

# The High Calling

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## What Is God Like?

By Stan Key

Imagine yourself a Hollywood producer looking to cast someone in the role of God for a movie you are directing. Who would you select? George Burns played the character in the movie *Oh, God!* (1977), and in the 2003 movie *Bruce Almighty*, Morgan Freeman was chosen for the role. Through the years, the character of God has been played by Groucho Marx, Whoopi Goldberg, Octavia Spencer, and others. Who would you pick?

Imagining that you would have to make such a choice may not be as ridiculous as it may first appear. Though it typically happens at an unconscious level, all of us think we know what God looks like. It is when we begin to flesh out those assumptions in words and images that we discover what theology is all about! I'm aware that the Second Commandment

prohibits any effort to make an image of God, and the danger of idolatry is always present in any attempt to portray God, whether in a movie or in a systematic theology text book.

But we must recognize that it is the Bible itself that nudges us repeatedly in the direction of imagining what God is like.



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## Jesus Reveals Who God Truly Is

By Dennis F. Kinlaw (1922–2017)



In his important book *Let's Start with Jesus: A New Way of Doing Theology* (Zondervan, 2005), Dennis F. Kinlaw asserts that the only way to know the truth about God's identity is to look closely and listen intently to the One he has sent: Jesus Christ, God's only Son. "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (John 14:7). This article is

a slightly edited abridgment of the first chapter, "A New Concept of God" (15–24).

A young chaplain at one of the colleges of Oxford University made it his practice every year to interview each new student in his college. He wanted to get to know each one and to explain something of the religious program in that college. On occasion, after the chaplain had made his case for the program, a freshman would explain a bit awkwardly that he did not believe in God and probably would not be active in the chaplain's program. The chaplain would then reply, "How interesting! And in which god do you not believe?" The student then would try to explain his atheism. The chaplain would smile and comment on the fact that he and the student had a great deal in common, for he did not believe in the existence of that god either.

Most of the gods that so-called unbelievers reject have never had any objective reality and are simply goblin constructions of their own minds. The concept in their heads and the reality behind all things may have little relation to each other. The god before whom the sincere believer bows likewise may be

a caricature that does little justice to the reality one believes oneself to be worshiping. Error for the believer, as well as for the unbeliever, always carries its unfortunate consequences.

William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, insisted that if our concept of God is wrong, the more religious we get the more dangerous we are to ourselves and others. Our concept of God must be a true representation of the One Who Is, the God with whom all of us ultimately will have to deal. In fact, nothing is more important for anyone or for any society.

But how can we know what God is really like? Christianity joins with Judaism and Islam in their affirmation of the oneness of God. Jesus firmly maintains that he and Moses stand in the same tradition and worship the same God (John 5:45–46). God is one, and he is to be loved with a single and exclusive devotion (Mark 12:29–30). For the Christian, just as for the good Jew and the devout Muslim, there is one God, and he alone is God.

But there is a difference. When Christians say that God is one, the oneness of which we speak is not the same as the oneness of which Jews and Muslims speak. It is not the unicity of a divine monad, of a single divine being who is simple in nature. Christians believe that within this oneness are personal differentiations. Note how Paul expresses this truth: "For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came

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# The People Who Know Their God

By J. I. Packer



In his classic book *Knowing God* (IVP Books, 1973), theologian and author J. I. Packer not only tells us *about* God, he encourages us to *know* him, to build a relationship with him, and to draw close to him in love and worship. In a chapter entitled “The People Who Know Their God” (24–32), Packer describes what happens in a person’s life when he or she truly knows the true God. This article is a slightly edited abridgment of that chapter.

Those who really know God never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained. Paul wrote: “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish . . . I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:7–10). When Paul says he counts the things he lost *rubbish*, or *dung* (KJV), he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure? Yet this, in effect, is what many of us do. It shows how little we have in the way of true knowledge of God.

We need frankly to face ourselves at this point. We are, perhaps, orthodox evangelicals. We can state the gospel clearly; we can smell unsound doctrine a mile away. If asked how one may know God, we can at once produce the right formula. Yet the gaiety, goodness, and unfetteredness of spirit which are the marks of those who have known God are rare among us. A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge *about* him.

So what effects does knowledge of God have on a person? Various sections of Scripture answer this question from different points of view, but perhaps the most clear and striking answer of all is provided by the book of Daniel. We may summarize its witness in four propositions.

1. *Those who know God have great energy for God.* In one of the prophetic chapters of Daniel we read, “the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits” (11:32 KJV). The RSV renders it thus: “the people who know their God shall *stand firm and take action*.” The book of Daniel tells us of the “exploits” of Daniel and his friends. While their God is being defiled and disregarded by the Babylonian culture in which they live, they cannot rest. They feel they must do something; the dishonor done to God’s name goads them into action. Whether resisting the king’s diet (1:8–16), praying three times a day (6:10),

or braving the fiery furnace and the lions’ den (chapters 3 and 6), Daniel and his friends proved their knowledge of God by the remarkable lives they lived. If there is in us little energy for action and prayer, this is a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God.

2. *Those who know God have great thoughts of God.* There is not space enough here to gather up all that the book of Daniel tells us about the wisdom, might, and truth about God. Suffice it to say that there is, perhaps, no more vivid or sustained presentation of the many-sided reality of God’s sovereignty in the whole Bible. Great thoughts of God filled Daniel’s mind, as witnessed in his prayers (always the best evidence for a man’s view of God): “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom. He knows what lies in darkness,



**A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about him.**

and light dwells with him” (2:20–22); or “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands” (9:4). Is this how we think of God? Is this the view of God which our own praying expresses? Does this tremendous sense of his holy majesty, his moral perfection and his gracious faithfulness keep us humble and dependent, awed and obedient, as it did Daniel? By this test, too, we may measure how much, or how little, we know God.

