

#783 Reexamining the “face of God” metaphor

After we posted Steve Albertin’s sermon, “Seeing the Face of God,” in [last week’s Thursday Theology](#), we were very happy to receive the following thoughtful response from Bruce T. Martin, who is a frequent Crossings writer. We are grateful for the light he casts on the “face of God” metaphor on which that sermon hinged, and we expect you will be similarly grateful.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Dear Editorial Team,

I am writing in response to the recent sermon “Seeing the Face of God” (TT #782). As one who has been a self-aware Christian for at least fifty years, I do not think that I am alone in admitting that I have never, in those fifty years, seen “the face of God.” Nor have I ever met one who did, or even claimed to.

Along with another Crossings writer, I agree that there is a substantial difference between dogma and kerygma, between what the Church teaches (to explain faith) and what the Church proclaims (to engender or strengthen faith); and that the Church’s dogma only exists for faithful proclamation. I fear that our preacher has exaggerated the kerygma to such an extent that the Church’s dogma on the limit of faith has been obscured.

I have also had experiences not unlike the one that our preacher attests. But I do not explain them as “seeing the face of God.” These experiences of faith and love are very intense and

personal. They cry out to God in faith, and feel in the flesh God's reflective love in and among our fellow Christ-trusters. Such experiences are what Luther called the "conversation and consolation" of the faithful. Even here the Word of God is central, being grasped by faith alone. Luther called God's works in creation (the old creation, that is) "masks" in order to prevent any form of self-righteous works or idolatry. Faith sees through the masks, not to see God himself, but to see his works and to experience their impact as from God. Faith and love are for the "night," not for the "day." To use an analogy: stargazing is a wonderful experience, but one should never stargaze during the day.

In the Book of Revelation, "seeing the face of God" is of course an anthropomorphic metaphor, but one that sets forth the proper distinction between "faith" and "sight." In the New Heaven and New Earth, yet to come, where God himself is the only light available, faith gives way to sight, and sin and death are no more. Such "sight" is unavailable to anticipatory faith in the here and now. For us, living in the unmasked light of God remains always a promise, the trusting of which we call faith but not sight. "Sight" is a metaphor we reserve for a sinless existence yet to come. Which makes me wonder why our preacher has made sight into a present possibility. The only explanation I can think of is that the experience of faith and love he eloquently described was somehow worthy of this high-value expression. But is it? Is any possible experience really something more than faith and love? It seems to me that the apocalyptic "sight" metaphor is far too weighty for any earthly experience to bear, and that using it so mundanely not only devalues faith but effectively removes the great promise yet to come.

Though he wasn't present to witness the powerful experience he tells, the preacher claimed that he himself "saw the face of

God". Does a second-hand retelling of an experience count as an actual experience? (But I won't quibble with that.) With this metaphor, he no doubt wished to convey that in the here and now (in the loving act he described) Christ himself was present, faith was at work, and that God himself was among the suffering providing comfort in gospel-words and in the flesh. The question is, Does using the expression "seeing the face of God" adequately or even accurately summarize these kerygmatic ideas? Isn't faith-in-Christ (and the love-of-Christ as faith's real-life consequence) the adequate and accurate description of what is going on here? Going beyond Christ (who for us is always the Crucified One) to the unmasked God is, I submit, going too far in our preaching (because we wouldn't like Who we "saw"). And, if I may say so, it not only makes Christians like me wonder about the adequacy of our experiences but causes non-Christians to shake their heads in impossible wonderment. I'd like to prevent that. [I am well aware of the several distinctions made between the Hidden and Revealed God, but here I am simply working with the notion of the masks of creation and would not like to unmask God at all.]

Now, one might be inclined to accept the "face of God" metaphor if it were not for the Book of Revelation upon which it is ostensibly based. After all, if God himself is present in his Word, then the whole God is present (even if hiddenly), and the "face of God" could be an adequate metaphor. But this will always be in the context of God's suffering presence among us, and nothing to "glory" in (except of course by faith in the Crucified). But in the Book of Revelation, faith gives way to sight and suffering and death is no more. This is the promise that faith conveys. In the New Heaven and New Earth, we will see the glory of God and not die, forevermore.

My appeal, based on the application of the Church's dogma (the limit to faith) to the Church's kerygma, is to reserve "faith-

in-Christ” and the “love-of-Christ” for the cruciformed here and now, and to reserve “seeing the face of God” for the promised tomorrows yet to come.

Peace and Joy,
Bruce T. Martin