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Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism

Amanda Drury

Amanda Drury, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana, delivered this opening lecture of The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, April 25, 2017.

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hen we encounter a teenager who really seems to “get it,” we need to follow up to see just what exactly they “got.”

It is becoming increasingly difficult to claim a faith tradition without including caveats. “I’m a Christian, but not the kind who...” “I’m a Christian but I believe that...” “I’m a Protestant who thinks...” We make more apologies than declarations. In this particular political climate, our statements of faith appear with ready-made disclaimers. We have modifiers, adjectives, statements of clarification, because the only thing worse than being a Christian is being *that* kind of Christian. Of course, this assumes we say anything at all. Sometimes it’s just easier to duck. What we proclaim, if we proclaim anything at all, is not anything prophetic as much as it is...nice.

We’ve been trying of late to add some passion to the niceness. However, in an effort to get our teenagers to feel something remotely religious we forget there can be unintended consequences of passionate faith. And so when we encounter a teenager who really seems to “get it,” we need to follow up to see what they “got.”

It has been twelve years since we first heard that phrase “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”—the National Study of Youth and Religion led by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton revealing that the de facto religion of North American teenagers seems to be one where God is a divine butler or a cosmic therapist. You ask the average church-attending teenager what they believe and they shrug. God is a God of “benign whateverism;” Smith and Denton say¹. Christianity, is a religion of the nice. We’ve been hearing all about this for the past decade.

Smith and Denton’s studies suggest that these teenagers are an accurate reflection of their parents. What you see in the parent is reflected in the child. Kenda Dean followed up this research with the alarming observation that it’s not that teenagers aren’t paying attention in church. It’s that they *are* paying attention. They are picking up what we are putting down. These teenagers are holding up a mirror, allowing us to see the ramifications of our formational words.

Somewhere along the way the good news started seeming less good and more—*nice*. And this nice news wasn’t really even *news*; it was stale. The Good News morphed into a very nice history lesson where we were transformed not so much into the image of Christ as we were into the color of beige.

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 266. I am increasingly grateful for my research assistant, John Wilson, for his contributions to this piece.

That was twelve years ago. We've had twelve years to get our sea legs in this newly described Moralistic Therapeutic Deist territory, twelve years asking: "how do we convince teenagers that this matters? That this is worth dying for? That God is not a distant, removed being but is present. Here. That faith and sacrifice often go together." We've spent twelve years trying to bring back the passion.

Now full disclosure: I have spent the last ten of those twelve years feeling pretty smug. MTD was a description of *other* people. Of *other* churches. *Other* faith traditions.

I come from a tradition that is highly articulate and highly devoted. You ask us what we believe and not only can we tell you, we can also tell you how you can believe it for yourself. We talk about Jesus like he's our best friend. We speak of God as if we just spent an hour at Starbucks with him (and there's a good chance we actually did). And I love that about my tradition. I really do.

I knew about an immanent God. I understood my faith went beyond being nice. I was told God was present, always watching and that God loved the world, pined for it, really. I was told that true peace came through Christ Jesus, that happiness meant holiness, and that my faith was worth dying for.

There was only one problem: I believed it.

In our post MTD world, we have *been struggling with the question*, "What if our teenagers don't take this whole faith thing seriously?" However, perhaps an equally weighty question is, "What if they do?"

I believed Jesus was a present and personal God who wanted to be involved in my everyday life. I also believed I was continually on the cusp of hurting God's feelings.

I believed my faith involved suffering and sacrifice and that Jesus called for less of me and more of him. I also believed that if I was not involved in some kind of spiritual battle, I was doing something wrong. Comfortability equaled complacency and complacency equaled backsliding. If you're not moving forward, you are obviously moving backward.

I believed Jesus was the answer for the world in the same way I believed an EpiPen® was needed for a peanut allergy. And so my task in life was to run to every person I met and ask, "Are you allergic to peanuts? Do you have an EpiPen®? I have one right here." Because what kind of monster isn't offering an EpiPen® to a world dying of peanut exposure?