3. *Those who know God show great boldness for God.* Daniel and his friends were men who stuck their necks out. This was not foolhardiness. They knew what they were doing. They had counted the cost. They were well aware what the outcome of their actions would be unless God miraculously intervened, as in fact he did. But these things did not move them. Once they were convinced that their stand was right and that loyalty to their God required them to take it, then,

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# Describing God? Or Breaking the Second Commandment?

Excerpt from *The Shack* by William P. Young



Though the second commandment prohibits “graven images” of God, most Christians have felt that did not include systematic theology. Human attempts to define God in theological categories have for centuries helped to guide the faithful in their spiritual devotion and to protect them from heresy. But when theology morphs into fictional literature, we find ourselves bumping dangerously close to a literary “image” of what the author thinks God is like. In his influential novel *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2007), author William P. Young paints a literary portrait of God that is both shocking and theologically stimulating. The plot centers around the abduction and murder of Mackenzie Philips’ youngest daughter, Missy. Broken with grief and tormented by questions about why God would allow such a thing to happen, Mackenzie receives a mysterious note, apparently from God, suggesting they meet to talk about it in the very shack where his daughter was murdered! This article is a slightly edited abridgment of that part of the story that describes the moment when Mackenzie (Mack) arrives at the shack and meets God for the first time (82–87). While not everyone will agree with Young’s portrayal of God, we hope his effort to describe God will promote deep theological reflection.

Once on the porch Mack stopped. Voices were clearly coming from inside. What should you do when you come to the door of a house, or cabin in this case, where God might be? Should you knock? Presumably God already knew that Mack was there. Maybe he ought to simply walk in and introduce himself, but that seemed equally absurd. And how should he address him? Should he call him Father, or Almighty One, or perhaps Mr. God?

Finally, he walked up to the door. Mack decided to bang loudly and see what happened, but just as he raised his fist to do so, the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman. Instinctively he jumped back, but he was too slow. With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child. And all the while she was shouting his name—“Mackenzie Allen Philips”—with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply-loved relative. She finally put him back on earth and, with her hands on his shoulders, pushed him back as if to get a good look at him.

“Mack, look at you!” she fairly exploded. “Here you are, and so grown up. I have really been looking forward to seeing you face to face. It is wonderful to have you here with us. My, my, my, how I do love you!” And with that she wrapped herself around him again.

Suddenly, he was overwhelmed by the scent emanating from her, and it shook him. It was the smell of flowers with overtones of gardenia and jasmine, unmistakably his mother’s perfume. He had already been perched precariously on the precipice of emotion, and now the flooding scent and attendant memories staggered him. He could feel the warmth of tears beginning to gather behind his eyes, as if they were knocking on the door of his heart. It seemed that she saw them too. “It’s okay honey, you can let it all out . . . I know you’ve been hurt, and I know you’re angry and confused. So, go ahead and let it out. It does a soul good to let the waters run once in a while—the healing waters.”

The large black woman gathered his coat and just as she turned to enter the cabin, a small, distinctively Asian woman emerged from behind her. “Here, let me take those,” her voice sang. Obviously, she had not meant the coat, but something else, and she was in front of him in the blink of an eye. He stiffened as he felt something sweep gently across his cheek. Without moving, he looked down and could see that she was busy with a fragile crystal bottle and a small brush, like the one in his wife’s makeup kit, gently removing something from his face. Before he could ask, she smiled and whispered, “Mackenzie, we all have things we value enough to collect, don’t we? I collect tears.”



Scene from “The Shack” movie (2017)

He then glanced past her and noticed that a third person had emerged from the cabin, this one a man. He appeared Middle Eastern and was dressed like a laborer, complete with tool belt and gloves. He leaned against the door jamb with arms crossed in front of him, wearing jeans covered in wood dust and a plaid shirt with sleeves

rolled just above the elbows, revealing well-muscled forearms. Mack stepped back again, feeling a bit overwhelmed. “Are there more of you?” he asked a little hoarsely.

The three looked at one another and laughed. “No, Mackenzie,” chuckled the black woman. “We is all that you get, and believe me, we’re more than enough.” Then she said, “Okay, *we* know who you are, but we should probably introduce ourselves to you. I,” she waved her hands with a flourish, “am the housekeeper and cook. You may call me Papa.”

“And I,” interrupted the man, who looked to be about in his thirties, “I try to keep things fixed up around here. I enjoy working with my hands although, as these two will tell you, I take pleasure in cooking and gardening as much as they do.”

“You look as if you’re from the Middle East, maybe Arab?” Mack guessed.

“Actually, I’m a stepbrother of that great family. I am Hebrew, to be exact, from the house of Judah.”

