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Christian Agnostics

We may divide men into four classes:

The first class includes all who know nothing about God whatever. Those who confess their ignorance are termed "Agnostics" while those who call their ignorance knowledge--and because they know not God, declare that there is none--are called "Atheists." The fool has said in his heart there is no God, but he does not proclaim it. It is said that only apostates are atheists who publicly deny God.

The second class are those who have learned what can be known of God from the book of Nature only. They thus know there is a God, and that He has the power of an overruling providence. Such were the Greeks and Romans in their worship of an unknown god. This is, of course, a great advance on agnosticism.

The third class are those who are Christians, and who have not only read Nature but the Scriptures; who have received the Christ of the Bible, and who have become by faith the children of God. These are a great advance on the Greeks, and concerning God, have touched the limit of intellectual knowledge described by the word *oida* (from a word meaning to see), to know by immediate perception. Their hearts have also known the Saviour's love, they have believed in Him, and belong to God's family.

Yet, if they do not go farther, they do not really know (*ginosko*, to come to know by observation through an active relationship) what a Father they have; for we shall see there are many children in the heavenly family, as

there are in earthly families, who are strangers to their own Father.

Of the fourth class we will merely say that they have passed this stage and personally know the wondrous heavenly Father into whose family they have entered; the practical result being not increased salvation, but a whole different way of life on earth.

At first sight it seems impossible that any who are, by faith in Christ, members of the divine family, and who have the Spirit of His Son in their hearts by which they cry, "Abba! Father" (Rom. 8:15), can possibly be lacking in the personal, the heart knowledge (*ginosko*, *cognosco*, *connaitre*, *kennen*) of God.

Yet such a condition is not only possible, but--if one may judge from much of the ordinary language and ways of Christians--is quite common. Of course it would be misleading to assert that any Christians do not know God without explaining that it is this personal knowledge of which we speak here. Let us note especially that this is no question of attainment. The knowledge of those who are still not acquainted with God may be very profound and broad. A Christian may be clear and sound on the Atonement, on the Godhead, on the Trinity, on the dispensational aspect of God, on Jehovah Elohim and El Shaddai, and on the attributes of God, which he may not only know but deeply admire. All this is quite possible and quite common without the personal knowledge of God Himself. In human affairs, as I have shown, this is often seen. I may study and delight in a character; I may know all the circumstances, manners, and ways of some relative whom I do not know personally at all. There is something indescribable about

personal knowledge and contact that separates it entirely from any other sort of knowledge.

A great danger accompanies a profound intellectual knowledge coupled with an utter absence of personal acquaintance. For thus even a true Christian may build up from this information an ideal that bears little or no resemblance to God Himself.

Thus, with the best intentions, false gods are frequently unwittingly made. The very word "idol" is directly derived from this merely intellectual perception (eido and eidos) of which I speak. Eido means to see or perceive, or know, and eidos is an appearance or perception; hence, eidolon, an idol, or appearance or representation of something not personally known.

Those, therefore, whose knowledge of God is practically confined to what is expressed by oida are extremely liable, for lack of personal knowledge, to represent God by some "idol," some mental projection of their own. Sometimes Christians have in this way many gods differing strangely from one another.

This manufacture of idols is due not only to ignorance of God, but to what always go with it--conceit and presumption. These both disappear in the presence of the Eternal; but away from Him they flourish.

But all these self-made gods are lifeless idols. Idolatry is the worship of anything short of the one true God, and may include even the words and doctrines of Scripture, as well as the forces of Nature or the visions of the mind. But oh, the dullness of idolatry, the weariness of worshipping a dead god, the lifelessness of much current Christianity!

That the god we make for ourselves is really as an idol to us is clear, for we treat it as such. If it does not act as we wish or approve of, we may refuse it (temporarily) our worship; we may find fault with it, or excuse it, or apologize for it, or explain its method and acts; we are quite capable, in our own estimation, of sitting in judgment on divine wisdom!

This idol thus unconsciously set up by good Christian people and worshiped as God is often disfigured by the reflection of the passions of its worshippers. It may be vindictive, ignorant, or cruel. It is even supposed to frequently act worse than a man would. And thus is God dishonored in the house of His friends.

In Isaiah 46, we find a remarkable contrast between the living God and a dead idol. Of the idol and its worshippers it says: They fall down, yea, they worship. They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove; yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble.

Does not this describe the way we often treat our god? We set him up, worship him fitfully, we cry to him. And do we not often feel he does not answer, nor save us out of our trouble? Let our hearts reply.

Now look at the living God.

I am God, and there is none else...I am God, and there is none else. I even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will carry you; I have made and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.