I was not caught up in the life of God; rather, Jesus was in my pocket ready to be used. My faith was less, "I have come that they might have life," and more along the lines of God as Princess Leia, "Help me, Mandy, you're my only hope!"

Somewhere along the way the good news stopped seeming so good. It was news, all right. There was a message to be shared that was quite different from the message of the world. But the news wasn't necessarily good. And when the Good News isn't good, it's just news...alternative news.

My fear is that in running from moralistic therapeutic deism, we run the risk of overcorrecting in a Pac-Man like fashion; coming out on the other side. My fear is that in stoking flames of passion within an MTD context we are unintentionally creating a culture of Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism.

While there are teenagers operating under the MTD pretext that God is here to make them happy, there are also those teenagers who are equally convinced they are here to make God happy. Both strands have distorted images of God. And it’s within this context, many of us have found ourselves shifting from a religion of “benign whateverism” to a kind of “malignant fervor.”

Here’s a look at both MTD and MTP in a side by side comparison:

Question	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism	Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism
Metaphysical beginning	1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.	1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and planned out every day of my life before I was even born.
Moral means	2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.	2. God wants people to be holy and obedient, to pray and read their bibles, and to share their faith.
Moral ends	3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.	3. The central goal of life is to make God happy
Metaphysical middle	4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.	4. God wants to be involved in every single aspect of one's life, and if he's not, his feelings are hurt.
Metaphysical/moral end	5. Good people go to heaven when they die.	5. Saved people go to heaven when they die.

For MTD, “Immanuel” means “God with us...when we’re in trouble.” And for MTP “Immanuel” means “God with us...and can’t live without us.” If MTD is, “I will go to God when I am anxious,” MTP is, “I am anxious because of God.” The therapeutic element is certainly there. If I can make God feel happy, then I will feel happy. My happiness is contingent on God’s happiness, and God’s happiness is contingent on my actions. In MTD God is emotionally distant. In MTP God is emotionally needy. If MTD is a bastardization of the Gospel, then MTP is its incestuous counterpart.

The 2014 movie, “Stations of the Cross” follows 12-year-old Maria who is a part of a Vatican 2-rejecting, conservative Catholic sect and is preparing for her upcoming confirmation. The film is

broken into fourteen fixed, wide-angled shots, each representing one of the stations of the cross.² The cinematography alone is worth watching as each scene unfolds within a single, stationary and continuous shot.

The movie opens at the first station of the cross, “Jesus is condemned to death.” Maria and her peers are receiving instructions from their priest concerning their upcoming confirmation. The priest describes the world as being at war with the Gospel and invites the young teenagers to enlist as warriors, making sacrifices to advance the Kingdom of God. By this logic a sacrifice (i.e. not listening to music on the radio) creates more space in my life for the Holy Spirit to reside. “Each time we say ‘no’ we make room for Jesus in our hearts,” he reasons. The ultimate call, of course, is to give one’s entire life as sacrifice, thereby being fully dedicated to God. Maria, taking all of this in, asks whether or not one could make a sacrifice for the sake of another. We soon learn that Maria has her 4-year-old brother in mind who has a form of autism and has yet to utter a single word.

The second scene opens with the title, “Jesus Carries his Cross” and shows Maria on a walk with her family through the German countryside. After remarking on the beauty of the scenery, Maria asks Bernadette, her au pair, “Do you think it could be sacrificed?” Bernadette hesitantly supposes it could.

So, Maria continues the walk, keeping her gaze straight ahead and directed towards the ground. She has, in her mind, sacrificed a view, thereby creating more space inside of her for God. She takes it a step further and removes both her coat and her cardigan and continues her walk in the frigid spring air in a thin, short-sleeved blouse, sacrificing her warmth. Her reasoning: Less of me and my desires, more of God.