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# Why We Must Think Rightly about God

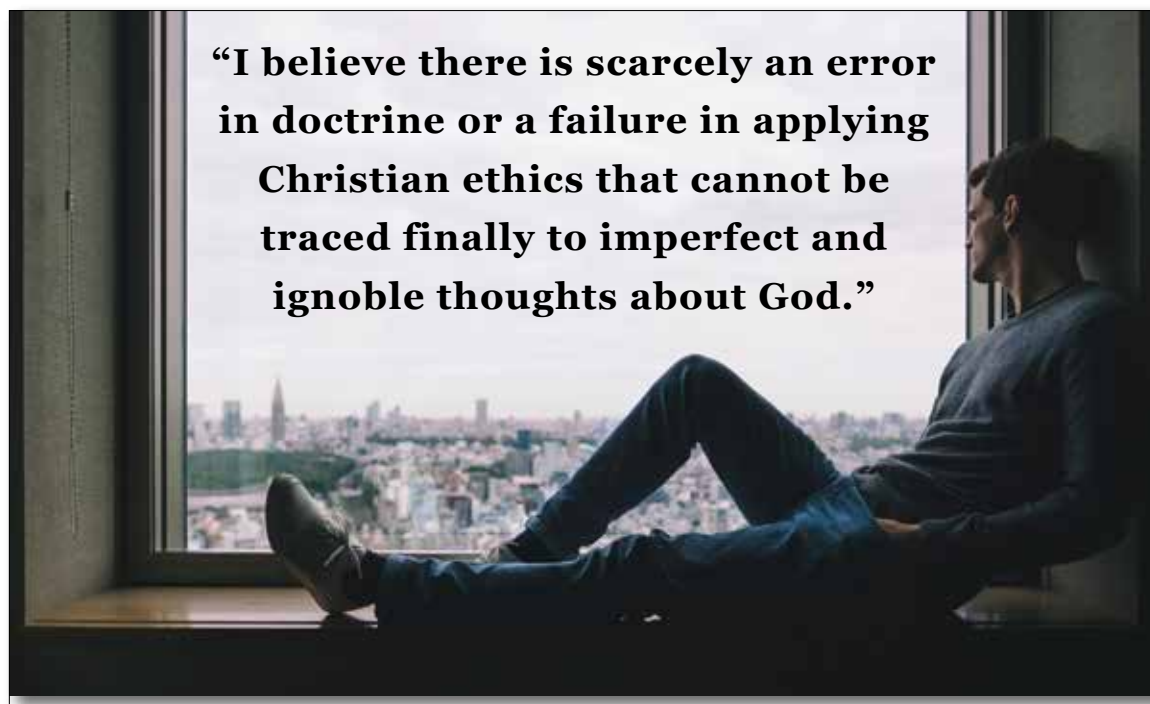
By A. W. Tozer (1897–1963)



The author of thirty books, A. W. Tozer has been called one of the most influential American evangelists of the twentieth century. In his classic little volume, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper, 1961), Tozer calls the people of God back to a right understanding of the One they worship. This article is a slightly edited abridgment of the first chapter: “Why We Must Think Rightly about God” (1–5).

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.

For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret



**“I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”**

law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.

That our idea of God corresponds as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us. Compared with our actual thoughts about him, our creedal statements are of little consequence. Our real idea of God may be buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require

an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is.

A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current these days is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.

Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on his character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than he is—in itself a monstrous sin—and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges.

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that

are unworthy of him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place. Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true.

Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, “What is God like?” and goes on from there. Though she may continue to cling to a sound nominal creed, her practical working creed has become false. The masses of her adherents come to believe that God is different from what he actually is; and that is heresy of the most insidious and deadly kind.

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of him—and of her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place. ✠

# The Face of God Is Reflected in the Human Face

By Roger Scruton



Roger Scruton is an English philosopher and writer who specializes in aesthetics and political philosophy. In his book *The Face of God* (Bloomsbury, 2012), he gives a fascinating and insightful analysis of the face, both the face of man and the face of God. This article is a slightly edited abridgment of the fourth chapter (73–111).

The lamentation in Psalm 13 is expressed thus: “How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” In Psalm 17 we read, “As for me I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.” And Psalm 4 implores God to lift up “the light of your countenance upon us.” The hope of a face-to-face encounter fills the Psalms from beginning to end and the hope is turned to a promise by the apostle Paul, who tells us that now we see through a glass darkly, “but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). God’s face, which Moses was forbidden to see, is now at the center of faith and hope, and the way to it, Paul says, is *agape*, the New Testament word for neighborly love.

What is meant by the “face of God”? This is what we want to examine. And the obvious starting point is the human face. Many animals have eyes, nostrils, lips, and ears disposed in ways that resemble the disposition of the human face. And many animals recognize each other by their features. But would it be right to say that they have faces?

My face is that part of me to which others direct their attention, whenever they address me as “you.” I lie *behind* my face, and yet I am present in it, speaking and looking through it at a world of others who are in turn both revealed and concealed like me. My face is a boundary, a threshold, the place where I appear as the monarch appears on the balcony of the palace.

The face is the subject revealing itself through an interesting repertoire of adjustments. For example, there is smiling. The smile that reveals is the involuntary smile, the blessing that one soul confers upon another, when shining with the whole self in a moment of self-giving.

Think about the eyes. Animals can look at things: they also look at each other. But they do not look *into* things. Perhaps the most concentrated of all acts of non-verbal communication between people is that of lovers, when they look into each other’s eyes. They are not looking at the retina, or exploring the eye for its anatomical peculiarities, as an optician might. So, what are they looking at or looking for? The answer is surely obvious: each is looking for, and hoping also to be looking at, the other, as a free subjectivity who is striving to meet him I to I.

