

How Do We Introduce God?  
Isaiah 29:13-16; Mark 7:1-23  
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When a friend from my days at seminary heard what I was preaching on this week, he dimly replied, *good luck keeping your congregants awake.*

Now granted, when considering this big question with such a broad and blunted affect as was his (“*How do we introduce God?*”), it would appear that it could indeed yield a rather bland Sunday. For one can imagine the type of pat and empty answer that could be offered to meet that sort of affect in kind, namely: well, first you must get a Gideon Bible into every room that somebody may or may not one day frequent. Second, you take them to church. Third, you teach them about the commandments, creeds and the incarnation of Christ; and if all that fails, well, then you persuade them towards baptism so to at least mark them as God’s own thereby protecting them from Hell and their own eternal damnation.

For our mutual benefit however, I won’t submit to you such a deflating answer, though, I suppose, you could argue that I just did. Rather, one of my goals today will be to discover if the question itself can change depending upon which word carries the emphasis. For instance, “**H**ow do we introduce God?” is quite different from “How do **w**e introduce God?” which is quite different from “How do we introduce **G**od?” which in totality is different than “How do we introduce God?” See kids, being married has additional benefits; it teaches one to scrutinize the precise tone of another’s question to such an extreme that something which once was rather straight forward has suddenly been overrun with endless possibilities and utter confusion.

So how then can we be sure upon which word our author intended his or her emphasis? But, if it was the latter, which is to say, “How do we introduce **G**od?” then boy have we been taken to the task.

For if that is indeed the intention of this question then our first and principal task would be to explain just who this entity is and who it has always been. And how do you really expect me to do that, especially within my type-casted ten to twelve minutes? I mean do you really want me to go all the way back to the beginning, explaining the essences of God within and prior and shortly afterward the Big Bang? No, I’m afraid a lesson on the elemental and historical attributes of the divine this morning wouldn’t necessarily be beneficial to our whole, particularly our children, who at this point are about to ask their parents for a crayon and some paper. So instead, why don’t we begin our inquiry today by looking at the emphasis, probably intended, on the first word rather than the last, that is: “**H**ow do we introduce God?”

Now, in my mind there are two ways which we can approach this particular version of the question, and we’ll have to examine both since we’re still not quite sure just how our author employed his or her accentuation. [Now, wouldn’t it be easier you’re thinking, if I simply asked this author to rise and reveal his or her intention so to get on with it? But lest we forget, we are Presbyterians, and outside of our hymns, call and response sections, and occasional coughing fit, we shall not permit those in our pews to offer any such vocal additions.]

For instance, “**How** do we introduce God?” can be thought of as evoking either the indicative or the imperative mood. And if taken in the imperative, then this question is only interested in requesting an answer to satisfy a sociological curiosity. That is, tell me how people introduce God already. At what age do they start introducing God and consequently at what age do they start being introduced? Is there a cross-generational standard and is it replicated throughout each congregation? Moreover, what are the particular methods out there and which have been the most and least successful? “**How** do we introduce God, pastor Brian”; I need to know for my power-point presentation. Or something like that.

Now I think we can all admit that this would seem like a rather dry procedure as I doubt many of you out there would be terribly interested in hearing monotone reports about certain religious studies and their subsequent discoveries as told through the medium of black and white statistics. For that sentence alone was enough to drown your interest. And honestly, I just can’t imagine that that was our author’s intent when submitting this big question. After all, this is PCCH, not the Statistical Institute of Leiden. Moreover it be rather redundant to give the imperative approach any more time as we already touched on it briefly when we first began: remember, *first you must get a Gideon Bible into every room*, etc.

So let us instead investigate the indicative mood of this question, which consequently is the true destination of this sermon. “**How** do we introduce God?” or perhaps more revelatory, how ought we introduce God to others? But rather than listen to me bandy about some self-evident answer, why don’t we finally turn to our texts this morning.

In both our Old Testament text from Isaiah and our New Testament passage from Mark, the answer is made clear in that what we do as opposed to what we say is what truly matters in how we are to introduce God. In Isaiah, God is said to be on the verge on hiding the gift of discernment from the people and burying the wisdom of their wise, principally because they chose to honor God with their lips rather than their hearts. More specifically, God has turned on these people because what they are supposedly glorifying in their oral worship is inconsistent with how they plan and act in their daily worship (vs. 15). You see, what’s coming out of their mouths ain’t really mirroring who they are.

It’s kind of like these modern day Christians who say the most “amen’s” and the loudest “praise Jesus’s!” and yet are the first to harden their hearts against those who live different yet altruistic lifestyles. All of those *do not judge nor condemn* lessons that Christ himself taught, or that one about casting the first stone, are forgotten at the stake for the sake of propagandizing their own human doctrines. And of course, it’s not just the modern Christian who is guilty of this, for throughout centuries our spoken faith as dictated in the imperative has been the catalyst for great evil. Just think of the Inquisition or the Crusades and all of the lives that were poisoned by the imperatives of fear and hate guised as the Word of God and good news.