This backfires, however as Maria’s stern and domineering mother approaches and scolds her daughter for her impractical clothing. Her mother mistakes the sacrifice for an attention-seeking move and accuses her daughter of being vain in her desire to show off her beautiful blouse. You see Maria’s mental anguish as her attempts at piety are misinterpreted as pride.

The sacrifices continue. She gives up singing in a choir. She begins to spurn the young man with whom she enjoyed friendship. Her meal portions shrink and shrink until it is clear her own life is at risk. But Maria’s joy is set before her. Her understanding of being wholly God’s dictates how she operates within the world.

The day of Maria’s confirmation arrives, and she approaches the altar shaking. She is already anxious about having all eyes on her, potentially admiring her confirmation dress. What if she falls into pride? As she kneels before the priest to receive a blessing she swoons, falls to the floor, and ultimately ends up hospitalized.

The doctors are clearly concerned. Not only is Maria not eating, but she clearly no longer desires to live. In fact, conversations about death meant to bring her to her senses only entrench her

² *Stations of the Cross*, directed by Dietrich Bruggemann (Germany: Film Movement, 2015).

further in her desire to be a living sacrifice. Her nearness to death is her sign that she is closer to God. The nurse's wise pleas for health are received as foolishness.

In one of the final scenes, "Jesus dies on the cross," Maria is on her deathbed and requests that the priest visit and offer final unction. The priest arrives with communion and she opens her mouth to receive the sacrament. However, as she attempts to swallow the wafer, after having not eaten anything for quite some time, Maria begins to cough and choke to the point that she flat lines. The room fills with doctors, an attending nurse reaches into her mouth to dislodge the host, but despite their efforts, they are unable to resuscitate Maria. In an ironic and troubling twist, the moment Maria is declared dead, her autistic brother opens his mouth and utters his first words, leaving the viewers wondering just where and how God was present.

For Maria, the Bible was indeed a double-edged sword—one she was called to thrust herself upon. Maria was the good girl. The kid we all want in our youth group. She stays after church to ask questions. She desires to integrate her understanding of faith into her form of life. She seeks to honor her parents. When we encounter a teenager who seems to really "get it," we need to follow up to see what they got.

My earlier research focused on teenagers who "got it;" teenagers who were articulate on faith matters. I was (and still am) fully committed to this articulation theory that adolescents engage in their most authentic selves when they are able to articulate just who exactly they are (as opposed to merely assenting to whom we proclaim them to be). Thinking of Maria, it seemed wise to revisit some of these youth groups to attempt to explore the object of their articulated faith. To see just what it was they "got."

Now, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton administered 3290 Surveys and 167 in-depth phone interviews with the help of over 20 associates, over the course of two years. I interviewed sixteen teenagers with the help of three associates over the course of six months. So, you can see, we pretty much did the same thing.³

Obviously not. Let me be clear: I am not attempting to make any grand sociological claims; rather, I am attempting to listen to the theology that is expressed in articulate teenagers; to listen as they describe their faith and to search out theological implications that undergird such talk.

The sixteen teenagers we interviewed were highly devoted teenagers. The kind of kids you want in your youth group. When we asked them to describe God, the word most commonly used was "friend." God is like a friend. Following the survey, we sat down in individual face-to-face interviews and asked them to tell us more about this friendship. And this is where things got a bit sticky.

This idea of God as friend sounds great! It wonderfully captures the love and affection I want for my teenagers to have in their understanding of God.

³ I am indebted to Pastors Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis who invested many hours in overseeing and transcribing these interviews as well as their engagement in the many conversations that led to the above conclusions. This research was made possible by the Adolescent Faith and Flourishing initiative housed in the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

But there's a problem. What if this friend is constantly tagging along, budding into your conversations? What if this friend was constantly asking to be introduced to your other friends? What if this friend wants you to repost every single one of their online statuses? What if this friend is counting the minutes between texts to see how long it takes you to respond to gauge your loyalty? Jesus is a friend who's really, super sensitive.

