

The SBJT Forum: Is There a Battle to Define God?

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. C. Ben Mitchell, D. A. Carson, Carl F. H. Henry, R. Douglas Geivett, and Craig Blaising have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Many adherents of new definitions of God consider themselves postmodernists. What is postmodernism and is it a healthy thing for the doctrine of God?

C. Ben Mitchell: Postmodernism has been around for some time and has had a variety of meanings. Most recently in philosophy and theology the term has come to describe the successor to modernity. That is to say, the age of the Enlightenment was the age of the Modern. The postmodern era represents a rejection of, or at least evolution away from, modernity. The modern age was characterized by the search for the Truth. For philosophers from Descartes to Kant to the logical positivists of this century, universal truth was the goal. Truth was something "out there." Truth was objective.

Postmodernism does not accept the limitations of modernism. Whereas modernism seeks unity, order and the absolute, postmodernism finds paradox, indeterminacy and ambiguity. Whereas modernism is typically thought of as "either/or" thinking, postmodernism is "both/and" thinking. Whereas modernism sought to know the truth underlying "the story," postmodernism is satisfied with the narrative itself and holds that there are many ways of worldmaking revealed in the story.

There is no objective truth and, perhaps, no objective reality. So, postmodernism is very post-Enlightenment, post-Christian, and, well, post-modern.

You see this distinction played out on television's mega-hit *The X-Files*. On the one hand, you have the epitome of the rational scientist in Dana Scully. Scully is interested in objectivity and verification—she performs autopsies, weighs, measures and observes. She is pursuing *the* truth. On the other hand, you have Fox Mulder who is open to other ways of seeing the world. He not only embraces the reality of life on other planets, but life in other dimensions. He is the postmodern man, unconvinced by his sense perception or the scientific method.

It also needs to be said that postmodernism is very pluralistic. Again, there is no one truth, no unifying theory, or singular way of seeing the world. This has tremendous implications for understanding things like written texts. For the postmodernist, generally speaking, written texts, like the biblical texts, are very perspectival. There is not *one* correct interpretation of a text, there are as many "correct" interpretations as there are interpreters. Each person has his or her own unique in-

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terpretation, each of which is equally “true” or legitimate. For that matter, the telling of the biblical story is similarly perspectival and non-universal. Thus, the Bible does not have to cohere for the postmodernist. The biblical writers may have had quite different, even contradictory, views of God and the story of redemption when they penned their materials.

Is this a healthy thing for the doctrine of God? I am tempted to say, “Well, that depends on one’s perspective,” but that would be to succumb to postmodernity’s trance. Of course, some scholars, such as Stanley Grenz, argue that postmodernism might be a friend to evangelical Christianity. In fact, Grenz argues that postmodern Christianity should, in some sense, embrace post-rationalism. And, to some degree, I think he is right; although I would prefer to call Christianity supra-rational instead of post-rational. When Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we see God rejecting God. That is incomprehensible to me; but it is not irrational. It is supra-rational. That is why our faith must rest on the revelation of God in scripture and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in illumination.

On the whole, however, I do not think postmodernism is particularly helpful nor healthy for the Christian faith. Now, that does not necessarily mean I am a pure rationalist. Far from it. Nevertheless, postmodernism does not accommodate well any religious faith or tradition which is exclusive and which makes absolute truth-claims. When Jesus said He is “the way, the truth, and the life,” He made postmodernism obsolete. He is ultimate truth. And He is the singular way. There is no other way to God.

Similarly, with respect to the doctrine of God proper, postmodernism has diffi-

culty tolerating the truth-claims and attributes of the true and living God. That God is the “King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Ti 1:17) is an exclusive claim. Since God is the only God, there can be no other. This is the kind of bivalence and exclusivity that is unacceptable to the postmodern mind. And the notion that God is absolutely sovereign over human affairs causes the postmodern mind to recoil. Finally, that God is immutable would be inconceivable to the postmodernist. Thus, process theology is popular among postmodern theists. As William Grassie, professor of religion at Temple University put it in a recent article in *Time*, “There is a shift to [the idea of] God as a process evolving with us. If you believe in an eternal, unchanging God, you’ll be in trouble.”

So, the battle that is shaping up is a battle of tremendous import. Since God defines our religion, what we know about God is crucial to true religion. If God is either unknowable or changeable, the entire Christian religion is fundamentally flawed.

SBJT: Are we in a battle to define God? If so, what are some significant flashpoints involving evangelicals?

