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GOD: THE BOTTOM LINE

God Is One: Part 1

IT ALL BEGAN WITH a question: “One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’” (Mark 12:28).

We can’t be sure precisely why he asked. He seems to have been impressed with Jesus’ debating skills. Jesus has just acquitted himself well before a delegation of Sadducees, seeing them off with some deft use of Old Testament Scripture, so he clearly has some game. Let’s try him on the commandments and see how he fares.

The question may also reflect some genuine bewilderment. Jewish lawyers had enumerated 613 separate commandments within Old Testament law. Like someone overwhelmed by too much information, this man may have been looking to Jesus for some guidance, a sense of what really mattered most to God. Jesus seemed to possess some uncommon insight. “What’s the bottom line here? Which commandment is the most important?”

Whatever the motivation behind the question, Jesus leads in with a quotation from Deuteronomy. But he does something unexpected. He was asked for a commandment, but he opens with a truth about God: “‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’’” (Mark 12:29).

Doctrine comes before ethics, confession before commandment. Before assessing what you need to do for God comes an understanding of who that God is.

And that God is one. This is the bottom line, the foundation. Everything else—including how he wants us to live—will need to flow from this context. Discipleship (following God) has to follow theology (knowing God). And the particular characteristic of God that Jesus puts front and center is his oneness. This is the truth about God that precedes everything else. It may be a subtle rebuke to Jesus’ conversation partner: God’s oneness makes trying to pick one commandment over another a moot point. They’re not independent options on a menu; the same God stands behind them all.

This is where we need to start. God is one. It may be a short phrase, but it is packed with an explosive charge: God is one means that God is unique.

In the West, we’re familiar with the concept of there being one God. It is the God most people would have in their mind: a unique, one-of-a-kind God. You believe in *a* God or you don’t believe in *a* God. Whatever else people in the West might believe, if God comes into the equation, there tends to be only one of him.

Not so in the ancient world. While the norm in the West has been to believe (or not) in one God, the ancient world was proud of its polytheism. There were different gods for different things: you would have a god of travel or commerce

or sport. In fact, the more gods the better—you stood a greater chance of covering all your bases. It was the equivalent of that episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer, believing he is about to die, cries out in desperation, “Jesus! Allah! Buddha!—I love you all!” That was the kind of setup they had in the ancient world. Hedge your bets; believe in as many gods as possible. It was the fashion. To believe in one unique God, as Jews and Christians did, was dorky.

The Bible has always insisted on monotheism: there is only one God. The verse Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6 was not plucked from scriptural obscurity; it was one of the foundational verses for the people of God in the Old Testament. It was said every day, morning and evening. Nor was it a lone verse in standing for God’s uniqueness. Far from being a theological “blip” in the Bible, Deuteronomy 6 is in fact typical of many passages affirming God’s uniqueness. Consider some of the others:

*This truth was
never intended
to be just a
matter of
mathematical fact.*

I am the LORD, and there is no other;
apart from me there is no God.
I will strengthen you,
though you have not acknowledged me,
so that from the rising of the sun
to the place of its setting
men may know there is none besides me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Isa. 45:5–6)

This truth was never intended to be just a matter of mathematical fact. It’s not like being able to number how many states there are in the United States or how many players make

up a football team or how many planets there are in the solar system.¹ It is a truth that makes an enormous practical difference. It applies to us in any number of ways, but two stand out in particular: devotion and mission.

DEVOTION

God's uniqueness compels us to wholehearted devotion. If God is one, then our devotion to him must be total. Consider the logic of the verses Jesus quotes.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29–30)

The observation that God is one is not incidental to what follows. It is the grounds for it. The Lord our God is one. *Therefore* we are to love him with all that we are and all that we have. His oneness and the totality of our love for him are tightly bound together. If God were anything other than one, we would not need to love him with our “all.” Someone doing two jobs part-time could not be expected to give the entirety of their working life to one of their two bosses. But God’s oneness means he deserves our everything.

In other words, we must not compartmentalize God—give him *some* of our heart, *some* of our soul; split our mind and strength between him and four or five other claimants. Yet this is so easily done. We allow God some parts of our lives but not others. I say he can have my Sundays but not my Saturdays, my church life but not my social life, my work but not my wallet, my industry but not my fantasy. For each of us there will be particular areas of our lives that we instinctively want to rope off from God.