Many of the teenagers told stories about being ignored by a friend, or neglecting to include someone and how sad they felt. In an act of anthropomorphism, their feelings from these experiences were then transferred to God. In other words, God was not defining friendship; rather, the teenagers' understanding of friendship was defining God.

Nathan explained it this way:

So, if you're in relationship with any human...it might hurt if they don't talk about you when something comes up...If I say to all my friends on the track team, "I love that Micah runs on the team" and then Wyatt is standing right there...like me and Wyatt have a friendship and God and I have a friendship and so it hurts him because he could be disappointed in me.⁴

Vanessa explains:

I feel like I'd be sad if someone didn't mention my name if something had to do with me...so God in the same way...if something great happened that he had a part in and I was telling someone else...I think he'd be sad if we didn't mention Him.⁵

You could sense the internal conflict as these teenagers attempted to rectify this easily disappointed friend with an all-loving God.

Annie sums this up nicely: "I mean, I think he's a little upset...like he's not upset, but...semi-disappointed but not super-disappointed...he's not happy but sorta disappointed that you missed that opportunity but at the same time he presents other opportunities so he's very forgiving about it."⁶ You can see the cognitive dissonance here.

While the concept of "friend" is generally thought to be a pleasant one, we would be remiss not to consider the role and function of *teenage* friendships. The recently coined word "frienemy" describes the adolescent friendship culture well. Consider the adolescent propensity towards jealousy should their friend Jesus spend more time with another person. Vanessa confesses:

⁴ Nathan, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁵ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁶ Annie, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

“When somebody else says that they heard from God I feel kinda like, *Ah man, why didn't I hear from God too? Why didn't God speak to me? He spoke to this person.*”⁷

Vanessa acknowledges this kind of jealousy is not something she is necessarily proud of:

I know that it's not really a good way to think about it but when you're comparing your spiritual lives, I'm like *I go to church more than them, or I'm in the word more than they are, or I try so much harder than they do, and I still haven't heard from God. So why have they been called by God or spoken to by him, and I haven't?*⁸

If the Jesus of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a divine butler or the cosmic therapist Smith and Denton speak of, than the Jesus of Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism is that awkward friend slightly off to the side, watching my every move. Imagine a relationship where you are continually afraid of hurting one's feelings; a relationship where the other person is continually slipping in tests and opportunities to prove your love and loyalty. If I am in a relationship with another who is a) perfect and b) easily disappointed, either I am not going to last long, or I am going to be a miserable individual with a warped understanding of the Good News.

Sometimes, in our efforts to convince teenagers that God matters and is present and personal, we overcompensate and create God in our own image to the point that my understanding of the word “friend” over determines my understanding of God.

My fear is that in describing Christianity in our impassioned terms, we convince our young people that our faith is worth dying for but forget to show them how to live.

Just last week, an article commemorating the religious impact of Columbine emerged. Writer Alissa Wilkinson speaks of “the ‘awesomeness of martyrdom’ having been “converted into a kind of fantasy of oppression, wherein persecution is something to be wished for, not something to escape.”⁹ Alan Noble writing for *The Atlantic* in 2014 referred to the “evangelical persecution complex” and warned us of problematic Christian narratives of suffering that “fetishize suffering.”¹⁰ Noble explains how persecution can often be a sign to Evangelical Christians that they are doing something right. “The danger of this view,” he writes, “is that believers can come to see victimhood as an essential part of their identity.”

⁷ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁸ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁹ Alissa Wilkinson, “After Columbine, Martyrdom Became a Popular Fantasy for Christian Teenagers,” *Vox*, April 2017, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/20/15369442/columbine-anniversary-cassie-bernell-rachel-scott-martyrdom>.

¹⁰ Alan Noble, “The Evangelical Persecution Complex: The Theological and Cultural Roots of a Damaging Attitude in the Christian Community,” *The Atlantic*, August 2014, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>.