Here is the difference--we carry the idol, but the living God carries us. The idol neither answers nor saves. The

true God hears us, and will deliver us. Meditate on this chapter and ask yourself which of these two Gods, the false or the true, is the one you really know and worship in your heart.

It may be that the statements

I have made seem harsh and exaggerated. I wish they were. One has but to listen to what is said, without shame, about God by earnest Christian people, and, indeed, often with the idea that they are using pious expressions. In trials, for instance, they say: "I daily pray for grace to trust Him." "We must believe that God knows best." "I am sure God means everything for the best, even when He makes me suffer."

Then as to favors: "God has been very good to us lately." Or, instead of approval, one hears open murmurs, "God's ways are hard to bear." "We must submit to Him." Or it may be doubt: "I wonder why God does not..." or, "I sometimes doubt whether God..." Or grumbling: "I think it very hard that God..."

All one can say of such expressions, many of which are current coin in Christian circles, is that they are absolutely impossible where God is personally known. They sound so horrible, so daring, so untrue to the ears in which God Himself has spoken that they show without a doubt where the speaker is in relation to Him.

"I have surnamed thee,"

says the Lord to Cyrus, "though thou hast not known Me" (Isa. 45:4), and the verse is very applicable to those who are called "sons of God," and yet do not know their Father. God is great, and we know Him not (Job 36:26) is true in the lives of many good Christians.

Of course, in one sense, there is nothing amazing in this. Ignorance of things divine is natural to man, and we are all originally "agnostics" as to God. But desiring an object of worship, we mix up bits of revelation with much of our own ideas, and unconsciously evolve a God, of whom we dare to talk or think as indicated.

The marvel is that some get beyond this; and it is possible for a man to be so convinced of his ignorance as not to dare to think a thought of his own, much less say a word, about God; to not only be content but overwhelmed with gratitude to have unfolded to him by revelation through the Spirit anything of God.

It is not the ignorance, but the personal knowledge, that is the marvel! It is to this marvel I would lead my readers. Here, and here alone, is to be found a joy, a rest, a peace, a fullness of life that is little known to Christians in general. It should be the heritage of all.

Yet we believe the Christian soul longs for the living God; and God longs to know His children and that they should know Him. For I (God) desired the knowledge of God (that we should know Him) more than burnt-offerings (Hos. 6:6). The knowledge of the Holy is understanding (Prov. 9:10).

Before asking the question that now arises, "How can we thus know God?" we would have the need more deeply felt, the want better understood, and the true value of the personal knowledge of God more fully apprehended.

Words have been used that are apparently harsh, but please understand they all apply to the writer, who has manufactured as many false gods as most; and it is because one has trodden this God-dishonoring path so

long that one knows it so well. Let me put my readers through a very short catechism.

Do we ever doubt God's love?

If truth compels us to answer "Yes," then there is a sense in which we have never known Him. Do we ever doubt His wisdom? That never can be done by the man who personally knows God as his Father, even under exceptional circumstances. Take, as illustration, a child who adores a good father. That child may get cross, or cold, or even be alienated from its father, and speak foolishly; but there are things it cannot say and thoughts it cannot even think. It never really questions its father's love and wisdom, as Christians do of God when they have no direct knowledge of Him.

With regard to spiritual communion with God--of which we hear so much--it seems to me that what is so called is often a highly artificial and unnatural condition of soul, maintained with much difficulty and effort by a vast expenditure of time and thought, and as different as possible from the natural, easy, filial confidence that exists between a child and its father. "Communion" may not be such a common term on the lips of those who know God best, but the reality is understood and enjoyed. The objection as to idols is natural, for the word is harsh; but will, I am sure, be pardoned if it leads to any heart-searchings as to who the God is who is worshiped, and yet thus spoken of; and whether He is indeed the all-loving Father of Scripture or some other God, partly of our own making.

The fact remains, in spite of all objections, that God the Father, always all love, all wise, all powerful, is a concept not generally realized among Christians. And

yet it is God's will that He should be known. "I know My sheep," says the Good Shepherd, "and am known of Mine" (Jn. 10:14).

"This is eternal life,"

says the Saviour, "that they might know (ginosko) Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (Jn. 17:3).

Those who truly know this can never question, never murmur, never doubt, never think or speak evil of, never explain or apologize for God--again. You will say for yourself how you stand in this matter.

So much, so very much, turns on it! Indeed, everything both in our own lives and in our relation to others depends on our personal knowledge of God. As Westcott so beautifully says, "Eternal life is not connected with time, but with the knowledge and existence of God (who is beyond all time). Eternal life is a unity of infinite peace (that springs from infinite justice) with the energy of infinite love."