D. A. Carson: Yes, of course: we have been in this battle since the Fall. When the serpent asked, “Has God said . . .,” implicitly he was asking, “Is the God you can believe in the sort of God who would say . . . ?” And that entails a subtle redefinition of God. Paul’s analysis is profound: any displacement of the centrality of the Creator by the centrality of something in the creation lies at the heart of this ugly displacement of the real God by a newly defined God. Ultimately this stance generates idolatry, which displaces “the God who is there” (as Francis Schaeffer used

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to say) by pseudo-gods, and this is the most blatant redefinition of all.

The apostle also tells us that covetousness is idolatry. Covetousness sets our affections and thoughts on almost anything other than God, especially if the things in question are not ours. Thus we break the first commandment, which insists that we love God, the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible, with heart and soul and mind and strength. If we break the first commandment, we have committed the first sin. In such cases we may *formally* adopt a more or less orthodox definition of God, but our practice has defined God's irrelevance, displacing him by things that interest us more. The God who is there is marginalized, and that, too, entails a more subtle redefinition.

The nature of the redefinition varies from culture to culture. In some, the chief competitor is polytheism; in others, pantheism; in still others, philosophical materialism, and so forth. What shape does the battle for the definition of God take in our day, in Western culture?

We must recognize that for hundreds of years Western culture adopted a more or less Judeo-Christian view of God. When we spoke of God, we referred to a transcendent, sovereign, personal Being, the God who had disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus. Inevitably there were variations in emphasis: those in the Reformed tradition emphasized God's transcendence and sovereignty, and, at the worst periods of their heritage, failed to think through very adequately the implications of his personhood. Those in the Arminian tradition tended to make the obverse mistakes. One could make similar observations along different axes: there were differences of opinion, for example, regarding eschatology, regarding

the relationships among the covenants, and so forth.

Further, it is important to recognize that the assertion that there was a "Judeo-Christian view of God" in Western culture is not tantamount to saying that virtually everyone in the culture was either a Jew or a Christian. The point, rather, is that even an atheist in that culture was not a generic atheist but a Christian atheist: i.e. the God in whom he or she did not believe was not, say, a Hindu God, but the God of the Bible. We might say something similar for agnostics and nominal believers of various stripes. Inevitably each position brought its own variation to the implicit definition of God. Nevertheless the God against whom they defined themselves and their beliefs or unbeliefs was the God of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and this God has remarkably close links to the God disclosed in the Bible.

Although the powerful influences of secularization and materialism, coupled with our own spiritual apathy and the dearth of strong preaching, combine to marginalize the God of the Bible in much of our culture today, here I shall mention two developments that have been primary in recent redefinitions of God.

(1) The first is driven by the shift in undergirding epistemology. Increasingly, Western culture is shaped by postmodernism; the epistemology of the Enlightenment is being left behind by more and more sectors of the culture. Religiously, this sanctions any sort of god at all, provided he or she or it does not have the temerity to say that some other god is false. Doctrinally, the only heresy left is the view that there is such a thing as heresy. Practically, evangelism must be viewed with suspicion, or even derided as an absolute evil, because implicitly it is

saying that someone else is wrong and needs to be converted. “Spirituality” is in, but is so poorly defined that it can mean anything, anything at all.

In this world, the god many believe in still has certain characteristics parallel to the God of the Bible, for the Judeo-Christian heritage has not entirely dissipated, but this redefined deity is a god without teeth, without majesty. This god fills people with warm fuzzies, but is never feared; this god dispenses a benevolent love, but has little moral bearing. Farther away from the Judeo-Christian heritage, this god may be personal or pantheistic, but is never sovereign and rarely a judge. In this god’s more extreme manifestations (as in the writings of John Hick), he or she or it cannot even be called a “god” anymore, but simply “Reality,” since in some religions (e.g. some forms of Buddhism) there is no place for “god” in any personal sense at all. And underlying all these gods is the great god Pluralism.

(2) Although the first development has made strong inroads into churches historically committed to evangelicalism (inroads I cannot explore here), the more dramatic development *within* the evangelical camp is the rise of the view that God cannot know the future of contingent actions. Biblical compatibilism is out; a finite God is in. The God so defined has numerous links with process theology, but differs from it in that it insists that this finite God is the God of creation. This view, well articulated by scholars such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd, emphasizes the biblical evidence for the personhood of God, but domesticates the biblical evidence for his transcendence and sovereignty. If this were a minor dispute in theology proper, there would be little cause for alarm. But as more books

and articles appear on this subject, one discovers that significant shifts are entailed in many Christian doctrines, and ultimately in the very structure of Christian faith. At the heart of the issue, however, is this redefinition of God.

I dislike confrontation, but I fear that these “battles of definition” are battles that Christians must fight, or lose by default. The issues are immense, faithfulness demands that we engage.

