
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

September 27, 2015

Is Belief In A Personal God Possible?

“Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven.”
Matthew 6:9 (Common English Bible)

For many, the most challenging part of faith is belief in a personal God. Membership in a local church usually requires “a profession of faith.” Often, this is little more than mental consent that there is a God. That same consent to God’s existence usually assumes that the individual intends to place themselves under God’s authority. Yet, what is often present in that “profession” is a sincere desire to know God personally, to experience a relationship with God in such a manner that in those hours of deepest need, we may personally address God and feel that we are heard and cared for. Harry Emerson Fosdick is helpful here, “No one achieves a vital, personal, Christian experience without a profound sense of need.”ⁱ But the question presses, is belief in a personal God possible?

One difficulty for experiencing a personal God today is the tendency of impersonal thinking and living. Anything sensory is found to be inferior to reason and intelligence. During my ministry in Texas a number of years ago, one individual criticized my preaching as too personal, too emotional. He was a medical doctor and sought sermons that would stretch his thinking, not move his heart. He was suspicious of preaching that stirred the emotions. To think of God in personal terms, he argued, was unsophisticated. I suspect that the Sunday morning pews are filled with people who are in agreement.

But look at what Jesus does here for his disciples: Jesus takes the qualities of human parenting as a clue to understanding God; asks that we address God as father. God is not an impersonal force that moves through the universe. God is a living being that knows us, loves us and has a divine desire for our lives. Jesus draws from what is the best in our hearts to show us its higher ideal in God. Certainly, it is true that God has given us minds and expects that we should be growing in knowledge. But we cannot pursue God and fully know God without the heart. One of the basic convictions of our Christian faith is that the universe is directed by a *loving* purpose.

Moments confront each of us that demand more than a mere belief in the existence of God. They are moments of such great personal need that more study - more knowledge about God - fails to satisfy. A calm strength in the midst of life’s storms is possible only as God is known personally. The Christian lives not by a higher knowledge of God. The Christian lives by faith, by prayer, by love and communion with God. When the soul cries out for a personal God, Jesus shows us the way. It is so simple we doubt its power. Get down on your knees, patiently silence all the voices in your mind, and then say, “Our Father, who is in Heaven.”

Doug Hood

ⁱ Harry Emerson Fosdick, **Riverside Sermons** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 168.