



"Imagination is the beginning of creation."  
—George Bernard Shaw

16-Sep-16

## *God of the Pigeonhole*

A stroll through just about any cathedral in Europe, not to mention many a church just about anywhere in [the world](#), would bring to the eye the sight of perhaps a handful or even dozens of images of [God](#) and Christ, as imagined by painters, glaziers, and sculptors down through the ages. Some of them are magnificent works of art, perhaps more fit for a museum than a place of worship. These images catch the Father, or most often, the Son in one state or act intended to impress an aspect of [the gospel](#) on the viewer in one poignant scene.

As a lad of ten or so, I remember entering the home of a neighbor across the street, a retired minister whom the family had befriended. Giving me a short tour of his house, he showed me into his office, and the first image that struck me—almost literally—was the serious, compassionate, blue-eyed gaze of "[Jesus](#)" following me wherever I walked in the room. To me, it was eerie and uncomfortable and just wrong. I had been brought up on the Ten Commandments, and the second one says unambiguously that we are not to make images of worship ([Exodus 20:4-6](#); [Deuteronomy 5:8-10](#)). This "Jesus"—the well-known, long-haired, and slightly effeminate portrait that can be bought at any Christian bookseller or gift shop—made me squirm. I could not leave his office quickly enough.

Each depiction of the Father or the Son freezes Him in a moment. From the image, the viewer envisions and concludes something about Him based on the imagination of the artist, a mostly if not entirely unknown actor. Was he even a Christian? If he was, how

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well did he know his Bible? Was he devout or just nominally religious? If he was not a Christian, how can he be trusted to portray the Christian God? Was he agnostic? An atheist? A pagan? A lunatic?

Does the artist's character even matter? Probably not. In the end, if we desire to be true to God and what He has said of such matters, the only significant fact is that the artist produced an [image of God](#) that captures Him in a split-second of action. And it is wrong.

Why is it wrong? Not only does it breach the second commandment, it also presents a false idea of God. He cannot be defined, even in a small way, by art, by an image. The reality transcends the depiction by infinite orders of magnitude. Even if produced by the most talented artist, even if he or she has the most noble of intentions, an image, whatever the medium, treats God in a low, disrespectful manner. It attempts to confine the infinite to the finite, bringing God down too far to our level. It produces, not merely a diminishment, but a lie, a false witness. As God Himself says in [Isaiah 40:18](#), "To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?"

It is bad enough that so-called sacred iconography exists throughout "Christendom," despite God's injunction against it, but it is just as damaging spiritually when true Christians do the same thing in the privacy of their own minds. Creating an untrue mental image of God is not uncommon—in fact, it would not be out of bounds to say that *everyone* has done it and is probably doing it right now. Limited human minds simply cannot comprehend the infinite God and His holy, righteous character. So, when God reveals Himself to us through His Word, we do our best to define, categorize, and analyze Him in comparison to what we know—and none of us knows enough or has the capacity to grasp the awesome infinitude that is God.

We, then, pigeonhole God into a humanly knowable, explainable Person. Most people are probably familiar with the term "pigeonhole." Originally, when pigeons were used to carry messages, it referred to a literal hole or recess for a pigeon in a pigeon loft, large enough to hold only one bird. Later, desks were built with many small, open compartments for papers, and these compartments, because they were reminiscent of pigeonholes, took on the name. Over time, the word came to imply a sense of narrow categorization. Nowadays, we use "label" to mean virtually the same thing: People are pigeonholed or labeled as a liberal or a conservative, a boor or a flirt, a native or a foreigner, a thief or a coward, etc.

As hard as we may try not to, we do the same with God. We do it unconsciously, as a matter of habit. Sometimes, depending on our circumstance or mood, we take God from one pigeonhole and place Him in another, as our minds find it difficult to entertain

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multiple facets of His nature at the same time. So some days, we [see God](#) in one way, and as the situation changes, we see Him in another way. We may think of God as:

- a Benevolent Gift-Giver, providing His people with abundance;
- a Stern Judge, pounding out a harsh sentence in response to our "little" sins;
- a Compassionate Parent, gathering us up in His arms for a hug and a few soothing words when we are down or grieving;
- a Chummy Older Brother, guiding us to maturity around the stumbling-blocks He has already navigated;
- a Cosmic Force, energizing and balancing the universe and all its laws;
- a College Professor, patiently teaching and explaining the intricacies of theology;
- an Ancient Prophet, decrying the evils of the times and foretelling the doom of nations;
- an Authoritative King, sitting in majesty on His throne and ruling with a rod of iron;
- an Armed Warrior, smiting His enemies with His great sword as He rides His white horse through their ranks;
- a Gentle Shepherd, carrying a lamb over His shoulder as He leads His flock to green pastures and still waters; etc.

He is all of these and many more—and none of these. Certainly, He fills these roles as needed, but they are mere cardboard cutouts compared to the reality of His nature in these areas. Yes, He gives gifts, but as the apostle Paul writes, He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" ([Ephesians 3:20](#)). Yes, He is the Judge of mankind, upholding His law, but "the LORD is [merciful](#) and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy" ([Psalm 103:8](#)). When we try to impose boundaries on our understanding of Him in one area, we learn that He has equal qualities in another—sometimes in even an opposing trait! He cannot be pigeonholed!

To see God as accurately as possible, as difficult as it is, we must refrain from drawing a too-simple mental picture of His nature. We must be continually expanding our

conception of His nature as He reveals it to us day by day. While in this life we will never fully grasp even a scintilla of the wonderful mind and character of God, we can by His Spirit "comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" ([Ephesians 3:18-19](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## *From the Archives: Featured Sermon*

### [Words Versus Images](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, reflecting upon the technological and linguistic changes that have occurred in the short span of one century, marvels at the drastic decrease of our attention span and the corresponding degradation of language. The dramatic shift in orientation from words to pictures has weakened thought and the transmission of ideas, "dumbing down" our culture toward drabness, unaesthetic plainness, and imprecision. Because virtually everything we know about God comes through words, this denigration of language (the vehicle transmitting spiritual truths, metaphorical bread or food) could prove highly detrimental to our spiritual welfare. Spiritually, relying exclusively on images leads to shallowness of thought at best and idolatry at its worst. The Word of God, however, provides depth and nourishment leading to salvation and eternal life. Through God's Spirit, we need to learn how to process the Word of God effectively and efficiently.

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## *From the Archives: Featured Article*

### [Can Theology Define God's Nature?](#)

by Earl L. Henn (1934-1997)

Matter interacts with energy in a different way at the atomic level than it does at the macro level. Earl Henn show that in a similar way human reason and logic are practically useless as tools in determining the nature of God. Only the Bible gives a complete revelation of God.

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