

To Glorify or Enjoy Forever?

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A number of years ago while teaching a seminary class I was explaining the opening lines of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The opening question, in the language of the 17th century, asks, "What is the chief end of man?" The catechist is then to respond, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

On this particular day in class one of my students raised her hand and said, "My problem is that I can never decide which it is I'm really to be about—to glorify or to enjoy God forever." She went on to describe her dilemma. To glorify God seems to imply that we should put controls on ourselves and our personal enjoyment in life. Glorifying God is to move beyond our own self interests to the interests of God. It focuses on commitment, discipleship, and a giving of self to our Lord and to the needs of others. On the other hand, she noted, enjoying God focuses on all the good things that God brings in life. The enjoyment of God seems to end up inadvertently focusing on ourselves as we celebrate the blessings and gifts of God, and in turn this enjoyment appears contrary to the pursuits of God's glory.

My student's comments set off a wonderful discussion in class that day. Since then I've thought often about her dilemma and the tension that we no doubt often feel between glorifying and enjoying our maker, for the reality is that believers often do seem to fit into one category or the other. Some are enjoyers and others are glorifiers. In fact down through the history of the church, this typology seems to be quite pronounced with the two approaches frequently moving in very different directions.

Enjoyers of God

Enjoyers of God are those who focus primarily on all the good things that flow from our faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. The enjoyment of God includes the benefits that accrue from salvation by God's grace: forgiveness of sin, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, hope of eternal life, personal meaning, and empowerment for daily living. Enjoyers tend to talk frequently of how God answers their prayers and meets their personal needs, whether they be spiritual, economic, physical, emotional, or relational. God is always there doing great things for the enjoyers of Christian faith.

The enjoyer types like to emphasize the wonderful world in which God has placed us and his good gifts to the human race. Music, art, sports, friendships, intellectual pursuits, food, family, and hobbies are among the wonderful gifts that God provides as gifts of general grace to all humanity. They are meant for human enjoyment.

When I think about the enjoyers of God I sometimes recall Beth. She loved to reiterate the ways in which God met her needs and answered her prayers. God always seemed to be there at every turn and in every hardship, no matter how mundane. She often told the story of being in college and needing \$1,500 to pay the rest of her semester bill. She was down to the last day, thinking she would need to drop out, when in the mail that day she received a check for that exact amount of money from a person unaware of her need. Later in life Beth was downtown with her two children in tow, attempting to find a parking space so she could do her shopping. Around the block she went several times seeking a spot to park; none was available. Finally, in desperation she prayed to God for a space. As soon as she said amen, a car pulled out and she pulled in. For Beth, God always seemed to be meeting her needs; and she enjoyed it.

Glorifiers of God

Other Christians are more the glorifier type. These are the believers who talk of a deep, sincere, uncompromising commitment to Christ. Following Jesus in life means giving up comfort and ease for the sake of God's kingdom. Glorifiers focus on responsibilities we have as Christ's disciples, not all the good things that come our way due to our faith. They remind us that we are called to a life of worship and spiritual disciplines. We have a responsibility to share the gospel of Christ with others, seek justice and mercy within our world, and attempt to influence the culture as salt and light.

The glorifiers of God tend to remind us that we are not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed (Romans 12:1-2), and thus set apart from the patterns of the world around us. We are to seek God's way, not the easy way. The glorifiers contend that we must stop focusing on ourselves, our own agenda or personal enjoyment,

and rather seek the vision of God and the needs of a hurting humanity.

When I think about the glorifier types, I often think of Dan, a young man I knew in college. While some of us were down at the gym playing basketball, Dan was often on his knees in fervent prayer. While some of us were out on dates on a Saturday night, Dan was down at the local rescue mission preaching the gospel to the homeless and alcoholics. While some of us were spending time with that gift of God called friends, Dan was nurturing his spirituality through reading the Bible, contemplation, spiritual disciplines and giving himself wholeheartedly to the cause of Jesus.

While some of us as fellow students were reflecting on the future and how to use our talents and gifts in ways that might include at least some personal satisfaction, Dan was talking about going to the most difficult spots on earth to feed the poor and to preach the good news. Dan was clearly into the glory of God. It was his ultimate aim in life. Enjoyment was not on his agenda.

So what do we do with these two orientations to faith? If my student was right, that most of us tend in one direction or the other, and that the two ways are at odds with each other, what should we do? Are we to be enjoyers of God or glorifiers of God? Which takes precedence?

Psalm 67: Holding the Two Together

Psalm 67 is a text that can help us resolve our dilemma, for it powerfully holds the glory and enjoyment together. The Psalm begins with enjoyment, “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us” (v. 1). The psalmist is clearly asking God to bring blessing to life, and does so by referring to a familiar blessing or benediction from the Old Testament:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26).

Throughout the Bible there is reference to the blessing of God with a sense that it is something to be enjoyed by the recipients. In the Old Testament these blessings often came in more visible, external or material forms. As God’s unfolding revelation occurs and climaxes in the coming of Christ and the apostolic witness of the New Testament, the blessings become more internal and spiritual in nature.