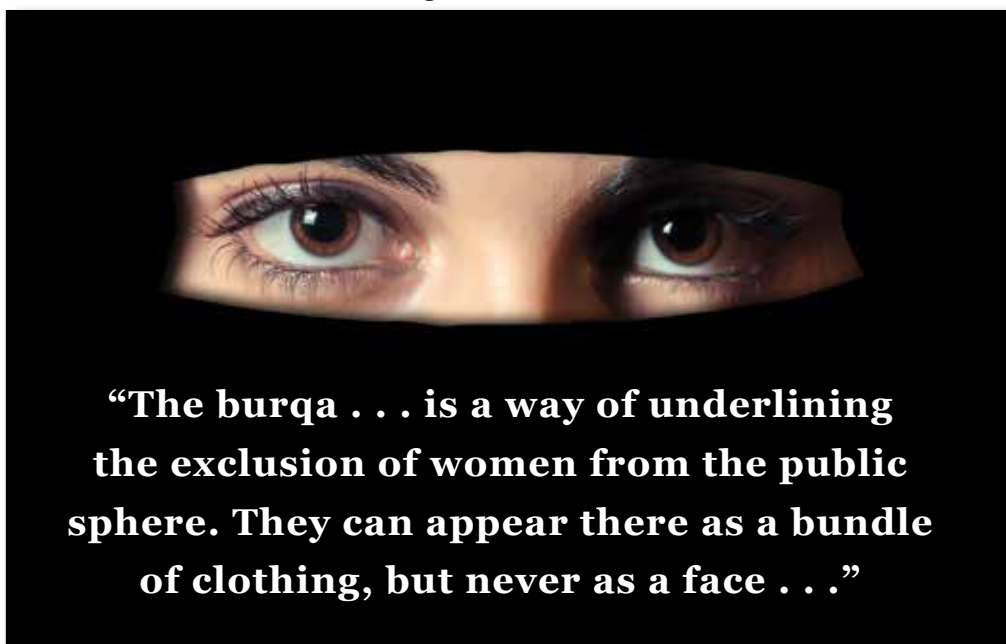
Tears of merriment flow from the eyes, so too do tears of grief and pain. Hence tears are symbols of the spirit: it is as though something of me is lost with them. Tears cannot be voluntary.

Although there are actors and hypocrites who can produce tears at will, that just means that there are ways of making the eyes water without producing “real tears.”

Similar observations apply to blushing. Only a rational being can blush, even though nobody can blush voluntarily. It is the involuntary character of the blush that conveys its meaning.

When it comes to human sexuality, the human face plays a very important role. In love, we desire the other as an embodied subject and not just as a body. And the embodied subject is what we see in the face. When sexual attentions take the form of hunger, they become deeply insulting. Unwanted advances are therefore felt as a contamination. That is why rape is so serious a crime: it is an invasion of the victim’s freedom and a dragging of the subject into the world of things.

I don’t need to emphasize the extent to which our understanding of sexual desire has been influenced and



indeed subverted by Freud, the Kinsey reports, and the like. If you describe sexual desire in the terms that have become fashionable—as the pursuit of pleasurable sensations in the private parts—then the outrage and pollution of rape become impossible to explain. Rape, on this view, is every bit as bad as being spat upon: but no worse.

In a once widely read book, *Eros and Agape*, the Swedish Protestant theologian Anders Nygren made a radical distinction between erotic love, which is motivated by its object, and the Christian love commended by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, which is motivated by God. A great and positive change came over the world, in Nygren’s view, when *agape* replaced *eros*, as the raw material for the love of God.

Sexual love desires to possess, and usually to possess exclusively. Sexual love can be cruel and full of anger. It makes massive and unfair discriminations between the beautiful and the ugly, the strong and the weak, the young and the old. It is jealous and cannot rejoice in the good things given by a rival.

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# The Invisible Made Visible

By Paul Brand (1914–2003)



Missionary surgeon to India, Dr. Brand achieved world renown for his innovative techniques in the treatment of leprosy. With Philip Yancey, he coauthored the book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* in the year 2000. In an updated edition (*Fearfully and Wonderfully: The Marvel of Bearing God's Image*, InterVarsity Press, 2019), a new generation of readers can now benefit from the timeless reflections on the

body contained in this volume. This article captures short segments of the authors' thoughts from both the opening and the closing of the book (12–14, 217–220, 251).

In modern times the word *image* may connote nearly the opposite of its original meaning. Today, a politician hires an image maker, a job applicant dresses to present an image of confidence and success, a corporation seeks just the right image in the marketplace. I wish to return to the word's original meaning: a true likeness, not a deceptive illusion.

Think of a ten-pound bundle of protoplasm squirming fitfully in a blanket. The baby's father weighs twenty times as much, with his body parts in different proportions. Yet the mother announces proudly that the baby is the "spitting image" of his father. A visitor peers closely. Yes, a resemblance does exist,

evident now in a dimple, slightly flared nostrils, a peculiar earlobe. Before long, mannerisms of speech and posture and a thousand other mimetic traits will bring the father unmistakably to mind.

Such a usage of the word *image* sheds light on a mysterious phrase from the Bible: the image of God. That phrase appears in the very first chapter of Genesis, and its author seems to stutter with excitement, twice repeating an expression from the preceding verse:

*So God created human beings in his own image.  
In the image of God he created them;  
Male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27 NLT)*

The very first humans received the image of God, and in some refracted way each one of us possesses this sacred quality.

But how can visible human beings express a likeness to God, who is invisible spirit? As spirit, God remains invisible, relying on us to make that spirit visible. The human body hints at a fundamental principle of how spirit, or mind, interacts with matter. God, a Spirit unbound by space and time, in an act of deep humility took on the confinement of matter and time—an event that Christmas celebrates. "Twas much, that man was made like God before / But, that God should be made like man, much more," wrote John Donne. The actual incarnation, however, spanned only thirty-three years.