Now, I don't want to get rid of the passion part. I hold onto that mindset that faith is worth risking your whole life for. And so, important questions emerge: How do I describe a God who is personal but not petty? How do I speak of a God who is passionate and also immutable?

Without letting go of this idea of a God who suffers with us, I think we need to reclaim the doctrine of immutability within the youth world—this idea that God is unchanging and that I cannot hurt God's feelings. Without immutability we are stuck with a God who loves us on Monday and is annoyed with us on Tuesday.

This is difficult for anyone to grasp—and teenagers in particular. Maria is missing the nuance of her priest's words. When I speak of the Good News, when I make feeble attempts to speak of an unspeakable God, I must find a way to speak with mystery and beauty without relying on a teenager's brain to be able to nuance my words. God is passionate. And God is unchanging.

This nuancing can be tricky for teenagers. Teenagers are not known for their subtlety. This was made perfectly clear to me in my first youth ministry position while I was a seminary student. On a Sunday morning in front of a full youth room, a 7th grade girl announced, "No offense, Amanda..." (you already know this is not going in a good direction). "No offence, Amanda, but I wouldn't be caught dead in that sweater you're wearing." I was speechless. However, my husband jumped in and said something along the lines of, "Well, I know you're not really a pink person, so maybe it's the pink?" He asked the young woman who was clad in black. "No," she said thoughtfully, "it's not just the pink. It's actually most of her wardrobe." And there you have it: subtlety at its finest.

We see evidence of this struggle with subtlety and nuance in various neurological studies. A few years back, Neuropsychologist Deborah Yurgelun-Todd of Harvard University's McClean Hospital led a study mapping the differences between adolescent and adult brains. Using MRI technology, both adult and adolescent volunteers were shown a series of pictures of people's faces and asked to identify the emotion they saw in the facial expression. The team of neuropsychologists would observe brain patterns in connection with the emotions identified.¹¹ Here is an example of one of the photos shown.¹²



It was not a large study; nevertheless, Yurgelun-Todd was surprised by the discrepancies between adolescent and adult brains. Every single one of the adults in the study was able to correctly identify the emotion of fear in this photo. "The woman is afraid" was the response

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Inside the Teenage Brain: Interview with Deborah Yurgelun-Todd," PBS: Frontline, 2002, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/todd.html>.

given. The teenagers, however, were not able to come to the same conclusion. While there were a few teenagers who identified the emotion of fear, the other responses given were anger, sadness, surprise. What seemed clear to the adults in the study was not nearly as clear to the teenagers.

Furthermore, adolescent participants in the study used different parts of their brains to reach their conclusions. Adults relied upon their pre-frontal cortices—that area which we say carries out executive functions—the critical thinking part of our brains. Adolescents were operating out of their amygdala—that part of the brain associated with emotions—when exposed to the fearful faces.¹³

To put it bluntly, what seemed perfectly clear to the adults was less clear to the adolescents involved in the study. That which we could easily identify with our prefrontal cortices was interpreted by a more visceral reaction for our teenagers. Simply put, when I think I am expressing fear or concern, they might hear disappointment or anger. So how do we speak of the mystery of the gospel, the hope from sin, the grace of penance, while still serving as responsible curators of the adolescent brain?

I say, “friend,” and they hear, “frienemy.”

I say “sacrifice,” and Maria hears “stop eating.”

The more impassioned my language, the more careful I must be with my words, tone, and facial expressions. I want Maria to know of the passionate fidelity God has towards her. I also want her to know that God has that same passionate fidelity for her younger Autistic brother, and that the goodness of God is not a zero-sum game. She does not give up her life so that her brother might have more life. There is enough life to go around because that is who God is. Moreover, God has that same passionate fidelity toward God’s self. God is unchanging.

I want Maria to nuance her understanding of sacrifice according to the story of her namesake, Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary’s “may it be done to me according to as you have said” is not a story about Mary ceasing to be; rather, she expresses an openness for the fullness of God to dwell within the fullness of her own person.

