

Some of you have probably heard the story of the three blind men and the elephant. Once three blind men wandering through the forest came upon an elephant who was just standing there. The one blind man reached out and by chance grabbed the tail of the elephant. He came to the conclusion that this animal, unseen by him, was a lot like a snake or a leathery piece of rope. The second blind man was standing near one leg of the elephant. He reached out and touched the leg and tried to stretch his arms around it. He came to the conclusion that an elephant is more than anything like the trunk of a tree. The third blind man happened to be standing on a ladder. He reached out and touched the side of the elephant. He reached as far as he could to the right and to the left and up and down and came to the conclusion that an elephant is a lot like the side of a barn. Finally the three blind men got together to compare notes and they were astounded at what different conceptions they had of the same animal. How could they reconcile their conclusions? How is it possible that this animal could be like a snake or a piece of rope, the trunk of a tree, and the side of a barn? Because they were blind and because of their lack of perspective they each had conceptions which seemed mutually contradictory.

When it comes to God all of us are like those blind men. None of us can see God with our natural eyes. The apostle John wrote, "No man hath seen God at any time." So like blind men and women, people have tried to describe God on the basis of their feelings for thousands of years. Since we can't see God, like those blind men, we grope around and feel God each in our different ways. And then, when we get together to compare notes we are astounded at how different our conclusions are. That's why there are so many different religions which contradict one another. Each of us feels God in a different way. Each of us expresses our feelings in a different way. Each of us describes God from differing standpoints. Like the blind men who stood in different places, each one of us feels something different and when we try to describe our feelings we find they seem to contradict the feelings of others. Even within the Christian church, within the United Presbyterian Church, and within a local congregation there may be contradictory beliefs about God.

But it's not entirely true to say that all beliefs about God are contradictory; nor is it true to say that all beliefs about God are based on our mere feelings. Jesus came to open blind eyes and make them whole. Just

as the eye is the light of the body, Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus opened the eyes of blind people so they could see the light of the world. But far more important he opens our eyes to see God. Of course we can't see the Risen Christ with our physical eyes as Thomas did, but he does open the eyes of our soul to see God when we believe in him. He said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the father."

Originally the church was composed of people all of whom saw God as with a single eye. The apostles were united in their doctrine. And although no one could see Jesus literally after his ascension the early church was united in that they believed with one mind what the apostles taught. And there was a time when the Presbyterian church was united in the way they saw God. People were drawn together in a close fellowship because they all saw God in the same way. They joined the church, not because their parents or ancestors were Presbyterians, but because they believed the Westminster Confession of Faith contained the System of doctrine taught in the Bible. They saw God as with one eye.

This is the way the body of Christ, the church, should be. Jesus said, "If therefore thine eye be single, thy

whole body shall be full of light." We should all see God as with a single eye because God is not simply a projection of our feelings and emotions. He is really out there as an objective fact. Because of that, those who have eyes to see him see him the same way. And when we as Christians begin to see God as with a single eye then the whole body of Christ is filled with light.

To a large degree this is true today despite all the competing Christian denominations. When you think of all these denominations the amazing thing is to discover that there are so many people who see God in the same way within these denominations; who adhere to the same creeds, who speak the same language, who share the same experiences. Some are episcopalians, methodists, lutherans, baptists, and Roman Catholics. The denominational label doesn't seem to matter that much. The important thing is that there are men and women within these churches who see God in pretty much the same way. Independently they interpret the Bible in nearly the same way. Unlike the three blind men who came to quite different conclusions, these people have come to the same conclusions despite the fact they may be very different otherwise. And when these people

discover one another there is real joy and openness. Because they see God the same way, a Presbyterian may have more in common with a Roman Catholic or a Baptist than with many people within his own denomination.

The same thing is true when I read church history or biographies of the saints. You would think that intelligent Christians living in the twentieth century would see God quite differently from Christians living 500 or a thousand years ago. But the amazing thing I discover is that I see people living in the 20th century who see God the same way as people did a hundred years ago, 500 years ago or a 1000 years ago. When I read Luther or Calvin or St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine and the early church fathers I say to myself, "These men are describing the same God I see. I have experienced him in much the same way as they have. I feel one with them. And I long for a greater sense of that unity among Christians who are living today.

It truly amazes me that <sup>many</sup> men and women who are different in so many other ways, separated by culture, generations, and geography and language, all see God in nearly the same way. And when I realize this I begin to have more confidence that my religious beliefs, my faith in God, is not

based on my own subjective feelings, like the three blind men whose beliefs about the elephant were based on their feelings. My beliefs are based on something solid, something as objective as science, something that is really there, out there, to be seen by all who have eyes to see. What I see is verified by the same witness of Christian men and women in every age.

How much of your faith in God is based on mere feelings? So many church members stop learning after they go through a communicants class. They stop using their eyes and their spiritual sight becomes dim and they fall into darkness. So many of us remember little bits and pieces from Sunday school about Jesus, we add to this what we read about religion in newspapers and magazines. We mix this up with our own feelings and social and political prejudices and we call this hodge-podge Christianity.

But when you compare it with the creeds of the church or the hymns we sing or even the Bible itself there is little relation between the two. An honest appraisal of our situation should lead us to conclude that there is something wrong with our spiritual eyesight. Otherwise how could two people looking at the same object, that is God, see something so different from one another?

But you may be saying, "What difference does it make whether our beliefs are the same? After all isn't belief in God just a matter of personal feelings?" Do you really believe that? Is God just a projection of our own subjective feelings, like Sigmund Freud proposed in his little book, The Future of an Illusion? Can we know nothing more of God than blind men groping in the dark? As long as we base our beliefs about God on our feelings we will grope in the dark and come to false conclusions about God. We need to be almost scientific in our approach to God, as Thomas was. We need to study the creeds and confessions of our church. We need to read and study the Bible. And above all we need to have our eyes made whole so we can see.

Murdock Campbell, a Presbyterian minister who died a couple years ago, wrote in his autobiography, "One of my earliest memories is that of standing before my father lisping a prayer which he wanted me to repeat every day until the Lord would give me a prayer from Himself. For a mere child beginning to put words together this prayer was not only a light burden, but also a suitable plea.

"Lord, in mercy open the eyes of my soul that I may see my need of Christ. Amen."

"That was all." This prayer was so woven into his mind

and mercy that for years, without adding to it or  
from it, he said it night and day, when he got up in the  
morning and when he went to bed at night until one day God  
opened his eyes to see his need of Christ.

May each one of us who are parents begin to teach  
our young children the same prayer. "Lord, in mercy open  
the eyes of my sould that I may see my need of Christ."

And may we pray for them every morning and every evening  
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as Thomas did. But may none of us be satisfied to base  
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