From the outset Jesus predicted his departure, foreshadowing a time when he would leave the work in the hands of his followers. After his departure, Jesus Christ receded to the role of Head in order to create a new Body, this one composed not of living cells but of men and women from all over the world. "As you sent me into the world," Jesus reported to his Father, "I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Can the shift be expressed more succinctly?

In one sense Jesus' departure from earth was an ascension—church calendars call it that—though in another sense it was a further condescension. God elected to make God's presence known through people like us—not in one body but in many, not in one perfect Son but in millions of ornery children of all races, sizes, IQs, personalities, and genetic traits. The Spirit has chosen to make our prayers, our compassion, our actions, our proclamations of truth and justice a primary means of relating to the world of matter.

Today, we are God's medium, Christ's Body. When you look at me, you don't see the whole Paul Brand; rather you see a thin layer of skin cells stretched across my frame. The real Paul Brand resides inside, especially centered in my brain, hidden from the outside world. Even more so, we cannot "see" God; we lack adequate perceiving organs. Rather, God becomes visible through the members of the Body.

**"Christ has no hands but ours"**



# The Blind Men and the Elephant

By John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887)

We are called to bear God's image corporately because any one of us taken individually would present an incomplete image, one partly false and always distorted. Yet collectively, in all our diversity, we can come together as a community of believers to restore the image of God in the world.

Dorothy Sayers names three great humiliations God has willingly undergone. In the first, the Incarnation, God stripped off the prerogatives of deity and descended to live as a human being on earth. In the second, the crucifixion, God's Son suffered an ignominious death. The third humiliation, she says, is the Church. God in the person of Jesus Christ is one thing, and God in us is quite another.

The Head working through member cells involves a sort of abdication in which God sets aside omnipotence and adopts an invisible, behind-the-scenes role in human history. In so doing, God riskily entrusts the divine name and reputation to imperfect human beings. Members of Christ's Body have sullied God's reputation by such misdeeds as launching crusades, torturing heretics, and trafficking in slavery. The flaw is not in the Head, to be sure, but the humiliation is there.

After World War II, German students volunteered to help rebuild a European church that had been destroyed by bombs. As the work progressed, debate broke out on how best to restore a large statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched and bearing the familiar inscription "Come unto Me." Careful patching could repair all damage to the statue except for Christ's hands, which had been destroyed by bomb fragments. Should they attempt the delicate task of reshaping those hands?

The workers reached a decision that still stands today. The statue of Jesus has no hands, and the inscription now read "Christ has no hands but ours." ✠

Though most consider "The Blind Men and the Elephant" an innocent and delightful children's rhyme, the poem actually carries a very dangerous philosophical message. John Godfrey Saxe was raised in a strict Methodist home in Vermont but rejected his Christian upbringing. He dabbled in both law and politics but is most remembered as a poet. In this, his most famous poem, he retells a Hindu fable about a group of blind men trying to make sense of an elephant. The tale is a parable about humanity's quest to discover Absolute Truth (God). The final two verses reveal Saxe's own agnosticism. Though the meter is captivating and the rhyme scheme entertaining, the reader ought to beware of this poem's not-so-subtle cynicism!



*It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me!—but the elephant  
Is very like a wall!"*

*The second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried: "Ho!—what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an elephant  
Is very like a spear!"*

*The third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
Is very like a snake!"*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he;*

*"'Tis clear enough the elephant  
Is very like a tree!"*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch  
the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an elephant  
Is very like a fan!"*

*The sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
Is very like a rope!"*

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an elephant  
Not one of them has seen! ✠*

For one thing, human persons are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). Apparently, even in our fallen state, there is something about us that reflects, to some degree at least, the reality of who God is and what he is like. And then, of course, the Incarnation is a startling example of making visible the One who is invisible and of giving physicality to the One who is Spirit. Though no one has ever seen God (John 1:18), those who saw Jesus saw the Father (John 14:9).

Yes, determining what God looks like may be more complicated than you think. And Christmas is the season that begs us to wrestle with this question. Who is Mary's baby *really*? The answer must not be limited to theological abstractions related to events that happened 2,000 years ago. The answer to this question is both personal and contemporary: If God walked into *my* world *today*, would I recognize him? Would he match my expectations? Or would I be as blind and ignorant as those who lived in Bible times?

*Sweet little Jesus boy,  
they made you be born in a manger.  
Sweet little holy child,  
we didn't know who you were.*

At the risk of offending, let me tell you what I would do if I were a movie producer looking for someone to play the role of God. I'd choose Esau—that's right, Jacob's brother, the fellow who sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup (Gen. 25:29–34), who married outside the faith and broke his parents' hearts (Gen. 26:34–35), and who hated his brother and vowed to kill him (Gen. 27:41). Yes, I'd choose the one who was *not* chosen to receive the father's blessing (Gen. 25:23; Rom. 9:12–13). Yes, I think he would make a *great* choice to play God. Let me explain.

To understand why Esau looks like God, we must first understand what was going on in the life of Esau's brother,

Jacob. If ever anyone in the biblical narrative deserved the title "jerk," it was Jacob. From birth, he was a lying, cheating, conniving manipulator whose one aim in life was to make sure he got what he wanted. But Jacob finally met his match when, in an all-night wrestling contest with God, he came to a place of brokenness and full surrender. Prior to this moment, Jacob's knowledge of God was of a distant deity whom he knew only superficially. But the wrestling match at Peniel was up close and personal. Here he saw the Holy One face to face.