SBJT: Based on your sixty years of formal theological reflection, what trends do you consider most significant to the doctrine of God? What trends give you reason to be optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

Carl F. H. Henry: Your question may imply — rightly so — that the doctrine of God and more specifically God himself in his revealed Word (Christ and Scripture), offers us what genuine basis there is either for maintaining or foregoing optimism.

In the forefront of our century Modernism — with its quasi-pantheistic view of reality — assimilated God to the cosmos and assumed history’s inherent evolutionary progress to utopia. It stressed the onmicompetence of human reasoning and hailed the scientific method as the authentic way of knowing the real world.

This speculative theory was challenged not only by evangelical Christianity but also by Neo-Orthodoxy, by Secular Humanism, by raw Naturalism, and more recently by Postmodernism. Defection from the authority and full reliability of Scripture by these non-evangelicals issued in compromised intermediary positions that offered no insurance against further decline. One by one rationalistic alternatives to historical Christianity plummeted to ever more enfeebled positions.

Even as Modernism a few generations

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ago disdained Fundamentalism in the name of prideful scientism, so too Postmodernism today devalues Modernism as an arbitrary reconstruction of reality. Although Modernism championed itself as *avante garde*, Postmodernism now rejects Modernism as a mutilation of reality. Whereas Modernism claimed to update the portrayal of the biblical God, Postmodernism denies that any objective truth, objective reality, or objective meaning exists.

Were there no shared meaning, Postmodernism could not communicate its own speculative beliefs to its intellectual rivals. Instead of evolutionary utopia, Modernism accommodated Auschwitz, technological warfare and ecological poisoning. Postmodernism in turn accommodates pluralism and skepticism.

Neo-Orthodoxy was a valiant but maledict effort to recover the self-revealing God in a context that had detached faith from ontological logic and from external history. Its concessions to biblical criticism accorded it a warm welcome among scholars who held critical views of the Bible while defending the authority of biblical testimony. Though Neo-Orthodoxy appealed to religious colleges and seminaries that proclaimed scriptural authority alongside an acceptance of historical criticism and higher criticism, it could offer little effective resistance to humanists who denied transcendence and blended religious perspectives with naturalism.

The present Postliberal option calls forefront attention to the whole Bible, but through narrative theology interjects a new way of interpreting scripture that places doubt upon the objective factuality of its truth and history. In place of reliance on the objective authority of divinely inspired inerrant Scripture it leans on the faith of the believing church for the au-

thority of the story. Yet the apostle Paul insisted not alone on the importance of the faith of the believing church, but also on the divine inspiration of the Scriptural text. He claims that the faith of the Early Church is vain if the factual history of the resurrection is unsure (1 Co 15).

The historical method cannot with certainty confirm or deconfirm the supernaturalness or objective factuality of biblical events. But Christians have a referent other than the faith of the believing community; the divinely inspired Scriptures vouchsafe the factuality and nature of the events. More so, Scripture details the importance of specific events, from the Hebrew exodus from Egypt to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

All this reinforces the value of a simple biblical faith to a philosophically confused generation. It matters not what novel options arise from the religious creativity of innovative theologians, for if they forsake biblical legitimacy they are doomed to ongoing revision. But scriptural theology retains its apostolic legitimacy and power, and therein lies a firm basis for ongoing optimism over Christian ministry and its future.

SBJT: Do you think human suffering should or should not influence one's doctrine of God?

R. Douglas Geivett: This question concerns the relevance of human suffering for developing an accurate doctrine of God. Since human suffering is a feature of human experience, we are dealing with a question about the propriety of making theological judgments or pronouncements on the basis of a certain type of experience common among human beings. The question is whether the human experience of suffering is a *legitimate* source of information about God.

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Human beings have an almost inexhaustible capacity to leap to conclusions about God's nature and about God's concern for human persons on the basis of their experience of evil. Many atheists build their case against the existence of God on the evidence of evil. Some Christian theologians trim their theological sails to the harsh winds of human anguish. And a characteristic response to suffering among ordinary Christian believers is to demand to know what good purposes God means to bring about from their own suffering. These are risky ventures in all cases.

Without a reasonable theory about what evil is, we cannot begin to discern the theological significance of evil. The atheist must be prepared to offer a plausible conception of evil, and an account of the significance of human suffering, that is consistent with denying the existence of God. But atheist philosophers have yet to develop any real theory of evil. Perhaps most thoughtful people would allow that all genuine evil is a departure from the way things ought to be. But can an atheist endorse this characterization of evil if he denies the existence of the only sort of Being whose intentions could be the measure of how things ought to be?

