

Feedback

Thanks so much to all those who have responded to my musings. Much of your feedback has been very encouraging (“It’s good to be challenged and made to think about what we believe”) but some has been cautionary – and quite right too! OK, so some of my writing has been deliberately provocative, but it is all offered in the spirit of faithful questioning.

Sadly, by my narrowness over the years, I believe, has ‘innoculated’ some members of my own family against the Christian faith. It is on their behalf that I’ve been struggling with the “Jesus is the **only** way to God” idea. And having raised Acts 4:12 with you folks only yesterday, guess what our vicar quoted in his Bible Sunday sermon! Drat! Bother! Blow! I’m squirming.

I want to say that Jesus is the very, very best way, and anyway, why would anyone want to go by a different way, once they’ve come to know Jesus? And I also still maintain very strongly that a loving God is **not** looking for ways by which he can exclude people; he desperately wants us all to come to him and be part of his family, his kingdom. And on that basis, I don’t have any fear for those who’ve never heard about Jesus; God is **not** going to assign someone to eternal separation from him just because they died not knowing about Jesus. Sorry, but that’s not the God that Jesus portrayed!

But just now I was rereading “Recovering the Scandal of the Cross” (a bit theological, but I’ve found it very helpful, as long as I concentrate hard while I’m reading), and I came to a helpful passage (p.69, 2011 Edn), just after quoting Ex 34:6,7 (“...merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” – a strong antidote for anyone who sees ‘the God of the OT’ as wrathful). Anyway, Baker and Green then say:

The whole of salvation rests on God’s initiative, the single source of salvation is God, and God’s salvific purpose comes to expression in the one event of grace, the redemptive act of Christ...

So if Jesus IS God, then to say that “Jesus is the only way to God” is simply not an issue, it’s self-evident! To rephrase that sentence “God is the only way to God” – well, of course he is! No problem!

Why then have I been struggling so hard with it? I’ll tell you what I now think my problem is. It’s not the ‘who’, it’s the ‘how’.

Yes, Jesus is “the way”, but the church tradition I’ve ‘grown up in’ (for 48 years!) actually goes **beyond** John 14:7. It tries to say “and this is **how** it works”, i.e. there’s only one method by which Jesus makes that salvation available. And this is where I shall probably find myself disagreeing with some of you.

I have always been taught that **THE** mechanism by which we are saved is that when Jesus died on the cross my sin was placed on him and he took the penalty that I deserve so that God’s wrath against me was turned aside – the idea of so-called penal substitution or penal satisfaction.

Personally, I'm not 100% sure that this really is a correct biblical way of viewing what Jesus achieved on the cross. I'm not saying it's wrong per se, but I'm just not sure it's helpful, certainly not for everyone in today's culture – and surely we want (God wants) people to come to faith in Jesus.

And if you're of the view that penal substitution is *the way*, the only way, by which we are saved then how did God manage to enable the church to spread around the world and flourish for hundreds of years before anyone had ever heard of the idea of penal substitution?!

And don't forget, the Bibles we use today were translated by people for whom penal substitution was an accepted part of their belief system, and that is bound to have influenced the way in which various passages were translated.

But I'm not being negative; I've never felt more positive in my faith, EVER. I would say that, having taken my focus away from penal substitution, I am much more 'cross centred' than I've ever been. Through all my strugglings, I've realised in how many different and wonderful ways the Bible speaks of Christ's redemptive work – a glorious kaleidoscope of images that help me to appreciate and celebrate the amazing work of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Maybe after I've reread this book I'll be able to offer some pointers as to a more helpful way of explaining the glory of the cross to our friends and family. Perhaps you'd pray for inspiration for me to that effect?!

Paul Bev. 28.10.18