The next day, when the estranged brothers met for the first time in 20 years, Jacob fully expected Esau to violently avenge all the wrongs that he had suffered at his hands. But God had been working in Esau's heart as well. In one of the most emotional scenes in all Scripture, the brothers embraced, kissed, and wept (Gen. 33:4). Looking intently into the face of his brother, Jacob exults, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10).

The night before, Jacob had seen God's face. How could he ever forget what God looked like? And now, looking into the face of his reconciled brother, Jacob sees God's face again. Yes, if I were a movie producer, I'd choose Esau to play the role of God. Looking deep into the eyes of an enemy-turned-friend gives us a real indication of what God looks like.

This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the topic, "What Is God Like?" Though the articles included can only give a partial answer, our prayer is that, in this sacred season of Christmas, the Spirit of Holiness will use this little magazine to help open your eyes and mine to see God in his manifest Presence all around us. But be warned: he rarely comes in the manner you anticipate.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning) ✦*

## Giving Thanks for Your Participation

*By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Development*

Who are the persons who enable the effective proclamation of the gospel message through the different FAS ministries? We immediately think of speakers traveling the globe sharing the gospel in many venues, authors writing books and publishing articles, and teacher-mentors leading discipleship events. We are thankful for every one of these persons who are directly involved in moving FAS ministries forward.

But what about the large number of other persons who are not gifted or situated to speak, publish, or disciple? Can these persons be involved in FAS ministries? By all means, yes! Every person who believes that we can be wholly devoted to God with a heart fully given to God and his purposes in our

lives and who views the Francis Asbury Society as a means to proclaim this message can participate in the ministries of FAS, even from the confines of their home. Every person who prays for the ministries and persons of FAS or contributes from their tangible means to promote this ministry is an active participant in the ministries of the Francis Asbury Society. The success of FAS depends upon this host of individuals who participate in the ministry, even from afar. Thank you for participating in FAS ministries by praying and contributing.

Details for various methods of giving are available on the Support page of our website ([www.francisasburysociety.com/support](http://www.francisasburysociety.com/support)). ✦



and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor. 8:6).

The world’s problem with Christianity is Jesus. He is the “stone that causes men to stumble” (1 Pet. 2:8) that separates the monotheism of Christianity from that of Israel and Islam. And the separation is absolute. This affects every aspect of Christian doctrine and gives distinction to its understanding of God, humanity, sin, salvation, and last things.

**“Jesus is ‘the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being . . .’”**

The heart of the problem is Jesus’ own understanding of who he is and of his relationship to God. The important data on this question are found in all of the New Testament gospels and epistles but are seen most clearly in the Gospel of John. We see this particularly when he uses the word *Father*. For example, in the fifth chapter of John, after Jesus heals a lame man, telling him to take up his mat and walk, the Jewish leaders condemn him because he had performed this miracle on the Sabbath. The accusation evoked from Jesus one of the most extended speeches in the Gospels on his relationship to Israel’s God. He informed them that he was their God’s Son and as such did nothing “by himself” (John 5:19). He was doing only what he saw his Father doing. The works that he was doing, like that of healing the sick man, evidenced that he was sent by the Father. This meant that Jesus should be honored just as the Father was honored because he is the Father’s Son.

Succeeding chapters in John’s Gospel expand Jesus’ self-understanding. The capstone of his claim to a unique relationship with his Father comes in privacy on Thursday night of Holy Week in the upper room dialogue. Here he speaks not with the temple leaders but with his disciples. In this discourse, he insists that he and the Father are one. Indeed, they are so much one that anyone who has seen him has actually seen the Father, and in knowing him the disciples have actually know the Father (John 14:7, 9). Jesus makes it clear that his oneness with the Father is such that to reject him is to reject the Father and that to receive him is to receive the Father (John 13:20).

Because of these speeches of Jesus, John concludes for himself that no one has ever seen the eternal God, but that Jesus, God’s only Son, who has come from “the bosom of the Father,” has actually made him known to us, has “exegeted” him to us (John 1:18 KJV). He sees Jesus as the Word of God, a Word who in the very beginning was with God, was actually divine himself, and brought all things into existence.

One does not have to be very familiar with Jewish literature to know that the opening verses of John’s Gospel, as they speak of the Word of God, are a paraphrasing of the beginning verses of the Genesis creation account. In John, however, something that is only implicit in Genesis, becomes explicit. In Genesis we learn that God created the world by speaking it into existence. The key phrase in Genesis 1 is “and God said.” It is significant that the Hebrew word used for God (*Elohim*) is plural while

the verb for “said” (*wayyo’mer*) is singular. In the beginning there was one God, but in that oneness there was a richness that a singular noun had difficulty conveying. With God was his Word, and the Word had its own distinctness. Thus, John could amplify the Genesis account and tell us that creation was the work of the Word of God.

That Word, we learn in the Gospels, is the eternal Son of the Father and has enough distinctness from the Father that he can become incarnate in a human virgin’s fetus. God’s Son, now incarnate in human flesh, is so identified with mortals that he will find himself in a garden praying to the Father for the grace to finish the work the Father has sent him to do. Yes, the Gospels tell us that God is one, but it is a different oneness than that which Jew or Muslim can affirm.

What the Gospels affirm about Jesus concerning his relationship to the Father is further developed in the rest of the New Testament. In Colossians 1:15 Paul says that Jesus is the very “image of the invisible God.” Like John, Paul insists that all things were created by him and for him and that all things are held together by him. The writer of Hebrews, in the introduction to his letter (1:1–4), develops this theme further by saying that Jesus is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” that he sustains all things “by his powerful word.” The book of Revelation completes the picture. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is shown in 5:6 standing in the midst of the very throne of God. In the final scene (22:1–5), the throne of God, the seat of all divine power and authority, is identified as the throne both of God and of the Lamb, where the Lamb is being worshiped with the Father.

