

What Is God's Name?

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 9:1-7

God is dropping in the polls. Recent surveys done by the folks at Pew Research, Gallup and Public Religion Research Institute indicate that God is less and less believed in. Fewer Americans claim to have a faith in God. The degree to which God is dropping in the polls depends on which expert you talk to. Some research experts say that God's popularity is gradually dropping, others say the drop is rather precipitous. But everyone believes that God is taking a hit in the polls. Good thing that God is not running for office. God may not get elected.

Part of the problem might be that God has an image problem. A public relations problem. It appears we're not too sure what to think about God. A few years ago at Baylor University they performed an exhaustive study of God-believers seeking to ascertain what they believe about God. Thousands of "God believers" were surveyed and asked dozens of questions and the responses led the researchers to construct four views of God into which Americans fall by and large – four understandings about the nature of God and how God fundamentally works. The folks at Baylor divided up the believers of our country and placed them into one of these four categories.

- 31% of Americans believe in what is called the Authoritarian God – which is a God who is deeply involved in our daily lives and world events – and who is angry at our sin and is willing to punish the unfaithful.
- 23% of Americans believe in what is called a Benevolent God – which is a God who is also deeply involved in our daily lives and world events – but largely as a positive force who is not eager to punish us.
- 16% of Americans believe in what is called a Critical God who does not really interact with our

daily lives, but – at the same time – is not very happy with how things are going in the world – and will at some point exact justice upon us.

- Lastly, 24% of Americans believe in what is called a Distant God who does not really interact much at all with our daily lives or with world events. He takes no pleasure nor holds any anger over what is going on in the world – he is more of a cosmic force that got the whole thing started and now sits back and watches.

Authoritarian God
Benevolent God
Critical God
Distant God

No doubt you might come up with some other designations for God and add them to the list. And no matter how long the list might grow to be, most might say that their view of God is informed by the Bible. That when I read the Bible I come out believing that God is an Authoritarian God ... or a Benevolent God ... or a Critical God ... or a Distant God. And though we might say that, "I believe in the God of the Bible..." we might discover that each of our "Gods of the Bible" are a little different. And that may say something more about us than it does about God.

Or maybe not.

Enter one Isaiah. In one of the great prophecies of the Old Testament – the prophet Isaiah in chapter 9 says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelled in the land of deep darkness on them has light shined. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; authority rests upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Not one name, four names. And not just four names, but four descriptive names. Four names that mean four different things.

I grew up with four names. I am the youngest of four boys and I always knew I was in trouble when my parents called me four names – because they would do that classic parent thing when they were mad -- of running through in haste all the names of the boys until they got to the right one. "Trez, Cam, Jim,

Steve!" Now each of those names in my family meant something different.

His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Four names. And that is just the start of the list. The Bible is filled with all sorts of names for God. Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai, the Mighty One of Jacob, the Shield of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac. Jesus calls God his Father. Moses asks who God is ... God says, "My name is – 'Yahweh' -- 'I am who I am'."

Why so many names?

Well, maybe because of the light? The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. What color is light? Which color name would you put onto the light? Which one would you pick – red, green, yellow, blue? You couldn't pick one. You shouldn't pick one. Because light is all the colors. Light is the spectrum of all the colors.

James McBride in his great memoir of growing up in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial family remembers asking his mother what color is God? And his mother replied, "God is the color of water." I love that answer. And what happens when you put those little water droplets up in the sky and you shine the light of the sun through them? You get a rainbow. Light is not one color, light is all color.

"His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," as if to say that this God who shines his light into our darkness is a God who seeks to envelop, surround us, take us in with the entirety of who he is. C. S. Lewis said that, "the whole purpose for which we exist is to be taken into the life of God." It doesn't do God justice for us to put God into a box or a category. No one name, no one designation is going to do the trick.

St. Augustine, the great 5th century church father was puzzling once over the nature of the Trinity – and was walking along the beach pondering this great theological construct – when he observed a young girl with a bucket, running back and forth to pour water into a little hole.

"What are you doing?" Augustine asked.

"I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole," the girl replied.

And then the great scholar realized something significant – that our attempts to fully understand and characterize the nature of God are no less futile than trying to pour the ocean into a hole.

God is just too big. Too enveloping. Too surrounding. Too encompassing. Which makes me wonder if maybe one of the reasons why God is dropping in the polls is that we are trying to somehow pour God

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into some kind of hole, place God into some kind of box. Packaged up, delivered in bubble wrap, looking just like we want him to look. And my guess is that people don't want to believe in a God you can put in a box. Or a category. Or a designation. Or a hole in the beach. A God you can do that to – is a God who just can't be real. I don't know about you, but I think God is real. As real as every single person who sits in this building.

