

Background to Modern Theology

Immanuel Kant

16.10.2005

Last week, I began a series which looks at six influential people who have shaped much of modern Christianity. In their legacy, Christian leaders and people have changed traditional faith and understanding of God, and have discovered a completely different type of belief from our forefathers.

I spoke about David Hume, who grappled with how we can prove something is true, and 'did miracles occur?' David was a fine example of what is called an Empiricist. He thought of our world as being a whole series of unrelated events hitting our senses. There is no cause and effect in the world, but if we notice a series of consistent patterns in an event, we can (with the theory of probability) say the event is proved to be true. and then he ruled out miracles, based on his understanding of proof.

Hume's work was influential. But Immanuel Kant challenged it, and brought about an even greater change in the way western people think of life.

Immanuel Kant was born in Konigsberg, East Prussia in 1724. His family was very strict, and Immanuel kept a very rigid daily timetable. He was finnick and thorough. He became Professor of Logic and metaphysics at the university there, and died in 1804.

There were two main schools of thought at that time about understanding life.

1. Hume said we only know life by the impressions our five senses pick up.
2. A totally different idea was popular in Europe. It said you can understand our world by the instinctive categories and knowledge you were born with. You do not need your five senses to make sense of the world.

Immanuel Kant radically combined the two.

He said we experience the world as a massive series of impressions, but in order to make sense of life, from birth our brain organises them into groups or categories.

This became so popular, that most of us think it is so obvious, and we cannot understand why it was not accepted since the start of time. That is like the way most young people think that personal computers have always been there, and cannot imagine a world without them.

But along with making sense of how we understand our world, Immanuel Kant brought a sting in his tail.

For by accepting the ideas of us perceiving and grouping the images our senses picked up, he took it the next logical step. If we only ever know our perception of reality, then we can never know the true reality as it is.

eg I can touch, smell, taste, see and hear this book. My brain sorts that info and tells me it is a book, and what book it is. But, because I can only ever know it by what I perceive, Kant says I can never be totally sure if my perceptions are accurate. I can never really KNOW that book. Because I have to perceive and evaluate reality, I may get it wrong.

In my brain, it is possible that I could have the equivalent of a pair of red coloured glasses, so that everything I perceive is tinted red.

What does this have to do with God?

Kant concluded, that we can never really know God. Especially since God is not in our material or phenomenal world, he is in the noumena or sense-free part of life.

His work changed how many people thought about God.

The Bible says we can know God and He knows us. We know God most importantly through Jesus Christ, because Jesus has made Him known to us.

But Kant and some following him, changed the way people did theology. No longer was theology a study of God, and how God relates to His creation. Theology became man centred. They claimed all we can know is how people have understood God, since God can never be

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known.

To clarify: Imagine zooming in a spaceship, and coming to a new world. In that world, the fog is enormous. You stumble around and many things bump into you. You try grabbing them and feeling what they are, but you are not sure what life looks like on this planet. Your brain is trying to make sense of it, but it is confusing.

Finally you notice a book on the ground, written by another explorer. They have grappled with the same problems. As you read, you understand some more. However, all you are learning is their impressions and experiences.

If only the fog would lift, so you could really tell what was going on!

That is like what Kant says about knowing God. There is a fog blocking our true knowledge of our world, but there is a massive gap between God and us, so we can never be sure of the truth. We can only have impressions of truth, and our understanding of God is only an understanding of what others have thought.

This means the Bible can no longer be called God's Word. It becomes a record of how people have perceived God. You can say people have accepted it as being God's word.

Kant (and others who followed) stripped away Christian certainty, and left us wallowing in a fog of the great unknown.

Suddenly, Christians felt like the listeners in the Areopagus groping for truth, rather than like Paul who had such a clear grasp of the truth of God.

Kant also had an enormous effect on thinking in many other areas of life and Xy, including how can we have free will, and the place of whether we have choices or not, but I have chosen not to get into that today.

As Kant's work spread, the clarity of the gospel, and the certainty of knowing God in Christ Jesus, and the precision of knowing God by His Spirit through His word all flew out the window.

However, the problem with Kant's work was that he was defining our world from a seeker's perspective. He automatically ruled out that God could intervene into the material world. So what he was left with were people groping for truth.

The Bible clearly talks about this. Even in the opening verses of John's Gospel it speaks of this problem. Instead of comparing it to a fog, it calls it darkness. We're stumbling around in the dark. That part, Kant had right.

But what Kant could not include in His view of the world, was a God who has shone the truth into the darkness. His light has come into the world, and made things clear. The truth has been made flesh and lived among us, and we have known God in perfect reality.

Listen to John 1:1-18. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law*

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indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

Do not get caught in doubt. We can and do know God through Christ.