

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 01, 2006

Can we really say "God is Good"?

Christians dare to talk about God. We say things about God. We make affirmations about God's character. The problem is that God is obviously so much greater than our language for him. In light of the inadequacy of all human language for God, we might be tempted to give up on making bolds affirmations about God. We might go on saying, "God is good," but we don't really mean it in any trustworthy sense. But when we give in to this temptation, we will find ourselves praising God with our fingers crossed behind our backs. How can we affirm the transcendence of God beyond human language without giving up on language altogether?

To find a solution to this conundrum, let's take a look at a well worn but worthwhile phrase: "**God is good.**"

God certainly is good. If God were evil, bad, or less-than-good, we'd all be up a creek. So affirming the goodness of God is probably a good idea. But we immediately stumble onto a problem: what does it mean to be good? Is goodness something we all just know about and merely attribute to God? Do we see glimpses of goodness in our world, then project a God in heaven who is really, really good? We could simply admit that this is what we are doing as we continue to metaphorically attribute goodness to God. Yet such an admission leaves one vulnerable to the accusation that we are just projecting our own fantasies and desires onto God. So we are stuck with a God who is really just a great, big human being. Such a God might be great, but he is would not be God. God must be more than just the best in a group of good things. God is not a member of a class.

How can we bring out the true meaning of the statement "God is good" without falling into mere projection and wish-fulfillment? One way is to modify the statement to "**God is goodness.**" By saying that God is goodness, we are not simply projecting the goodness we see in creation onto an imaginary God. Rather, we are positing that there is an objective reality called "goodness" that God is. God is not one good thing alongside other good things. God is the very goodness

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from which every other good thing is derived. If there is good in the world, it is because there is a good God. This modification of the statement is on the right track. Unfortunately, it does not go far enough. Why? Because it leaves the impression that "goodness" is a thing beyond God. "Goodness" is some transcendental category that originates with God and then spills out into God's good creation. Thus "Goodness" or "The Good" contains within it both God and creation, and thus becomes bigger than God himself. So this modification escapes the error of projection without solving the underlying problem of projection: that God becomes a member of a class.

A further modification of the phrase brings out the truth of the matter: that **God is his own goodness**. Goodness is not some attribute that we apply to God in the way we apply it to ladders and apples and people. Goodness is also not some category that contains within it God, ladders, apples, and people. First and foremost, only God is good. Goodness is defined wholly and utterly by God himself. Whatever God is, that is good. If we want to know what good is, we'll need to pay attention to what God shows himself to be. Can ladders and apples and people be good too? Yes, but only in a secondary and derivative sense. We can only be good by participating in God's goodness. It is that God and I are contained in the larger category of goodness. It is that God is his own goodness, and I am only good in God.

So the problem with our human language is not that "good" (or any other proper attribute of God) is inadequate to describe God. Rather, the problem is that "good" is only properly attributed to God, and inappropriately used to describe ladder and apples and people. Anything that is good comes from God, and so we can call it good, but only in a derivatively.

If we keep in mind that God is his own goodness, then we can boldly affirm with the saints of all ages that "God is good!"

Any thoughts?

Does this way of putting things clarify how we can make affirmations about God?

Does the final formula really evade the criticism that all language is mere projection?

Can this formula be applied to any and all divine attributes? Are there any examples for or against?

Labels: [God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:02 PM

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At [4:38 PM, March 01, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

You'll remember that in my quasi-nominalist paradigm "God defines good for this universe" and then abides by His own rules (most of the time?) but to say that God is good in nature or essence is to speak of that "whereof one cannot speak." Bounds informs me that I am mildly unorthodox on this point :)

At [8:37 AM, March 02, 2006](#), [Aaron](#) said...

Watch out, once Bounds puts a big red H on your chest there is nothing you can do.

Prof. Horst was always fond of pointing out that we can only describe God in the negative. He isn't evil. He isn't finite. He isn't _____ insert favorite non-attribute.

Perhaps "God is his own Goodness" solves this a bit?

At [1:51 PM, March 02, 2006](#), Chuck Norris said...

Your brain is HUGE, but can you run down bandits wearing cowboy boots and tight jeans? Let's not pretend we're on the same level here.

--Chuck Norris, published author

At [5:46 PM, March 02, 2006](#), Josh said...

Pastor: "God is his own Goodness"

Congregation: "All the time"

Pastor" "All the time"

Congregation:"God is.... Hey wait a minute!!"

At [11:46 PM, March 03, 2006](#), Dan said...

On the question of God's attributes/nature, I would recommend A.W. Tozer's "Knowledge of the Holy." Very helpful for any person who is seeking to better understand a holy, transcendent, inexhaustible infinite God. More than that, this Knowledge is one you truly cannot live without. Though any thoughts of God by man are limited in some sense, this book certainly cast my understanding hopefully somewhere closer to the God who is really there (to borrow a line from Schaeffer) rather than some figment of my imagination that I call 'God.' Thank you for your insights.

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At [7:47 AM, March 09, 2006](#), [jul](#) said...

I think the meaning of 'good' should be evolving. All your life here and in eternity our idea of 'good' will be expanding and growing as we experience more and more of God, the essence of goodness. In effect, every day I will be saying "I knew he was good, but I didn't know he was that good!"

At [1:25 AM, March 30, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Is knowledge of God's goodness a prerequisite for salvation?

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