It must be God-related. A typical Puritan conversion was that of Thomas Goodwin, who wrote that when he was converted *"the glory of the great God was set up in my heart, as the square and rule of each and every particular practice."*

Vos said that

"the work of grace in the sinner is a mirror for the glory of God."

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As Mark Jones points out in his book *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* there is a great deal of practical Antinomianism in the evangelical world today. John 'Rabbi' Duncan spoke with great perception when he said:

"I suspect that, after all, there is only one heresy and that is Antinomianism"

(that is the sinner's quarrel with the authority of God). Grace does not free us from the authority of God and His law.

The life of the Christian must be God-centred and God-related. We cannot love the work of Christ for us without loving his Person. He is the Second Person of the Trinity. On the duty to love the triune God with all the heart, and soul, and strength and mind, the same John Duncan declared: *"Obligation to discharge this duty is not founded upon grace. Inclination to discharge this duty comes from grace, but obligation to discharge it does not come from grace, but from the eternal and immutable law, as founded on the eternal loveliness of God."* It echoes Augustine:

"The law was given that grace might be sought; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled."

The fourth commandment is the most neglected of all the commands of the Decalogue today.

With a God-related attitude we see it, as Alex Motyer comments on Isaiah 56.1:

"Keeping the Sabbath is the positive re-ordering of life around God."

"Return, O Lord, how long?"