My friends, **how** then we are to introduce God in our streets, schools, workplaces and churches is not through imperatives, or worse, words of hypocrisy. For it is precisely through such imperatives and hypocrisy that many are turned off from religion and God in the first place. Rather, how we are to introduce God to the world is through what we do.

And our passage from Mark crystallizes this point. For you see, the traditionalists and pious elders of Christ's time (and for many years before) frequently got all hot and bothered about such things like dietary laws and the particular ways certain foods were washed and cleaned before being eaten (that is, if they could even be eaten at all). Emanating from self-serving motives of control or out of blind deference to old traditions, they then made it a point to conflate God's purpose with their own human precepts.

And boy, did Christ call them out on it. Does God really care about the food that you eat? Does God really care if you could recite all of the old traditions verbatim? Is that really how we are to honor and glorify God, he demands, through rote memorization of old laws and creeds? No, God cares not about the words, food or drink that comes from or to your lips. That is not what defiles. Rather, God cares about what's going on in your heart for that is what either defiles or enriches your behavior toward yourself and your other.

Too often though we as Christ's own disciples forget this teaching and instead employ the imperative mood when introducing God, preaching a doctrine of laws and commandments that can't lift up our neighbor more than they can lift up a feather. Too often we pollute novice minds with our words of judgment and contempt rather than persuade their actions through manifestations of peace and acceptance. And in the same manner that the elders in Christ's day were so misguided in their concern over how food was traditionally eaten, so too have we become the elders of our own day erroneously holding onto such obsolete things like the traditional, and disenfranchising, definition of marriage. My friends, it's as if we have attempted to cryogenically freeze God; the very same God, mind you, who, apparently, willfully evolved from a blood-thirsty warrior deity to a compassionate redemptive sacrificial lamb. God changes! We really need then to stop holding onto the notion that God and God's Word is incapable of such.

Oh, but I remember some years ago in seminary when a couple of soon-to-be-pastors got together for a discussion on the future of Christianity in post-modern America. They were sore afraid and so very worried that in their infinite wisdom they unanimously decided that what the church had to do was reverse the recent course of corrosive liberalism, as they named it, and revert back to an age where what was instructed was accepted without an allowance for doubt and/or questioning. Creeds were going to be creeds again, rules were going to be rules again, and God, by God, was going to be God again. ...Are you kidding me? I remember thinking, wasn't it was their very own Christ who said "No one pours new wine into old wineskins"?

The time when we could dictate to kids or any novice of faith, that they must fully understand such concepts as the Trinity in order to be considered a believer has come to pass. And quite thankfully too, may I add. Our youth, indeed like many of us, want to make sense of these things instead of merely parroting them for their parent's satisfaction. They want to work in the indicative by asking the question rather than being force fed peculiar doctrine that seems strangely out-of-touch with their everyday realities. And they certainly don't want to listen to a laundry list of do's and don'ts poorly misconstrued as God's inherit substance. And on that accord, neither did Jesus, who lest we forget synthesized all of the imperatives, all of the commandments, all of those dopey Levitical laws down to the only two that mattered and compelled one to do more than say: Love your neighbor and love your God.

So, “How then can **we** introduce God?” you finally ask, especially to this new and rather skeptical generation? Well, without entirely simplifying it (though I shall) if we but simply abide by our scripture lessons today, seeking to show them first instead of dictating to them first, then we just might be able to set up a meet and greet. That is, if **we** continue to be good stewards to our seniors down at the Center on the Hill and out at their homes. That is, if **we** continue to support outfits like Our Brother’s Place, NPIHN, OHAAT and the food cupboard and crisis center. That is, if **we** continue to fund our missions and our mission trip. That is, if **we** continue to support Heeding God’s Call, working together for a greater cause erecting 331 memorials to the dead.

Do you know by the way, just how many random people, from the Hill at Whitemarsh, Dunkin Donuts, or wherever I’ve gone these past two weeks, have asked about that memorial? I seriously lost track. And after I would tell them, they all collectively said, see that’s what church’s should be doing.

Exactly. What we do matters more today than what we say. But, it’s got to be real. The people of today, our youth and adults, have acutely refined BS meters. For the veil has fallen: Sports heroes lie; ministers lie; politicians lie and the media spins them as they like. Twenty years ago you had to go into a library and rifle through the Dewey Decimal system just to find a resource to verify or deny claims wildly made. Today, you have the internet and immediate reconnaissance.

So just like the God of Isaiah saw through the hypocrisy of the people, so too can the kids and adults of 2013 see through those who talk right but who don’t exactly walk right.

Amen.