Applying the wrench of human experience for extra leverage, some theologians have ratcheted down their conceptions of specific attributes of God, focusing especially on the properties of *omnipotence* (the greatest power possible), *omniscience* (the most extensive knowledge possible) and *omnibenevolence* (unqualified moral perfection). "Refinements" of these attributes are thought to have a practical bearing on our understanding of God's role in making sense of human suffering.

For example, advocates of "the open-

ness of God" position (a position that is, unfortunately, growing in popularity within the increasingly pluralistic culture of the Church) reason that God may be omniscient without knowing all that will happen in the future. In other words, the future is "open" even from God's point of view. Hence, God might not know about certain instances of human suffering until they occur, so that he could not be blamed if they should occur. But there is nothing about the character of human suffering that supports this theological conclusion. Nor does it preserve a classically exalted doctrine of God challenged by the reality of evil, for it compromises that exalted doctrine by endorsing a diminished conception of God's knowledge.

Suffering believers naturally wonder why they suffer, and they are frequently tempted to insist upon knowing the real purpose of their suffering in order to make peace with their experience. But much human suffering, especially the suffering of the righteous, looks perfectly pointless when it is considered in isolation from a rich knowledge of the goodness and mercy of God. It is a mistake to suppose that apparently gratuitous suffering requires an attenuated doctrine of God. What the believer needs to gain perspective on personal suffering is a properly exalted view of God.

The child of a steamboat pilot may startle when there is turbulence or friction during passage through a narrow waterway, but the calm demeanor of her father as he steers the vessel, one hand on the wheel and one on the throttle, instills confidence. Her understanding of the situation is limited to her personal knowledge of her father and of his expertise. But it is enough. This simple picture illustrates the importance of exhausting other sources of

knowledge about God before relying too heavily upon the evidence of evil for constructing a doctrine of God.

We are, of course, quite familiar with suffering on the human level. But when we say that we are “familiar” with suffering, we mean that we have considerable personal experience with suffering. That is, we experience suffering in our own persons, and we regularly observe the suffering of others. But this sort of familiarity with suffering does not confer upon us any special expertise when it comes to the theological significance of suffering. That is a bitter pill to swallow, but it is a fundamental reality. It is, I think, one of the lessons of the Book of Job. Human beings are in a very limited position to make sense of evil before reaching at least provisional conclusions about God’s existence and nature on suitable independent grounds (including the data of general revelation and of Scripture).

Certainly, our doctrine of God must be compatible with our experience. But our experience is not an unambiguous indicator of the character of God.

SBJT: What are some of the issues in the doctrine of God that are being debated today?

Craig A. Blaising: We can summarize some of the issues in this debate in the following questions:

Divine Knowledge: Does God know everything? Or is he ignorant of some things? Does he already know the future? Or is he watching how things progress (learning as he goes) and deciding his course of action accordingly?

Divine Power: Does God have all power? Or is he unable to do some things or change some things in the world? Is he dependent on us (or other creatures) to do things? And if he is dependent on us, is it because he has

to be or because he chooses to be?

Divine Will: Does God actively will everything that happens in the world? Is he merely passive — such that he does not actively will anything that happens in the world? Do some things happen contrary to God’s will? Is he willing but not able to do or change some things? Is he able but not willing?

Divine Action: Does God actively control all things? Does he relinquish control of some things to his creatures (such as us)? Does he control by direct causation? Or does he rely on luring or persuading his creatures, leaving direct action up to them? Has he stepped back entirely from what he has created, leaving things to run their own course?

Most of the debate has to do with understanding God’s relationship to the world and especially to human life, thought and action. Throughout the history of the church, Christian orthodoxy has worshipped God as sovereign over all things. This is tied to the fact that God is confessed to be the Creator — creating all things out of nothing by his word. He has all power, all knowledge, and works all things according to the purpose of his will. God’s sovereignty is also seen in salvation. He initiates and completes our redemption. We cannot regenerate ourselves any more than we could create ourselves. Salvation is by grace alone.

In recent times, however, critics have argued that the traditional theological doctrine of divine sovereignty is defective philosophically and biblically. Process theists (from philosophers such as Charles Hartshorne to theologians such as John Cobb and Schubert Ogden) as well as Open-view or Freewill theists (evangelicals such as philosopher William Hasker or theologian Clark Pinnock) have

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argued that “classical theism” is too dependent on ancient Greek philosophical ideas of immobile perfection. Accordingly, they believe that classical Christian theism imagines the perfect God to be immutable, changeless, not merely in his being and character (the divine life) but in the expression and activity of his life. Consequently when classical theism explains divine sovereignty — God’s control of all things — it explains it as an immediate and direct singular (invariable) act, exercised (in the popular Reformed version of classical theism) in a single decree which effectuates all that is and happens.

