

Dear Class Member,

Recent news tells us about the development of a new world map that is the most accurate yet without being shaped like a globe. While this is good news in the realms of cartography and cosmology, it does invite thinking about the limits of two-dimensional representations -- as well as two-dimensional (or, in a word, *flat*) thinking as we read the Bible and seek to comprehend God. So that will be the topic of our next class.

Due to a lack of interest, *The Wired Word* Zoom classes are *cancelled*. We continue to have our combined Sunday evening and Tuesday morning Bible studies. We look forward to resuming in-person *The Present Word* classes for the first four Sundays of May, before switching to our summer schedule. In the meantime, you can continue to use *The Wired Word* sheets in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.



## New World Map Is Most Accurate Yet

*The Wired Word* for the Week of March 21, 2021

### In the News

Until now, if you were circling the world and wanted to carry with you the most accurate representation of your journey possible, you'd need to lug a globe. That's because no two-dimensional flat map could represent our three-dimensional spherical planet Earth without misleading distortions of the size of land masses or the distance between them, or both.

But now, a trio of map experts have developed "what might be the most accurate flat map ever made," says a news report from the Office of Communications at Princeton University.

That new flat map is two-sided and circular, like a DVD, and it is easily held in one's hand. The Northern Hemisphere is on one side of the map and the Southern Hemisphere on the other. (See a picture of the map in the *EarthSky* article found in the links list below.)

This new approach is the combined work of Princeton astrophysicist J. Richard Gott; Robert Vanderbei, a Princeton professor of operations research and financial engineering; and Drexel University astrophysicist David Goldberg.

While its representation of the world cannot be as error-free as a globe, it comes quite close, minimizing all six types of distortion found on other flat maps -- distortions including local shapes, areas, distances, flexion (bending), skewness (lopsidedness) and boundary cuts.

The Princeton article explains that the three designers of the new map "used an equidistant azimuthal projection: a compromise projection ... with small errors in both local shapes and areas, instead of optimizing one at the expense of the other. Antarctica and Australia are more accurately represented than in most other maps, and distances across oceans or across poles are both accurate and easy to measure, unlike one-sided flat maps."

Goldberg and Gott had previously designed a numerical system to quantify map errors where the lower the score, the smaller the errors and the better the map. The Goldberg-Gott error score is the sum of squares of the six normalized individual error terms.

Using that system, the new two-sided map has an error score of only 0.881. For comparison, the Mercator projection -- the one most of us remember posted on our classroom wall in grade school -- has an error score of 8.296. An almost-spherical globe, which mimics the actual shape of the Earth, would have an error score of 0.0.

Not counting the new double-sided map, there are at least 10 other flat-map representations of the world (see in links list below). But here are three, and their related shortcoming (all three are pictured in the *EarthSky* article below, and the pictures will give you a better understanding than words alone can do):

- The Mercator projection (Goldberg-Gott score: 8.296) depicts local shapes well, but distorts the relative size of the continents, with Antarctica looking bigger than all other continents combined. Some versions of this map don't show the polar regions at all.
- The Winkel tripel projection (Goldberg-Gott score: 4.563), represents the poles more accurately than the Mercator, but it still distorts Antarctica badly and creates the illusion that Japan is hugely to the east of California, instead of its nearest neighbor to the west.
- The Dymaxion polyhedral projection is based on an unfolded icosahedron (Goldberg-Gott score: greater than 15). Antarctica is "round, as it properly should be," said Gott, but this projection "shatters" the oceans.

In an article in *Scientific American* describing the new map, Gott acknowledged that its disadvantage is that the viewer can't see all of the Earth's surface at once, But he added that this is true for the globe as well. "Our map is actually more like the globe in this respect than other flat maps. To see all of the globe, you have to rotate it; to see all of the new map, you simply have to flip it over, as you can see below," Gott said.

The new double-sided map can be printed front and back on a single sheet of paper so that traveler circling the world can leave the bulky globe behind.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Astrophysicists Design 'Radically Different' World Map.](#) *EarthSky*

[The Most Accurate Flat Map of Earth Yet.](#) *Scientific American*

[Why Your Mental Map of the World Is \(Probably\) Wrong.](#) *National Geographic*

[Top 10 World Map Projections.](#) *The Future Mapping Company*

### **Applying the News Story**

Flat representations of three-dimensional realities have their place -- and sometimes a very useful place. Think, for example, of the Flat Stanley Project, the educational venture started in 1995 by a third-grade schoolteacher in Canada. It features paper cutouts based on the title character of the 1964 children's book *Flat Stanley*. It is designed to help elementary school students improve their reading and writing skills, while also promoting an interest in learning about different people and places. The project has proven successful and is now in use in 88 countries.

