

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

***Why Christianity Seems Silly to Intelligent People #2 of 5:***

## **Come On Out, God, and Fight Like a Man!**

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Let me tell you what I've gathered about Linda from the time I've spent with her, talking with her and just observing her....

Lovely home, lived in their home three years.

They drive a Lexus, I think it's the biggest Lexus they make.

They have three daughters — no, two daughters and a son.

Linda was born in 1958

in Lincoln, Nebraska.

She was an only child.

She went to college on an athletic scholarship.

She majored in home economics.

She met her husband at a square dance.

At home she has a long wooden spoon that she's always used to spank her kids.

Her favorite color is pink.

Her hairdresser's name is Anne Marie.

Sometimes, she just gets sick of the government invading her privacy, and she just goes ahead and cheats on her taxes.

One time her husband was giving her a hard time and she hit him with her shoe.

Well, Linda, how did I do on the facts of your life?

What? All that information is bogus?

Hm, I guess I misunderstood a few things about Linda.

But did that change who Linda really is?

No.

What I believe or say about Linda doesn't change the truth about who Linda is *at all*.

And this is an important principle to keep in mind as we look today at why Christianity seems silly to perfectly intelligent people.

In particular today, we're looking at our doubts about God, which may actually be very reasonable doubts.

But as we consider who God really is, we need to keep this concept in mind:

**1. Even when someone misunderstands me, it still doesn't change who I am.  
Even when someone misunderstands God, it still doesn't change who he is.**

We can debate about God, about what he thinks, about what he's doing —

"Well, I don't believe God operates like that!"

"I don't believe *that* about God!"

— and we get this idea in our heads that God operates however we think he operates.

Every few years, it seems there's a candidate for national office here in the U.S. who is outspoken about their religious orientation, and as a result, for a while, God seems to come back into fashion.

In 1976 it was Jimmy Carter.

Ronald Reagan talked about God a lot.

A few years ago it was Senator Joe Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, running for vice-president.

It was when Lieberman was running that Gary Trudeau, the cartoonist, ran an episode of his *Doonesbury* comic strip that said, "Good news, neighbors! He's back!... God!"

Had God changed just because Sen. Lieberman — a pleasant, smiley, articulate, energetic Orthodox Jew — was running for national office?

Probably not.

The truth about God was still probably just what it was back when Bill Clinton was president.

And let's face it, the truth about Linda is true whether I believe it, or understand it, or like it.

*Truth is truth.*

There is no new math, only a new way of teaching and learning the *old* math!

**Romans 3:3,4** in the Bible says even if we don't have faith that God is who he says he is, that doesn't change God.

**2 Timothy 2:13** says even if we don't have any faith at all, God is still faithful — still the same — because he can't "**disown himself.**"

This attitude-shifting phenomenon, which we all experience from time to time, is insidious; it creeps into our thinking without our even realizing it.

You know, the Bible tells us in **Genesis 1:26,27** that God created us in his image — but what we often actually do is make him in *our* image.

We imagine how God thinks, what he wants, how he works — and we operate on the basis of those beliefs.

So in effect, *we're* creating *him*.

Or we let a church or a religious organization tell us what God is like.

*They* decide how God thinks, and what he wants, and how he works.

So *they're* creating *him*.

Or we let our parents, or teachers, or someone else tell us.

So *they're* creating *him*.

And the truth is, most of us want God to operate on our own terms.

We want him to "come out and fight like a man."

We expect him to function more or less like us human beings.

But he won't.

He keeps being God.

How can we get a handle on who God really is? What he's really like? How he really operates?

Is our own imagination really the best source of information about God?

Is a church or religious institution really a reliable source of information about God?

If we really, genuinely want to know what God is actually like, how he thinks, how he works, how can we find out? Where should we turn?

Well, where should I have gone for the truth about Linda?

## **2. The best source of information about me is me.**

### **The best source of information about God is God.**

That's why God has given us this book, the Bible.

Last week we looked hard at the Bible and found that we could actually trust it.

If you weren't with us last time, I'd encourage you to check out that message, Part 1 of this series.

That's where we found that the Bible is actually quite believable, quite trustworthy, and actually consistent in its teachings.

So let's see what God says about himself — and I believe we're going to find that he doesn't fit the picture that our imagination has painted of him, or the picture our culture has painted of him, or the picture our religious institutions have painted of him.

For example...

Some people say God controls every little detail of the universe.

Every moment of every day, every breath you take, God stage manages everything.

He decides the score of the Super Bowl.

But other people say God gives us complete freedom.

He's not involved at all.

He created the universe, set it in motion, and then sat back to see what would happen.

Which view is true?

How involved is God?

I know what people say, I know what some churches have said, but what does God say?

