



Michael P. Knowles is professor and George F. Hurlburt Chair of Preaching at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario. He is the author of *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Preaching* (Brazos) and *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods* (Eerdmans).

“What’s in a name?” Understanding the biblical, spiritual and interreligious implications of God’s character

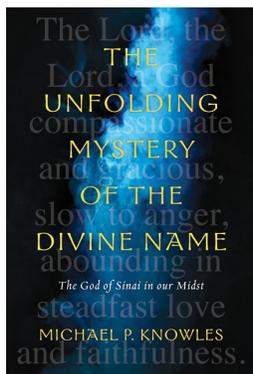
How does one discover and understand God’s divine name?

Knowles: When Scripture and theology present us with language about God, even those who have a high estimation of biblical truth must invariably “field test” such descriptions to determine their validity in practice. In fact, what Scripture presents is less a series of statements *about* God than a practical invitation to respond that reflects Israel’s and the early church’s experience *of* God. In short, it is not enough for us to discuss or speculate about God: we want to encounter and experience God for ourselves. What the following study proposes, therefore, is a description of the dynamics of the divine-human relationship, beginning with an encounter between God and Moses on Mount Sinai, then tracing the echoes and reverberations of that encounter throughout ensuing centuries as a guide to our own experience of God.

Why must our church leaders *know* God?

Knowles: As one who is called to prepare students for ministries of leadership within the Christian church, I maintain (and my students doubtless are weary of hearing me say) that . . . congregations only want to know one thing about those who presume to lead them. They want to know whether this person, pastor or leader actually knows God. They are not interested in merely factual knowledge, in the sense of the French verb *savoir*, to know a fact, to know about something with some degree of accuracy. Rather, this must be personal knowledge, *connaissance*, an experiential kind of knowing that entails a relationship, a certain mutuality, and an appropriate level of spiritual intimacy. I would contend, moreover, that congregations can be prevailed upon to excuse poor preaching, lack of interpersonal and administrative skills, and even the occasional lapse in pastoral judgment, as long as they are convinced that those whom they trust to lead them truly know, and can speak of, the God whom they gather to worship. Conversely, even the greatest of gifts and personal aptitudes are

AUTHOR Q & A



The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name: The God of Sinai in Our Midst

Available November 2012

\$22, 250 pages, paper
978-0-8308-3985-8

unlikely to compensate for lack of such knowledge or for an inability to address spiritual hunger with news of a God who can truly satisfy it.

What brought you to the realization that you wanted to comprehend what God's character is?

Knowles: I first came to grips with the question of understanding God's character over thirty years ago, in the course of my first degree in theology, as I tried to understand the meaning of Paul's quotation in Romans 9:15 of God's words to Moses in Exodus 33:19, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I have compassion." I needed to discover a vision of the divine identity that was more in keeping with Jesus' experience of God as "Father" than the customary modernist appeal to transcendence, eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and the like. My experience of teaching this material over a number of years has been that students find the exploration of God's character to be a linchpin that unites all the various components of spirituality, study, discipleship and practical ministry.

What implications does this have for Christianity's relationship with other major world religions?

Knowles: With respect to interfaith dialogue, in contrast to the popular view that religion causes conflict, I argue that conflict at least between adherents of the three Abrahamic religions could be reduced if the respective parties were *more* religious, in the sense of being more faithful to the gracious character of the God we all claim to serve. . . .

Celebrating the character of God to which Scripture and the history of interpretation over many centuries together bear witness offers a helpful point of agreement, reflection and dialogue between the three major Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.