So too, flat maps help us picture our world and understand something about distance, relationships, geographic significance and wayfinding. Thus, we are all for improved maps that help us to grasp those things more accurately.

But, as indicated in the "In the News" section above two-dimensional representations can also distort reality and thus distort our understanding of it. They can cause us to underestimate the significance of some things and overestimate our own significance in relation to those things.

The same can happen in the realm of religion and theology. For example, to the extent we use the Bible as a map for understanding who God is, we can "flatten" what cannot really be made two-dimensional by relying primarily on a few verses taken out of context. How often have you heard someone say, "Because God is a just God, therefore (fill in the blank with absurdities)." Or "Because God is a God of love, surely he would want me to (fill in self-centered activities)." In similar ways, we can also flatten or trivialize the meaning and power of trust, of eternity, of spirituality, of the great virtues, of suffering and of other matters related to the walk of faith.

This lesson invites us to be open to the idea that God's big picture has more dimensions than length, width, depth and time.

### **The Big Questions**

1. What statements have you heard or made that seem to tailor God to one's preferences? to one's political position? How does your image of yourself correlate with your image of God? What changes do you need to make so that people see a glimpse of God when they look at you?

2. What statements about God, Jesus, Christianity or faith have you heard (or made) that now seem to you to be flat-line thinking?

3. In 1 Corinthians 2:16, Paul wrote, "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ." Think of a troubling situation today in your own life. What does it mean to "have the mind of Christ" in that situation?

4. Pastors, Sunday school teachers and other religious leaders regularly tell their audiences what God wants them to do - such as "God wants us to love our neighbors." How do we determine whether such pronouncements about the will of God are correct?

5. What, if any, understandings of God do you feel you've outgrown? What has replaced those ideas? What prompted the change of thinking about God? Do you feel you've lost anything in the process? What have you gained? What changed thinking might be ahead?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Exodus 20:4**

*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (For context, read 20:1-17.)*

This verse is included as one of the Ten Commandments in some numbering systems. (Jews, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and some others use a numbering system in which this command is considered as a comment on the commandment to have no other gods.)

However the numbering is done, it's significant that the Bible writers mention this commandment more than any of the others. That is, when you count the references to the various commandments in other places in the Bible besides the actual Ten Commandment list found in Exodus 20 and again in Deuteronomy 5, it is this one about not worshiping idols that receives the most frequent mention. Obviously, this was a live issue in Bible times.

And it's also significant that in Israel's worship center -- first the tabernacle and later the temple -- there was no statue of God. That's one thing that made Israel's worship strikingly different from that of their neighbors. In the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the temple, you would find not a statue representing God, but only the ark of the covenant, a box containing nothing but the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them. In effect, this was God saying to the people, "If you want to please me, you don't do it by prostrating yourself in front of some inadequate image of me, but by obeying my words."

We may not worship graven images today, but the commandment still applies to us, especially when we confine God to some static idea, in effect, making him an idol -- a figure limited to the dimensions of Earth. For example:

- If we say God is limited to what evangelicals, fundamentalists, mainliners, liberals, conservatives, progressives, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics or any other religious segment believe about him, we have made him too small.
- If we see God as a sort of super-parent, or old man in the sky, we have made him too small.
- If we see God as merely someone to help us when we are in trouble, we have made him too small.
- If we see God as only a cosmic judge or a resident bad conscience, we have made him too small.
- If we see God as only the managing director of the universe, we have made him too small.

In fact, whenever we think we have God defined, we have made him too small.

**Questions:** When have you made God too small, and what was the result? Is it easier to see how another person has created a smaller god than when you've done it? What helps you consider God as "wholly other" than we humans are?

### **Job 38:1-2**

*Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (For context, read 38:1--42:6).*

The dialog between suffering Job and his three erstwhile friends, which makes up most of the first 37 chapters of the book of Job, shows a two-dimensional worldview where things and people are either good or evil. From that viewpoint, the friends conclude that Job must have done something to deserve the troubles that happened to him. And Job, from similar flat-line thinking, believes he is being wrongly punished.

But starting with chapter 38, God responds to Job from outside the flatness of that view with a vision of the larger cosmos. Far from merely blowing Job's socks off, God blows clear his thinking and vision, forcing Job to see the big picture (for a sample, read 38:4-15). And once he gets a real map of the universe, Job turns away from dust and ashes. He looks at his former protestations of innocence and his demands for God to put things right in his life and says, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3).

**Questions:** What might it mean for you to realize that the fullness of God is beyond your own understanding? How might that change how you approach life? How might it affect your hope? your despair? your resentments? your respect for your own intellect? your certainty about your religious doctrines?

