

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.