Process theists and Freewill theists argue that this view is unacceptable on three grounds. First, it is incompatible with the reality of contingency (chance, possibility) experienced in natural processes as well as in human development and behavior. Second, immediate, direct and invariable sovereign causation of all that occurs would make God the cause of evil. One has only to think of the Holocaust and the daily news reports of personal suffering in order to realize that the idea of direct divine causation of all events seems incredible. Third, divine immutability means that God is non-responsive. To respond to an external cause is to undergo change. Since God does not undergo change, he does not respond to external causes. This means that God does not respond to us (we are external to God), not to our prayers, not to our needs. Being unmoved, God is impassive, which critics charge renders him unconcerned, uncaring. Not only is such a view philosophically and ethically suspect, it is religiously unacceptable.

The view of divine sovereignty in classical theism has also been criticized on biblical grounds. The Bible narrates the history of God’s interaction with human

beings. Reaction and response to changing circumstances is intrinsic to this narrative. God answers prayer, converses (responds in dialogue), blesses, judges and expresses a range of emotions. Furthermore, God is revealed as a trinity in interactive communion. God the Son became incarnate because of love (a passion) so that even the human experience of historical sequence, responsive give and take, became essential to his Person. The idea of an impassionate, non-responsive God who effectuates all things in a single direct act seems quite foreign to Scripture.

A number of evangelical theologians, mostly Reformed, have responded to the critics in order to defend a traditional Christian view of God. Many of these acknowledge that the so called “classical” view targeted by Process and Open-view theists certainly needs to be modified in light of Scripture. Some have also complained that this “classical” view actually misrepresents the teaching of Christian tradition. The great theologians in the history of the church, such as Athanasius, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther, did not simply repeat the teaching of ancient philosophy, but attempted to set forth an understanding of the sovereign God out of Scripture.

Furthermore, the critics of the critics argue that some of the newer views of God’s relationship to the world are themselves deficient biblically and too dependent on modern philosophical ideas of process, evolutionary progress, human autonomy, rationalism and relativism. Some of the newer views have so stressed divine empathy, sensitivity and regard for human freedom as to render God inactive in the world. God feels for us, sympathizes with us in our suffering, but does not do anything directly about it. Conse-

quently, God is not really in control of things in this world, either because he is not able to control them or because he refuses to actively intervene. His knowledge is limited. He does not know the future, but is himself developing, learning, becoming what he will be along with everything else in the natural order. The transcendence of God is lost, and God becomes a finite object in the world. Ironically, this view also presents us with a non-responsive God. He does not actively answer prayers or otherwise intervene directly in our affairs. To do so would violate freedom (understood as indeterminacy) and contingency.

However, the Bible reveals to us a God who is quite active. Not only does he attempt to persuade, but he also intervenes with power in human history. He works all things according to the counsel of His own will. He reveals aspects of his plan and causes them to come to pass. His foreknowledge of future events is revealed even in the incarnation of the Son who not only sympathizes, suffers and endures the cross, but will yet return in power and glory to bring the future to its determined end in judgment and the kingdom of God.

Fundamentally, the problem in this debate is hermeneutical. How are the various biblical descriptions of God and statements about divine character and activity to be brought into a comprehensive doctrine of God? Some classical theists show a preference for general statements on divine providence. God upholds all things and works all things according to the purpose of his will. However, their tendency is to treat descriptions and narrations of God's particular activity in history — especially those displaying emotion or responsiveness to his creatures — as symbols of the more general statements.

This allows them to negate or alter the force of those particular descriptions. In this situation, abstract philosophical ideas can indeed be more easily accommodated to Scripture to the detriment of our theological understanding of God.

Ironically, some Open-view theists show the same preference for abstract generalizations, but they go about it differently. Their tendency is to generalize or abstract certain particular descriptions of God in Scripture — such as compassion, empathy and love, or patterns of divine-human interaction in biblical narrative where human beings exercise “freedom” with respect to divine counsel and will. These new abstractions (being now the way in which God relates generally to the entire creation) negate or alter the force of other particular descriptions (such as those in which God actively and directly intervenes in human affairs) and of general statements to the effect that God upholds all things or works all things according to his will.

What is needed is a full-orbed doctrine of God in which both the general statements of divine providence as well as the particular descriptions of God's historical interaction with his creation both have their proper place. It would recognize that the triune God is more complex than any philosophical theisms, ancient or modern.