### **Isaiah 55:8-9**

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (For context, read 55:1-13.)*

Isaiah 55:1-13 is an invitation to the people of Judah in exile to sustain themselves on God's nurturing word. The high point of the passage is the promise in verse 7 that if the people will return their loyalty to God, "he will abundantly pardon." Then, as if to counter the skepticism that the promise of pardon might raise, the prophet adds the words of God quoted above. God is able and willing to forgive precisely because his thoughts and ways are in a whole different plane from those of humankind.

**Questions:** If God's ways and thoughts are higher than ours, what basis do we ever have for claiming to know the mind of God? How do you determine God's will?

### **Hebrews 1:2-4**

*... but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (For context, read 1:1-4.)*

Much of what we've said about making God too small also applies to the eternal Christ. Notice that the writer of Hebrews describes the Son as "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being [who] sustains all things by his powerful word." That's no flat "Jesus is my buddy" view!

That also brings us to the radical nature of the good news of Jesus. We sometimes tie our understanding of Jesus and the Gospel to where we put ourselves on the political chart, seeing Jesus as a social-justice warrior or as a law-and-order stalwart. But, then, of course, political definitions tend to be on a flat line, with positions in the center, the left and the right. And trying to put Jesus somewhere on that line misses Jesus as the reflection of God's glory the Hebrews writer speaks of.

Jesus, we suspect, is not anywhere on that line. We often use "radical" to refer to people near the ends of the political continuum, But when it comes to Jesus and the nature of his good news, radical means Jesus is not left, right or center, but somewhere off the chart in several dimensions. The Sermon on the Mount, the way of the Cross, are above and beyond the flat map of our politics.

**Questions:** The writer of Hebrews says above that Jesus is "much superior to angels." In what ways do you suppose that is so? The writer also refers to Jesus making "purification for sins." To whose sins does that refer? How does that show that Jesus cannot be confined to our definitions?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Respond to this, from the late Walter R. Bouman, who was a professor at Trinity Lutheran Theological Seminary. He was referring to dialogue between Christian denominations regarding the Lord's Supper: "We need to look at matters in terms of an Einsteinian four-dimensional worldview. Jesus is not somewhere in outer space from whence he must come by special miracle (Roman Catholic transubstantiation) or to which we must go by faith ([the Protestant reformer] Zwingli). He is in a different time: the final eschatological future of the kingdom of God. He comes to us from the future with the power of the future. The Eucharist is anticipation of the final messianic banquet. Jesus is present as his self-offering, to enable the offering of ourselves in service to the kingdom of God."

2. Tell how this affects your thinking about God: In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes about what she sometimes senses when she prays to God for help: "Again and again I tell God I need help, and God says, 'Well isn't that fabulous? Because I need some help too. So you go get that old woman over there some water, and I'll figure out what we are going to do about *your* stuff.'"

3. Comment on this, heard in a sermon: "We in the religious profession have sometimes made so much of the approachability of God that we've left people with an inadequate image of the Creator. Like children, we've endowed God with so many human characteristics (only better) that there's not enough 'Godness' left in our understanding of him to command an adult faith. In fact, one reason we may have a hard time believing in, let alone trusting God, is that we have never comprehended what God is really like. Instead, we've struggled to believe in a childish shadow of God.

"It's true that in the New Testament, Jesus calls God 'Father' but this is an analogy, a way to express indirectly what cannot be directly expressed. But we have sometimes inferred from that analogy that God is like a great daddy."

4. Hear this, from TWW team member John Coulson: "So many of us try to make God in the image of us rather than us being an image of God -- sort of a seeing God as a more perfect version of me. The God we imagine conveniently agrees with us on most of our theological and political beliefs. This unchallenging image of God is, at best, probably an image that makes us feel safe and secure and doesn't require us to change too much."

TWW team member Mary Sells added, "So often I say the Lord's Prayer with "thy will be done," yet my personal petitions are "my will be done." May not be making God in my image, but rather asking him to obey me."

5. Consider this quote from J.B. Phillips' book, *Your God is Too Small*: "God will inevitably appear to disappoint the man who is attempting to use him as a convenience, a prop, or a comfort, for his own plans. God has never been known to disappoint the man who is sincerely wanting to cooperate with his own purposes."

### **Responding to the News**

If you have struggled with belief in -- or trust in -- God, this would be a good time to consider whether your struggle is because your understanding of God does not have enough "Godness" in it.

### **Prayer**

O God, help us to understand -- and live by -- the things you most want us to know about you. Thank you for Jesus, who helps us to know you more fully and shows us a way to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

