

The Battle for the Doctrine of God and a New Journal

Editorial: Paul R. House

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American Christianity is currently locked in a struggle over the doctrine of God that in time may well make the battle for the Bible of the past twenty years look small in comparison. This conflict involves academicians, pastors, and lay persons. Its implications are far reaching for all denominations, and no group that ignores this theological issue will survive with its ecclesiastical integrity and doctrinal purity unscathed.

What is at stake? No less than an orthodox definition of God. For centuries Christians have agreed upon such biblical concepts as God's sovereignty, omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. Believers generally assumed that members of other faith traditions were convinced that God does not change because God is inherently perfect and therefore not in need of alteration, evolution, or growth. Arminianism, Calvinism, Wesleyanism, and the denominations to which they gave birth disagreed over the particulars of these doctrinal convictions, of course, yet they did not forsake the foundational elements of historic Christian formulations of the doctrine of God.

To be sure, those committed to scriptural definitions of God battled aberrant theological traditions in the past. J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) argues that early twentieth-century Liberalism is not the Christianity set forth in the Bible. Though in a quite different way, obviously, Karl Barth likewise set aside Liberalism as authentic rev-

elation-based Christianity in his *Church Dogmatics*. Carl F.H. Henry, G.E. Ladd, David Wells, Millard Erickson, W.C. Kaiser, Jr., and a host of other evangelical theologians have spent their academic careers working to keep American Christianity grounded in a biblically-based definition of God.

But now the definitional battles have shifted to new fields, and some adherents of new concepts of God have evangelical roots. Process theologians, postmodernists, and freewill theists now depict God as evolving into an ever-greater deity. Some deny that God knows all that will happen in the future, arguing that divine knowledge of contingent actions would make real human freedom impossible. Others conclude that salvation comes not solely through Christ, but also through other religions. In other words, texts such as Numbers 23:19, Psalm 90, and Acts 4:12 are no longer deemed accurate summaries of the whole of scripture's teaching about God's immutability and the necessity of specific, personal faith in Christ for salvation. Adherents of these beliefs span the denominational spectrum, as David Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (InterVarsity Press, 1996) and its precursor, Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), make plain. Kirby Godsey's *When We Talk About God...Let's Be Honest* (Mercer Press, 1996) recently brought these issues before

Baptist clergy and lay people.

Evangelical Christianity must reassert the inerrantly-revealed biblical definition of God. Trinitarian interpretations of scripture must state afresh the immutability, eternal goodness, and absolute sovereignty of God the father, maker of heaven and earth. We must likewise stress the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the eternal *logos*, the son of God, in whose name alone salvation may be gained. We must also celebrate anew the Holy Spirit, who is the inspirer of scripture, convictor of sin, teacher of righteousness, and giver of ministry gifts to believers. Certainly these truths must be presented in a manner suitable for convincing today's readers and hearers of their truth. Hard issues, such as the existence of evil and suffering, must be addressed. But these core objective truths must never be compromised or obscured. Upon these beliefs the church and its academicians must stand.

The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology intends to be a positive partner with all parties, Baptist or otherwise, who hold similar convictions to those just stated. This journal is published by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, but its pages will not be limited to members of our faculty. Like-minded authors from other Baptist and evangelical institutions will help us in this ministry, beginning with this inaugural issue. We need and welcome this support. It will take a united and concerted effort for the battle for the definition of God to be won and world evangelization to proceed effectively.

Recently, our family completed its move to Louisville from Indiana, where I had been teaching at Taylor University. Our seminary president, Dr. Mohler, dropped by to welcome us, and stayed to chat with my father and me. At the close

of a pleasant conversation, my father said to us younger men,

The job of every generation is to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation *as pure as it was received*.

My prayer is that this journal will help this generation achieve that goal. If it succeeds in doing so, then our generation will have identified appropriately with those past believers who did not welcome controversy, but who nonetheless engaged in constructive debate when the definition of God was at stake.