Which then makes me wonder if that was the point that Jesus was wanting to make when he talked about how he would be present in our lives. I will be with you until the end of the age! How the light would shine upon us. When will we see you? the people asked. And Jesus said, you will see me in the people. When I am hungry you will feed me. When I am lonely you will visit me. When I am naked you will clothe me. When I am sick you will take care of me. You will see the light reflected in the faces of all the people. You will find the name of God in the names of all the people. You will know me not only as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. You will know me not only as Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai. You will know me as Larry down at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, and Julie down the street, and Bob standing in the line at the food pantry. Their names are my names. And they will present themselves to you in all sorts of wonderful, beautiful, challenging, maddening ways. And they will be a joy and they will be a pain. And they will require of you every ounce of energy and strength to love them as you love me. What can be more real, more encompassing than a God who shows up in the names and faces of his people?

What can be more real than a God who shows up as a little baby ... who walks the dusty trails of Palestine and who stops at every turn before the faces and names of the little folks like you and me. And he talks with them. And he listens to them. And he prays for them. And he heals them. And he teaches them. Because it's real. It's live and in the flesh. And it has as many names as there are in all the world.

And it's messy. If God shows up in the names and faces of God's people then it's bound to get messy.

Because people are messy. And you can't quite fit them into a box either.

It makes me think of a guy who I will call Bill. Bill was in one of my earlier churches. He was a lawyer in a high power law firm in the city. I was a pretty young pastor, not long out of seminary. And I made a decision about something in the church that Bill didn't like. And Bill was not the kind of guy to hide his opinion. So he scheduled an appointment to come to my office. And then and there he let me have it. Up one side and down the other. He unleashed every high power lawyer instinct he had in him. Chewed up this wet behind the ears pastor and spit me out. And then left. Leaving me with every imaginable emotion – anger, indignation, humiliation, insecurity, why did I become a pastor?, why doesn't he take a long walk off a short pier? And that stuff just doesn't go away. And so I spend the next several months just steaming and stewing and steering clear of the guy humbly praying that God might find him another church.

Until about a year later when one night a knock came to the door of our house. It was pretty late so it seemed unusual that someone would be knocking at the door of our house. So I answered the door and it was Bill. And I thought, oh boy. What did I do now? I wonder this until I see the tears streaming down his cheeks and the quivering of his lip, until I hear his stuttered plea to come in. So I invite him in and sit him down in the kitchen and give him a cup of coffee. And he tells me that for the past couple of years his son has been in some trouble and the good thing about having a lawyer for a dad is that he can usually help you get out of trouble. But tonight they got the call that he had been arrested selling drugs. And he was in jail. And there wasn't much this high power lawyer could do about it. And that the sheriff said that he couldn't have any visitors except maybe his pastor. And so pastor, would you be willing to come with me and visit my son? And that's of course what we did.

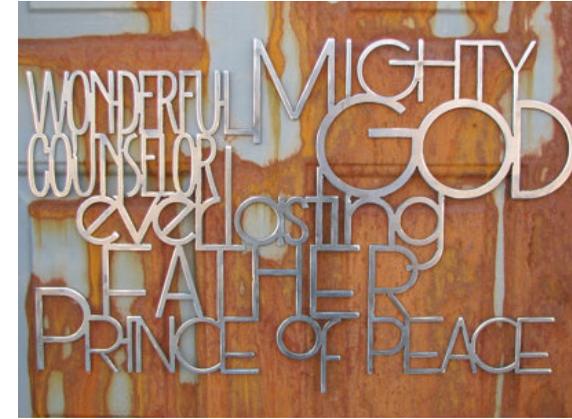
God shows up and sometimes his name is Bill. And sometimes Bill is screaming at you and sometimes Bill is balling his eyes out. But you can't put Bill in a box. You can't pour him into a hole. He's a name among many names.

Sometimes God shows up and her name is Juanita. And the knock that comes is on the door of my hotel room in Honduras. And our mission trip leaders are there to tell me that a young mother whose name I will say is Juanita is in the lobby with her two year old. And she has been beaten by her husband and not for the first time. And she has to leave town. She has to leave the country. And she has with her her cousin and the only thing she needs is a bus ticket south. She's heard there's some gringos in town and could we help. We check out her story and we put together what lempira we have and we buy their tickets and we send them into the night to God knows what the future might be. Sometimes God shows up and her name is Juanita. And you can't put Juanita in a box. You can't put her two year old in a box. You can't even put her violent husband in a box.

God shows up and his name is Bob and he is standing in line at our Food Pantry. God knows why he's standing in line at our Food Pantry. But there's this great big story behind Bob some of which maybe we will even come to know. God shows up in Theresa who lives next door to you and she lives all alone and she's not very nice and she doesn't keep up her yard. God know why she's all alone and not very nice and doesn't keep up her yard. And there's this great big story behind Theresa some of which you may someday come to know.

Because the light shines in the darkness, right? Those who dwelled in the land of deep darkness – on them has light shined. And God's name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Elohim, Adonia, El Shaddai. Bill, Juanita, Theresa and Bob.

And with every name, and with every person? Maybe, just maybe, a rise in the polls.



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Church of the Palms

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