

Ideas matter

We are born to think. It is not the only thing we do. We eat and sleep; and we walk and talk. But, as we do so, we use our minds.

The mind matters. And how we use it matters. We can use it to focus on right things. And we can use it to think about wrong things. We can grow in our understanding of people and events; but we can also be led astray by misunderstandings. A failure to think things through can lead to disaster.

One crucial topic in our thoughts concerns God. Do we have right ideas about him? Our understanding of God determines how we live. A person who imagines God does not exist lives as though he does not. Whereas a person who believes he does is influenced by his

understanding of who God is. So, who is he? What is God like? Our notion of him matters.

Two As or Os

Many use two terms to describe God. Those who like long words resort to words such as Omnipotent and Omniscient. Others prefer simpler terms like All-powerful and All-knowing. Whatever your preference, the first - omnipotent / all-powerful - is usually taken to include a reference to creation as well as history. God spoke the cosmos into existence. No human has the power to do that. And God is working his purposes out as the days and years come round.

We do not doubt God created the world. But is God as Creator the most important notion we can have of him? Many think it is. Are they right?

Force

Let us see where the idea of God as Creator can lead. It may result in thinking of him in impersonal terms. He is seen to be a powerful force rather than a personal being.

We all possess gadgets. We use them in the kitchen, living room and garden. We also travel by cycle, car, train or plane. Such objects are usually made by a company. And the

company is usually thought of in impersonal terms. We know people work machines in factories, but the likelihood of us personally knowing someone who works for BMW in Germany or for Apple in California is limited. Companies or corporations, then, are often remote as well as impersonal. It is possible to view God that way - remote and impersonal. What you think about God influences the way you respond to him.

Taskmaster

Again, those who see God primarily as the Creator of all things can think of him as being a dictator or tyrant. He is seen as the giver of rules and regulations which must be obeyed. The emphasis is on doing the right thing rather than enjoying God.

The notion of God as Maker and Lawgiver can also stir up fear. Not, that is, in the sense of respect. Rather, in the sense of being afraid of the consequences if the Maker's instructions are not followed.

Personal

Let us ask again, What is God like? In all that he has made known about himself, it is evident he does not want us to think of him as a hard taskmaster or remote tyrant. He wants us to understand he is a personal being whom we may know.

This is important. Once we think of God in that way the more we begin to see that he is not cold, detached or hard in his dealings with mankind. Thus we come to another feature of God. It is probably the most important of all.

Loving

In his first letter, John asserts "God is love" (*1 John 4.8*). He says this simply because he wants God's people to be what God wants them to be - those who love one another.

There are five steps to his argument. One, we are to love one another (*verse 7*). Two, love is from God (*verse 7*). Three, those who love have been made new by God (*verse 7*). Four, those who do not love do not know God (*verse 8*). And five, unloving people cannot know God because God is love (*verse 8*).

In step one he says what we are to do. In step two he gives the reason why. In step three he points to the source. In step four he provides a test of whether one is really a child of God. And in five step he provides the reason why he argues the way he does.

The point John presses home is that those who know God cannot but be loving. Why not? Because those who know God grow more and more

like him. It is an inevitable consequence of knowing him. Those who experience and know his love spontaneously begin to be like him - compassionate, gracious, loving and merciful.

Ideas matter. Our thoughts about God influence - and even determine - the way we behave. This is a fact too easily forgotten. That is why John writes as he does. In his gospel and letters we see the theme of God's love sparkling ever brighter like a precious jewel.

Being

We need to explore this dazzling theme further. There are two threads that ought to be drawn out. The first concerns what God is in himself.

We have already said he is not to be thought of as a detached and remote dictator. That is not how he makes himself known to us in the Bible. How does the Bible begin? It begins by introducing us to God - "In the beginning God..." (*Genesis 1.1*). What many of us do as we read on is focus upon God as the Creator of the cosmos. Clearly that truth is asserted. But so too is something vital about the very being of God. Indeed, we may argue that what we discover about the character of God in the opening verses of the Bible is

more important than the fact he is the Creator.

What do we discover about God? He is not an impersonal force or power. That notion belongs to science fiction, not the Bible. How do we know this? Because of the terms used. In Genesis 1 we read of God's Spirit (*verse 2*), God speaking (*verse 3*), and of God not being a solitary being (*verse 26*).

We need to tread carefully at this point. We do not want to suggest that there is more than one God. There is not. God alone is God. But nor do we want to give the impression that God is not in himself a loving being. He is love. From eternity to eternity love is at the heart of who he is. Within himself he loves.

He has revealed himself to us as being Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. Yet each person of the Trinity shares the one divine essence.

The Father from eternity has been the begetter of the Son. The Son from eternity has been the beloved begotten one. And the Spirit has from eternity proceeded from the Father and the Son. Yet there is not three gods but one.

We recognise this is a profound mystery. The key point to grasp is the internal love God has within himself. The Father eternally loves the Son, and the Son eternally loves the Father. The one God who is eternally loves. That is essential to his being. He does not need Creation or mankind for him to be love.

Doing

God who eternally expresses himself as love within himself also expresses his love outwardly. That is why Creation exists. Our loving God wants to share his love outside himself. He wants others to experience and know him and his love for them. Hence he said, "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness" (*Genesis 1.26*).

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve were free to enjoy sweet fellowship with God. Sadly they ruined things. They chose to rebel. And now mankind and creation is under God's curse. That is why we are subject to decay. But God, who expressed his love in creation, so loves us that he gave his Son to rescue lost people from their miserable state. The love of God for us is seen supremely in Jesus Christ.

Thus the loving nature of God is also seen in what he has done. He created the cosmos and mankind.

He has provided his Son as the one from whom we can find forgiveness and receive new life. And his loving kindness will yet be experienced in a fuller way when Christ returns to lead his people into the new heavens and new earth which will be revealed on the last day.

Conclusion

Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) sums up what we are seeking to convey in a superb manner. He writes:

If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit were happy in themselves, and enjoyed one another before the world was. Apart from the fact that God delights to communicate and press his goodness, there had never been a creation or redemption. (*Works, vol 6, p113*)

Ideas matter. How we see and think of God is crucial for daily living and our eternal happiness. The main way in which we are to think of him is as a loving Father. Christ Jesus called him Father. He teaches us to do the same. When you pray, he says, pray Our Father...