Obviously, the God pictured here is radically different from the God whom the temple leadership in Jesus’ day conceived of and worshiped. This God is also very different from the Allah whom good Muslims have worshiped across the centuries. Jesus said that God is one, as Moses insisted, but in the oneness there is a differentiation that enables Jesus himself to be distinct from the Father and yet part of the divine oneness. ✦

*Describing God?... continued from page 1*

“Then...” Mack was suddenly staggered by his own realization. “Then, you are . . .”

“Jesus? Yes. And you may call me that if you like.”

“And I am Sarayu,” the Asian woman said, as she tilted her head in a slight bow and smiled. “Keeper of the gardens, among other things.”

Thoughts tumbled over each other as Mack struggled to figure out what to do. Was one of these people God? What if they were hallucinations or angels, or God was coming later? That could be embarrassing. Since there were three of them, maybe this was a Trinity sort of thing. But two women and a man and none of them white? Then again, why had he naturally assumed that God would be white? He knew his mind was rambling, so he focused on the one question he most wanted answered. “Then,” Mack struggled to ask, “which one of you is God?”

“I am,” said all three in unison. Mack looked from one to the next, and even though he couldn’t begin to grasp what he was seeing and hearing, he somehow believed them. ✦

# But Can We Even Know God?

By Wayne Grudem



Can finite beings know the One who is infinite? Can sinners comprehend the Holy One? Theologian Wayne Grudem reminds us that though we can never know God *fully* we can indeed know him *truly*. This article is taken from Chapter Four of his book *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Life* (Zondervan, 1999: 69–70). It is abridged and slightly edited.

Even if we believe that God does exist, this does not tell us whether it is possible to actually know God, nor does it tell us how much of God we can know. In many cultures it is quite acceptable to profess belief in God's existence, but opinions on whether one can know God are much more diverse. Let's address these issues.

On the one hand, *we can never fully understand God*. Because God is infinite and we are finite or limited, we can never fully understand God. It is not true to say that God is unable to be understood, but it is true to say that he cannot be understood fully or exhaustively.

Psalm 145:3 says, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and *his greatness is unsearchable.*" God's greatness is beyond searching out or discovering: it is too great ever to be fully known. Paul says something similar when, at the end of a long discussion on the history of God's great plan of redemption, he breaks forth into praise: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33). We can never fully understand God or any of his attributes completely or *exhaustively*.

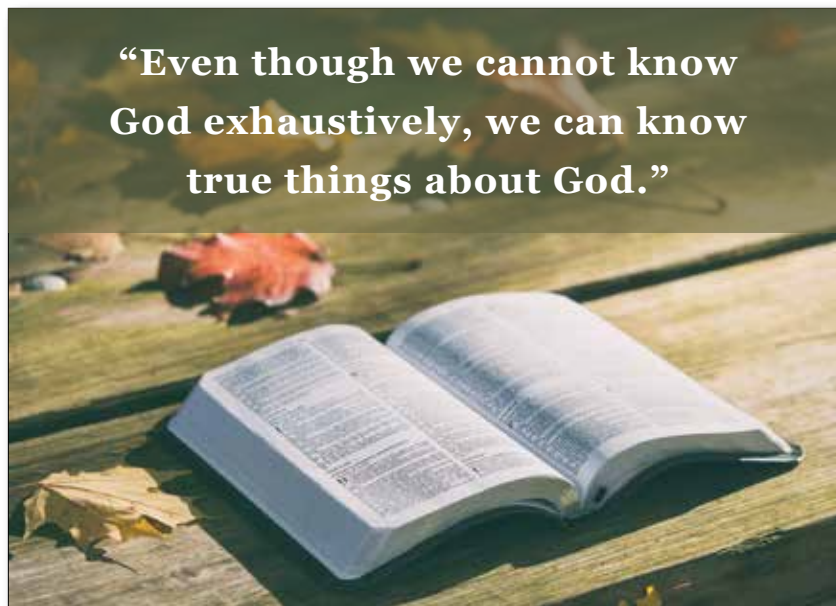
This doctrine, that we can never fully understand God, has much positive application for our own lives. It means that we will never be able to know "too much" about God, for we will never run out of things to learn about him, and we will thus never tire in delighting in the discovery of more and more of his excellence and of the greatness of his works.

On the other hand, *we can know God truly*. Even though we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know true things about God. In fact, all that Scripture tells us about God is true. It is true to say that God is love (1 John 4:8), that God is light (1 John 1:5), that God is spirit (John 4:24), that God is righteous (Rom. 3:26), and so forth. To say this does not imply or require that we know everything about God or about his love or his righteousness or any other attribute. When I say that I have three sons, that statement is entirely true, even though I do not know everything about my sons, nor even about myself. So it is in our knowledge of God: we have true knowledge of

God from Scripture, even though we do not have exhaustive knowledge. We can know some of God's thoughts—even many of them—from Scripture, and when we know them, we, like David, find them to be "precious" (Ps. 139:17).

Even more significantly, it is *God himself* that we know, not simply facts about him or actions that he does. We make a distinction between knowing *facts* and knowing *persons* in our ordinary use of English. It would be true for me to say that I know many facts about the president of the United States, but it would not be true for me to say that I know *him*. To say that I know him would imply that I had met him and talked with him and that I had developed at least to some degree a personal relationship with him.