God has created us in such a way that we can and should experience his good gifts of life. When we embrace the greatest blessing of all, salvation in Christ, it is to be enjoyed. After all, Jesus said, “I am come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

But Psalm 67 does not stop with blessing and enjoyment. The next verses go on to add another perspective, as they remind us that the benefits of grace and the enjoyment of God are not for our own self-centered gain. The invocation for God’s gracious blessing in verse 1 is followed by this goal: “That your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations” (v. 2). Here the blessing of God, clearly meant for our enjoyment, serves a wider and grander purpose – that God’s saving power would be known throughout the world. The psalmist goes on in v. 3-5 to push out the implications further:

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

Here the enjoyment of God is seen in the context of God being praised and honored throughout the world. In fact our enjoyment of God actually brings a worship and glory to our maker and redeemer.

The psalmist certainly wants to enjoy the blessings of God. They are wonderful gifts that remind us that God is a self-giving God of grace and mercy. We follow a God who wants the very best for us in life and desires that we experience joy, peace, hope, meaning, and a sense of divine presence and power within. But it is equally clear that we cannot stop there, for the enjoyment of God is not for our own self-centeredness. It is true enjoyment, but never narcissistic. It is true pleasure, but never pleasure as an end in itself apart from a wider context, purpose, and meaning.

The enjoyment of God always has a larger vision in mind: That God’s purposes on earth be fulfilled and that God’s name be honored and praised. In other words, the enjoyment of God and the glory of God can never be pulled apart. They walk hand in hand.

I think my student was on to something when she spoke of sensing a tension between enjoying God and glorifying God. She was right to grapple with that tension. But ultimately the two sides need each other, for without the harmony of the two we get a lopsided, distorted faith.

Distortions

What happens if we emphasize only the enjoyment of God? We end up with a very superficial, self-centered faith that ultimately undermines the glory of God. We end up using God for our own purposes. Faith becomes a device for getting what we want.

Will Herberg nearly half a century ago described American religiosity this way, and his portrayal still has

a contemporary ring: "In this kind of religion it is not man who serves God, but God who is mobilized and made to serve man and his purposes—whether these purposes be economic prosperity, free enterprise, social reform, democracy, happiness, security or peace of mind." Herberg further adds, "What should reach down to the core of existence...merely skims the surface of life, and yet succeeds in generating the sincere feeling of being religious. Religion thus becomes a kind of protection the self throws up against the radical demand of faith" (*Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, pp. 268, 260).

Today there are many enjoyers of God who embrace a health and wealth gospel that says, "Name it and claim it." The movement is a vivid expression of the enjoyment type. One preacher embracing this type of faith says, "If the mafia can ride around in Lincoln Continental Town Cars, why can't King's kids?" Some in this movement have spoken of actually commanding God and teach that, "You can have what you say."

Most of us are likely not tempted to such egregious distortions, but it is quite easy to end up with a faith that tends in this direction. When we examine the way we "use" our faith, the way we pray, and the elements of faith that most occupy our thinking, we easily slip into an enjoyment-only kind of Christianity.

But what happens if we emphasize only the glory of God? Faith in this type tends to become an austere legalism. Here following Jesus becomes a joyless burden that we must carry as appointed by a God who sternly stands over us. It is a faith without grace, as we dig deep down into our own finite resources to give something to God and to others out of a sense of obligation or fear, not overflowing grace and love.

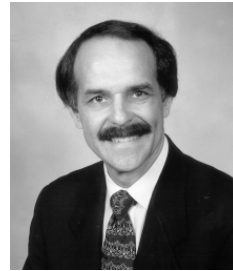
The glory of God distortion is often a faith that lacks spontaneity, creativity, and joy. And in fact, there's usually not much joy in being around some glorifier types that I have known. Their very presence can feel burdensome and oddly incongruent with a Savior who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). Those who emphasize only the glorifying of God tend to lack the wonderful sense of God's enabling presence in their lives, as they seek to mobilize their own resources for God's purposes. The glory of God imbalance is theologically deficient in two ways. First, it lacks a theology of creation in which we embrace the goodness of creation, including the wonder of humans made in the image of God. As such, this approach overlooks general grace and the wonderful gifts of creation available to all humanity. But secondly, it lacks a theology of special grace, as it places so much emphasis on the human need to glorify God that

it undermines the gracious divine gift that motivates and sustains us to live all of life for the glory of God, while simultaneously finding utter delight in the God who gives.

Conclusion

The reality is that we need both the glory of God and the enjoyment of God to be faithful believers. Those old Westminster Divines surely got it right when they asked the question of our chief end in life, and answered that it is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. But, the key is that they are pursued together and never pulled apart from each other. They need each other and feed each other, and in this dual affirmation we begin to understand and experience something of the marvelous, mysterious, ever-present God of the universe. The psalmist concludes with the harmony and the balance we all need:

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him (Psalms 67:6-7).



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