This is what I want for my own children. I want my children to grasp the passion of Christ. I want them to know that there is a passionate fidelity that God extends to God’s children. God is faithful to you. God is faithful to me. And I also want them to know that God is faithful to God’s self. God is immutable. God is unchanging.

Immutability is not a youth group friendly word: after all, is there anything more mutable than a teenager? What does it mean to speak of an unchangeable God to mutating teenagers? Unchanging. Unchangeable. I wonder if in our efforts to convince teenagers that God is with us and God is for us, we forget that God is not contingent on us. And this God is unchanging. God is passionately faithful to me, and God is passionately faithful to God’s self.

¹³ Ibid.

Immutability is a tricky term. It's one that immediately sends me to my rolodex of Bible stories, searching out the stories where God has changed, tempered, adjusted. At first glance the immutability of God appears to threaten the passion of God. I want a God that is moved by me and who grows in compassion. I would like to think that perhaps the words I pray could somehow prompt change.

My 9-year-old is prone to ear infections. He recently had a particularly painful episode that left doctors scratching their heads on how to help him. As I was tucking him in that night Sam said, "I know God has compassion for me when he sees I have an earache. But do you think it's possible that God could know what it's like to *actually feel* just how painful it is? Do you think he could feel it so that he has even *more* compassion for me?"

Sam doesn't just want a God who is compassionate; he wants a God who grows in compassion because of what Sam is experiencing. Sam wants God to change.

Sam wants a mutable God. I want Sam to know a mutable God. I want Sam to know of the God who suffers with him. I want Sam to know a mutable God. I also want Sam to know an immutable God. I want Sam to know that the passion of God is not contingent on Sam's actions. I want Sam to know that he cannot hurt God's feelings, that God is God regardless of what Sam does, and that God is glorified whether Sam glorifies him or not.

My initial reaction to the doctrine of immutability is one of discomfort. But just as our teens read their understanding of friendship into how they see God, so too am I tempted to read my understanding of immutability into how I see God, to let immutability define God rather than the other way around.

And so just as God informs us on what true friendship means, so God informs us on what immutable means. Immutability is not defined in a dictionary, it is defined by God. And God, we see, is passionately immutable.

Characteristics of God do not exist in a vacuum. They cannot be lined up in neat columns. Attempting to give us something tangible to grasp, we systematize what we believe about God, oftentimes ordering it neatly to fit a fifteen-week syllabus. But, as Kate Sonderegger writes, "The attributes of God, though unique, are also indivisible."¹⁴ You cannot have one without the other. And so, God is passionate. And God is immutable. And God is passionately immutable. God is immutably passionate.

And so we recall the story of the lost son and we remember the father who waits, who watches, and when he sees his son, is moved with compassion and runs. A passionate God runs. An immutably passionate God *always* runs. Do you hear the good news in immutability?

Words matter. Let's keep saying that God is a friend--but unlike any other friend we have ever known. God is a parent—but unlike any parent we have ever known. God is unchanging—but unlike anything unchanging we have ever seen before. Let us also occasionally remove the

¹⁴ Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 299.

familial terms we use for God and speak of God as light or God as rock, because you can't hurt a rock's feelings.

A passionate God runs. An immutably passionate God *always* runs.

A passionate shepherd looks for the sheep. An immutably passionate shepherd *always* looks for the sheep.

We cannot hurt God's feelings. We cannot put God in a good mood. God's happiness is self-contained in God's self. And it is within this self-contained happiness that God chooses to be happy with and for us.

Not long ago my husband John and I were sharing about our days before we went to bed. I made the comment with some consternation, "I'm not sure I was even remotely aware of the presence of God this entire day."

"And yet," John responded, "God was present with you all day long anyway."

In that conversation two paths clearly emerged. One path led to a moody God conjuring within me shame and anxiety. The other was a passionately immutable God who, by his very nature, is with me regardless of whether or not I acknowledge him. One path is an impetus for fear, the other, an invitation to worship. That's good news.