Here's what God says:

### **3. God is in control, but he doesn't railroad me.**

In **Isaiah 46:10**, God says, "**My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.**"

**Proverbs 19:21** says people can make their plans all they want, "**but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.**"

We learn from reading through the Scriptures start-to-finish that God is omnipotent — that's the fancy word for all-powerful.

He has the power to do anything and everything he wants.

And we see from these passages of Scripture that he does anything and everything he wants.

Are you familiar with the term “sovereignty”?  
 That’s what this refers to.  
 God is sovereign.  
 Nothing happens that God doesn’t allow.

But are we robots?  
 No.

Because — again — if we read through the Scriptures start-to-finish, we find that we are completely free to choose or reject God’s laws.  
 It’s just that God designed the world to function in a certain way, and the more we choose God’s principles, the better we function.

**Matthew 19:17** puts it very succinctly: **“If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”**

**Hosea 14:9** says, **“The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.”**

The word “righteous” is just the old-fashioned term for living by God’s design.  
 So God is saying, Live by the design I designed you by; life’s better this way.

Now maybe you’re wondering:  
 How can God be completely in control, and still give me complete freedom?  
 It seems impossible for both to be true, doesn’t it?  
 But it really isn’t impossible at all.  
 In fact, this kind of situation happens all the time in real life.

My wife and I came from the theatre community;  
 in fact we first met in a community theatre production.  
 Once we were in a production — Kristina was directing, I was acting — and it was a production with various cubicles scattered across the stage.  
 During one rehearsal, I happened to be in my place onstage,  
 and Kristina was up onstage with us actors, trying to be a big-shot, I guess — pointing and talking and showing us where to go and what to do and so forth.  
 And at one point she was walking toward me, but she was looking over her shoulder at one of the other actors.  
 She was breaking one of the fundamental rules of life, which is “Keep your face on the front of your head.”  
 And I could see that she was about to trip on one of those cubicles on the stage.

Now at that moment, I was God.  
 I was sovereign.  
 Kristina was completely free to do as she chose:  
 She could continue foolishly looking in one direction while she was walking another direction.  
 She could stop and come to her senses and look where she was going.  
 But I could see the big picture.  
 And I had unlimited options:  
 I could let her go ahead and fall flat on her face and let learn her lesson the hard way.

I could cry out and stop her in the nick of time.  
I could reach down and magically move that cubicle out of her path at just the right moment — you know, touched by an angel!

What do you think I did?

I stepped up to the other side of that cubicle and let her trip right into my arms.

(Seize every opportunity to be Cary Grant, that's what I say.)

But even in this silly scenario, we can see how one party can be totally free to choose, while another party can be totally in control.

And that's how God is sovereign, without having to make our choices for us.

He sees the big picture; we don't.

He holds all the cards.

What else does God say about himself that many of us misunderstand?

I was at a party.

I was talking with a woman at this party — not a churchgoer — and the subject of worship came up: how people tell God they love him.

And she kind of arched her eyebrows and said, "I thought *God* was supposed to love *us*."

But she didn't have it exactly right.

God wasn't *supposed* to love us.

He doesn't owe us anything.

It's the other way around.

He created us.

If anything, we owe him.

I see quite a number of people these days trying to sell us a theology that says "God loves you and because of that you can have anything you want."

Money in the bank, Rolls-Royce, perfect health, whatever.

But that kind of thinking ignores what God actually says about himself.

#### **4. God loves me, but that doesn't mean he gives me everything I want.**

**James 1:17** tells us that "**Every good and perfect gift**" comes from God.

If something good is happening to me, that *is* because God set it in motion for me.

But I don't get everything I ask for, because God's goals aren't necessarily the same as my goals.

God's goal is to make me more and more like the ideal by which he designed me.

That ideal looks and acts like God himself.

When God created the human race in **Genesis 1:26,27**, he said,

"I'm going to make people in my own image."

And in **Malachi 3:6** God tells us he never changes.

So his goal of making you more and more like him has never changed — and it never will.

That's why he says in **Romans 8:28**,

**"In all things God works for the good of those who love him, and he gives them**

whatever they want — ”

Well, no, actually, that's *not* what he says.

He says in all things he works for the good of those who love him and **“who have been called according to his purpose.”**

*His purpose!*

Not my grocery list of desires and dreams.

*His purpose* — to make me more like him. Not necessarily richer. Not necessarily living in a fancier house, driving a hotter car.

But more productive, more fulfilled.

Fulfilling more of the potential that God dreamed for me, back when he first dreamed of creating me.

But maybe this is a problem for you — because you realize that God is perfect, and you know in your heart, you're not perfect, and you're not gonna be perfect.

Well, here's another common misconception about God.

### **5. God is perfect, but that doesn't mean he expects the same from me.**

Let's face it, the Bible is kind of scary in places.

Sure enough, it says God's perfect.

