

One that matters

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

We were driving home from soccer practice. I was talking with my 11-year-old son about his team and the drills they had done that evening. I did not anticipate the turn our conversation was about to take.

“What does a divinity school do, anyway?” he asked. Some weeks earlier he had asked me what a “dean” was. I had suggested that a dean was analogous to the principal of his elementary school. He had been content with that, and did not raise any further questions.

I told him that a divinity school is a place where people go to learn how to become ministers. I mentioned the names of some ministers he knew, then added: “They came to divinity school so they could study the Bible, learn to preach and lead worship, and develop the skills necessary to be ministers of a congregation.”

“Oh,” he replied. I thought this had settled the matter. But then he spoke again. “Dad,” he asked, “don’t you think a divinity school ought to spend more time learning about God?”

I didn’t quite know what to say. After all, he was exactly right. My description of a divinity school had inadvertently left out the One who ought to be the central focus of the school’s activities. That was ironic, since I have spent much of the last year thinking about how and why a Christian divinity school needs to link together the love of learning and the desire for God. Yet my son noticed that my description listed activities of the ministry that could in principle be conducted without reference to God.

How much of church and seminary life is conducted as if God does not really matter? When we initiate new Christians into the faith, do we teach them to diagnose and renounce false ideas about God so that they and we are more likely to worship God faithfully? Archbishop William Temple’s warning ought to haunt us: “If you have a false idea of God, the more religious you are, the worse it is for you--it were better for you to be an atheist.”

We have for so long assumed that “everyone” knows what we are talking about when we refer to God that we have not tested the adequacy of our understanding or the faithfulness of our worship. Too often the language has lost its force, because we are unclear whom we are addressing or about whom we are critically reflecting. Further, we are increasingly discovering that people are referring to God in diverse and often incompatible ways--even among Christians, not to mention among those who adhere to diverse religious traditions.

Have we adequately helped one another learn what it means to address God faithfully in prayer or worship? Or to identify who Christians believe God is, and how God is related to the world and to our lives? To be sure, focusing on God in these ways will lead us into difficult debates and issues of discernment. Yet too often we have avoided testing our own judgments about a basic question: How do we identify God, and understand God’s relationship to the world and my life?

A few years ago, I asked a gathering of church folks--a group that represented a wide diversity of Christian traditions, from evangelical to mainline Protestant to Roman Catholic--how they would characterize the Christian understanding of God to someone who know absolutely nothing of the Christian faith. There was a long silence. Finally, one person volunteered a suggestion. He said, “God is a force that has created things.”

I asked for ways to enrich, modify or rework this phrase. There were no takers. So I asked a specific question: “Some things? All things?” The original person, worried by my suggestion, favored a cautious approach. “Some things.”

There we had it: “God is a force that has created some things.” This seemed acceptable, until I asked whether people would be willing to begin a prayer addressed to God in this way. They didn’t think so, but were puzzled about where to move from there.

I suspect that we might have made more progress had I begun by asking people to reflect on the ways they address God in prayer. After all, St. Gregory of Sinai suggested that Christian prayer entails “sharing in the divine nature.” He even claimed that “prayer is God.”

In Christian prayer we learn to develop a relationship with the One to whom we pray. Such a relationship is crucial, for it helps us deepen our understanding of God and renounce the ways in which we have constructed “god” in our own image. Similarly,

it is only through developing a relationship with someone that I slowly learn how to describe his or her character. Reading about a person is no substitute for getting to know her. Developing a relationship with God involves both learning how to pray and learning more about the One to whom we pray.

The disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." In such prayer the disciples discovered communion with God, the One whom Jesus addressed as "Abba." They also discovered that prayer and the knowledge and love of God are closely related. That is why the Eastern Christian tradition has always emphasized the close relationship between prayer and theology. As one maxim puts it, "The person who prays is a true theologian and the true theologian is one who prays."

Perhaps it was my son's own yearning to understand more about the God whom we worship that led him to ask his follow-up question. Or maybe it was a sense that, for all of our involvement in church activities, he--like the disciples--wants to learn better how to pray. Whatever the reason, his question reminds us that the deepest issue is not what we do at school, or in our vocation, but how we connect our learning and our living to a desire to know and love the God of Jesus Christ.