Out of bounds

I love having people over to my house. But the half hour before they arrive tends to involve me frantically trying to make the place approximately presentable. A principle which has helped me greatly in this is to think of tidying up not as *getting rid of* a mess, but as *putting it somewhere else*. So the spare room upstairs becomes the dumping ground. The week's accumulated debris is scooped up and banished there. Actually putting it all away would take too much time and would require a system for where everything goes. So the room upstairs takes it all. And, once the guests have left, it all gets transferred back downstairs again.

The corollary of all of this is that, while everywhere else in the house is open to guests, the spare room is not. The door to that room remains firmly closed. If I could get my hands on some, I'd cover the doorway with that yellow police tape they use to cordon off crime scenes.

It works with houseguests. And so we think it will also work with God. I'll have certain areas of my life specially tidied up for his appreciation. Others remain strictly off-limits. God is very welcome in some areas, but not in all.

But because God is one, we can't brush him off like that. It's why the quotation from Jesus begins the way it does. If you're thinking you might follow him, you need to know that it's got to be all or nothing. He deserves all of my life, all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the truth is that I need him in all of my life. There is no corner of my heart, soul, mind, or strength where his presence would not be a huge blessing.

Where the demons get it right

Failure to grasp this is very serious indeed. James wrote a letter to Christians struggling at this very point. Many of them

seemed to think they could blend following God with following the ways of this world, giving God part of themselves but not all. Spiritually they were being disingenuous. James called them “double-minded.” In today’s language we would call them “two-faced.”

James exposes their hypocrisy. They profess to follow one God, but their lifestyle demonstrates otherwise. And so James calls them on it: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!” (James 2:19). This is tragic. On this point of the creed it turns out that the demons have got more consistent theology than the Christians have. Not a great position to be in—getting theologically trumped by demons, of all things. The demons know very well that God is one. And at least in their case, you can tell because they shudder: their belief is evident. But for James’ readers it is not so. They are really leading only part-Christian lives. James has called their bluff. Their half-hearted faith shows that their God is not worthy of everything. He is not the God who is one. Their faith is dead, their response to God woeful. They are unfaithful.

A couple have got married. It has been a long, painful process getting to this point. The bride has not been, shall we say, entirely straightforward. The groom has hung in there—hung in with her tantrums, her inconsistencies, and even her infidelities. And now, at long last, they are man and wife.

It is a few weeks later. The boxes are now all unpacked. The last of the thank-you notes has been sent off. It feels like home. Familiarity. Our groom has managed to leave work early and, ever the romantic, picks up some flowers on the way home. He doesn’t spot the unfamiliar car parked across the street, nor the jacket that is not his hanging in the hall. It is only when he enters the bedroom that it all becomes clear.

Adultery. It’s a horrific picture, but one sadly not unfamiliar in our world today.

And that is the picture that best captures what we're doing spiritually when we give God only a portion of our affection. James does not sugarcoat it for us: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

It is a situation we need to repent of. James calls us to come back to God. To recognize the abhorrence of what we've done when we've not given him our all. To be brokenhearted. To weep. Some sins warrant our tears. It astonishes me how quickly I will well up at a sentimental movie and yet how slowly I am moved to tears by my own sin.

We need to remember that God is one. He deserves our all. And, amazingly, when we do draw near to him again he draws near to us, washing us afresh in his grace and mercy.

MISSION

God's uniqueness also compels Christian mission. His oneness is linked directly in Scripture to the mandate to call on all peoples to come to him. It is the lens through which we need to view other belief systems.

Corinth was a place with tons of different gods. Like an enormous food court, the choice was vast and bewildering; the temptation was to pick and mix whatever took your spiritual fancy. A little Kung Pow chicken here, a little lamb tagine there.

In this context the early Christians were understandably cautious. A particular concern was that they might get spiritually contaminated through accidental contact with stuff associated with some of these other gods. Tim Chester encourages us to put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine you are having supper in Corinth with your pagan friends from across the street. You're enjoying a lovely meal, only to discover that the

meat you've been eating had earlier been pledged to a pagan god.² What would you do? Carry on eating with your fingers crossed? Immediately spit the food out and do your best to retrieve the rest? Or ask for another helping without a care?

Paul had two things to say in response to their concerns.

No God but one

"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor. 8:4).

The first thing to note is that idols are nothing at all. Those other gods being worshipped by the pagan neighbours across the street aren't actually real. They don't exist except in the minds of those who worship them. There is no God but one. Paul continues: "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God" (1 Cor. 8:5–6).

If the God of the gospel is one, then all other gods are nothing in this world. They are just "so-called" gods. God's oneness excludes all other supposed contenders. Jupiter is not real. Vishnu is not real. None of them are.

This is not to say that there is nothing there at all. Paul goes on to tell us later in the letter that there are demons behind these alternate deities. But the key point here is that the gods themselves do not actually exist.