In **Isaiah 46:9** God says, **“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.”**

**2 Samuel 22:31** says, **“As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless.”**

And if it's not scary enough that God is perfect, it says we're a mess by comparison.

**Isaiah 64:6** says, **“All of us [are] unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”**

But obviously, we're still here — God doesn't just blow us away!

Don't you wonder why not?

It's because he loves us.

**Psalms 145:17** says, **“The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.”**

Sure, **2 Samuel 22:31** says, **“As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless.”** — *But read the rest of the passage:* It goes on to say, **“He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.”**

And it's because he understands we're not perfect.

**Hebrews 4:15** tells us in God we have a father, not some kind of far-away religious authority who can't sympathize with our weaknesses.

In fact, when God came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ, the Bible says he was **“tempted in every way, just as we are”** — even though he was without sin.

See, God doesn't expect us to be perfect. He knows we can't be.

But he still requires perfection. So — he designed the perfect solution for us.

**Titus 3:4-7** says, **“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done [not by doing good or being good, not by making promises about morality], but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”**

What does this mean to you and me today? **Hebrews 4:16** tells us:

**“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”**

When we say, “God, I give up. I’m defeated. I’m dirty, and as hard as I try, I’m not getting any cleaner. You will have to make me clean, because I can’t do it myself,”

that’s the moment we receive the gift of God’s grace.

Does it seem too simple? Isn’t God more complicated than that?

Well, sure, he’s complicated.

Which brings us to #6.

## **6. God is mysterious, but that doesn’t mean he’s unknowable.**

Let’s say I get a couple plastic 2-liter bottles and build me an ant farm.

Let’s pretend I created the ants themselves.

Then I put them in this ant farm.

I provide their food, their water.

I sit right here and watch them work, watch them play.

If I wanted to, I could take a can of Raid and spray it in there and wipe ’em all out.

I could squash them.

I could let them go.

I could put obstacles in their way and impede their progress, frustrate their work.

Or I can take obstacles out of their way, and help them become more productive.

But they can’t talk to me.

They can’t really see me.

They can’t hear me, can’t smell me.

So let’s say I wrote a book — I wrote it in ant language — and in this book I told the ants a bunch of things about me, and a bunch of things about themselves.

I told them how to get the most out of life.

I told them what pitfalls to avoid.

Most importantly, I told them that they matter to me.

I’m here with them, I’m involved.

So what happens?

One ant says to the other ant, "Do you believe in Doug?"  
 And the other ant says, "Nope."  
 That doesn't change the fact that I'm still here.  
 It doesn't change the fact that I created them.  
 It doesn't change the fact that I control their destiny.  
 And it doesn't change the fact that I love them.  
 I'm going to keep on caring about them.  
 Sometimes they may go ahead and do something self-destructive, and they'll suffer the consequences — but that doesn't change my heart.

Our relationship with God is like that in many, many ways.  
 We can't figure God out completely.  
 He's invisible, for one thing, which frustrates me.  
 But sure enough, the Bible confirms that nobody has ever looked God in the eye.  
 Jesus said **John 4:24**, "**God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.**"  
 Meaning, you're gonna have to fly by faith.  
 You're going to have to trust him.

God *is* mysterious, yes.  
 In **Isaiah 55:8** God says, "**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.**"  
 But God is not content to be *completely* mysterious.  
 He wants us to know him, because he loves us.  
**Acts 17:27** says, "**God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.**"

He wants interaction with us.  
 In **Colossians 2:2** the Bible says, "**My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ.**"

So God doesn't just sit up on a heavenly cloud and keep his distance.  
 He dwells among us.  
 He's close to us.  
 He's willing to live within us, in our hearts, and to make us new people.  
 To give us a second chance at life.  
**Isaiah 57:15** tells us, "**For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy:  
 I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.**"

He wants to be a Father to me.  
**2 Corinthians 6:18** says, "**I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.**"

How does it happen?  
 How can God become my Father?  
 How can God actually dwell within me, and help me achieve the full potential that he dreamed for me when he created you?  
 I just ask him.  
 He can hear my heart.  
 He can hear your heart.  
 Just ask him.

And when you do — when your life starts all over again, because you've found the relationship with God that you were designed to have all along —  
 is God going to pull your chain ... jerk you around ... confuse you and scare you and pull all kinds of tricks on you?

No.

**1 John 3:1** says, "**How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!**"

You can have absolute confidence that God will respond to you with the same consistency of character that he has demonstrated toward every other person who has turned to him down through the centuries.  
 Psychologists tell us one of the most damaging, frustrating things for a child is to have a parent who's inconsistent.  
 But in **Malachi 3:6** God says, "**I the Lord do not change.**"

This means —

**7. I can talk to God as if he were a really good dad. And if I do, he's going to respond in character.**

Not according to my idea of who he is, or what he's like.  
 He's going to respond according to his perfect love.

Are you willing to talk to God like that today?