Some people say that we cannot know God himself, but only know facts about him or know what he does. Others have said that we cannot know God as he is in himself, but only as he relates to us. But Scripture does not speak that way. Several passages speak of our *knowing God himself*. We read God's words in Jeremiah.



*Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23–24)*

Here God says that the source of our joy and sense of importance ought to come not from our own abilities or possessions, but from the fact that we know him. Similarly, in praying to his Father, Jesus can say, "And this is eternal life, that *they know you* the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). The promise of the new covenant is that all shall know God, "from the least of them to the greatest" (Heb. 8:11). And John can say, "I write to you, children, because *you know the Father*" (1 John 2:13).

The fact that we do know God himself is further demonstrated by the realization that the richness of the Christian life includes a personal relationship with God. As these passages imply, we have a far greater privilege than mere knowledge of facts about God. We speak to God in prayer, and he speaks to us through his Word. We commune with him in his presence, we sing his praise, and we are aware that he personally dwells among us and within us to bless us (John 14:23). Indeed, this personal relationship with God the Father, with God the Son, and with God the Holy Spirit may be said to be the greatest of all the blessings of the Christian life. ✨

in Oswald Chamber's phrase, they "smilingly washed their hands of the consequences." This was precisely the spirit of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It is the spirit of all who know God. By this test, also, we may measure our own knowledge of God.

4. *Those who know God have great contentment in God.* There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death, and on forever. This is the peace which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew; hence the contentment with which they stood their ground in face of Nebuchadnezzar's ultimatum (3:15): "If you do not worship [the image], you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Their reply (3:16-18) is classic. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter"—No panic!—"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king." (Courteous, but unanswerable—they know their God!) "But even if he does not"—if no deliverance comes—"we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods." It makes no difference! Live or die, they



**"It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found him . . . [who can] testify that they have known God."**

are content. The comprehensiveness of our contentment is another measure whereby we may judge whether we really know God.

Do we desire such knowledge of God? Then two things follow: *First*, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.

*Second*, we must seek the Savior. When he was on earth, he invited ordinary people to company with him; thus they came to know him, and in knowing him to know his Father. The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding Jesus' company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found him—for the promise is that when we seek him with all our hearts, we shall surely find him—who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God. ✠

On one Christian understanding, marriage is a sacrament—which means a union forged in the presence of God. And the purpose of the sacrament is to incorporate *eros* into the world of *agape*—to ensure that the face of the lover can still be turned to the world of others. Hence where marriage is not regarded as a sacrament, but merely as a contract between the husband and the parents of the bride, the face of the wife often remains hidden after marriage. That is the *deep* explanation of the *burqa*: it is a way of underlining the exclusion of women from the public sphere. They can appear there as a bundle of clothing, but never as a face: to be fully a person the woman must retreat into the private sphere, where *eros*, rather than *agape*, is sovereign.

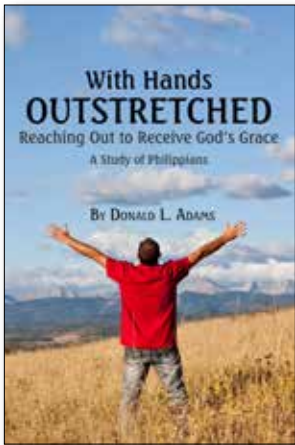
In conclusion, it is appropriate to say something about the destiny of the face, in the world that we have entered—a world where *eros* is being rapidly detached from interpersonal commitments and redesigned as a commodity. The first victim of this process is the face. The underlying tendency of erotic images in our time is to present the body as the focus and meaning of desire, the place where it all occurs in the momentary spasm of sensual pleasure of which the soul is at best a spectator and no part of the game. In pornography, the face has no role to play, other than to be subjected to the empire of the body. Sex, in the pornographic culture, is not

a relation between subjects but a relation between objects. And anything that might enter to impede that conception of the sexual act—the face in particular—must be veiled, marred or spat upon, as an unwelcome intrusion of judgement into a sphere where everything goes.

Emmanuel Levinas writes of the face as the absolute obstacle to murder, the sight of

which causes the assassin's hand to drop. Would that Levinas's remark were true. But there is a truth contained in it. Through the face the subject appears in our world. It is not to be treated as an object, or to be thrown away. Levinas wrote in torment, thinking of the murder of his own friends and family in the holocaust. And it is surely an apt description of the genocides of the twentieth century that they proceeded as they did only because subjects were first reduced to objects, so that all faces disappeared. That was the work of the concentration camp, and it is a work that has been described by Primo Levi, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and others—people who kept their faces, even in the face of the all-defacing machine.

Nobody could say that the growth of the pornographic culture is a crime comparable to the crimes described by those writers, though, like those crimes, it is a crime against humanity. Nevertheless, pornography has moved to that first stage on the road to desecration—the stage of objectification, in which the face disappears, and the human being disintegrates into an assemblage of body parts. My own view is that we should see this as a warning. ✠



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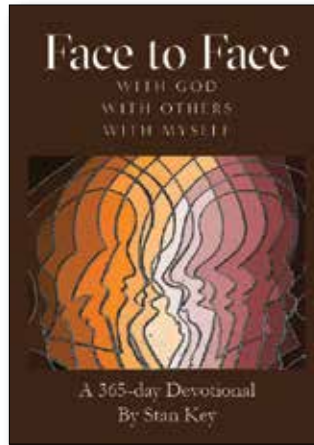
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