This has massive implications for how we are to understand the non-Christian beliefs of our friends and neighbors. We're not to think that Vishnu is out there somewhere, even in an inferior position to the God of the Bible. Vishnu exists objectively nowhere outside the minds of those who believe in Vishnu. Vishnu is only a "so-called" god. Demonic forces are certainly there, misleading worshippers of Vishnu; Vishnu

himself is not, and the same can be said of any other spiritual objects of worship reverenced by our friends.

This is not to say we should be flippant with our friends about this. Indeed, we need to take care how we articulate our faith. But we do need to be very clear in our own minds: there is but one God.

This has always been the testimony of Scripture. Consider the opening words of Psalm 96:

Sing to the LORD a new song;
 sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
 proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvellous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
 he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
 but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:1–5)

God's people are called to sing his praises. So far so good. But notice that they're not to do so in a holy huddle, sequestered away from the rest of society, but among the peoples. The pagans around were to hear the excellencies of God being proclaimed and sung by his people. The purpose was not to annoy them or get in their face. It was to be an invitation to those same peoples to come to know this God and praise him for themselves (as verse 7 says).

The rationale for all this has already been made clear by the psalmist:

For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
 he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols,
 but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:4–5)

There is only one God, one creator, one Lord. The psalm again reminds us that these other gods worshipped by the nations are none other than “idols”—literally, “nothings.” God’s oneness precludes the existence of any other deity. It also reminds us of the corollary, that this one God is to be commended to all.

One God for all

To see this we need to head from Corinth over to Rome.

Some of the Jewish Christians in Paul’s day were greatly concerned about some of the implications of his gospel. They had grown accustomed to people from other backgrounds becoming culturally Jewish in order to convert to faith in God. It was part of the “package” of works they presumed necessary to being made right with God. But Paul has been explaining that, through the death of Jesus, *anyone* can be justified by faith. Jewish culture has nothing to do with it. Through the cross, individuals of any cultural background can come straight to God. God’s people can now be multicultural. You don’t need to become Jewish to become Christian; no circumcision is necessary!

As Paul unpacks what it means to be justified by faith, he anticipates the objections of some of these Jewish Christians. His response is simple and very pointed: they have forgotten God’s oneness.

Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith, and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (Rom. 3:29–30)

God is the God of all people. Paul fires out a couple of rhetorical questions: You really think God is God just of the Jews? He's the God of the Gentiles too, right? And, just in case they get the second one wrong, Paul steps in and answers it himself: Yes, God of the Gentiles too; God of them all, not just the Jews, and because he is the God of all peoples and cultures, they all come to him on the exact same basis, irrespective of background or culture. We all get right with God the same way: through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is something we need to hear today. We can easily fall into the same trap as those Jewish Christians, by implying, for example, through our church practice that you have to become like "us" in order to be a Christian. We would never say that—in fact, we'd probably never even consciously think it—but it is very easy to imply.

Our way of doing things in church probably reflects the subculture from which the church has grown or to which the majority of the congregation belongs. We probably don't even notice the extent to which the life of the church reflects "our way" of doing things. But the message to everybody else can unwittingly be that they need to become like us to become Christian, that the great God of Scripture is only the God of people like us.

I suspect this is a blind spot for many of us. It is all too easy for our cultural practice to feel like the norm, to assume it's just the obvious and right way of doing things. I come from a white, English, middle-class background, as do the majority of people at my church. Now there's nothing wrong with that. But our locality is becoming increasingly diverse. There are growing communities of people from south Asia and Eastern Europe. We therefore need to be careful not to imply that our way is *the* way to be if you want to be a Christian around here.

It might be the style of music, or the amount of emotional openness we consider to be normal, or the extent to which we build deep relationships with one another that conveys this. It might even be the level of literacy our congregational life assumes of those participating. Are we willing to hold loosely to these things for the sake of reaching and involving those from other cultural backgrounds? Do we resist the change in “feel” that would result from having a culturally broader church family? Will we try to accommodate them or just assimilate them?

Or we could put it Paul’s way: is God just the God of people like us? Or of others too? There is only one God. And his one gospel is for all peoples.

We can begin to see why, when asked which was the most important commandment, Jesus answered in the way he did. Foundational to everything involved in following him is the understanding that he is one. As we double-click on that concept, we begin to see how much flows from it. “God is One” means that God deserves our all. Wholehearted Christian devotion stems from this. And “God is one” also means that God is unique. The heartbeat of Christian mission is the conviction that there is no God but one, and the gospel of this one God is for all.