

137 Do you possess eternal life?

A new curate or assistant minister comes to your church. His name is Joshua¹ Davidson, and you're looking forward to hearing his first sermon.

He talks about heaven and hell and how we can gain the former and avoid the latter – we need to believe in Jesus. His text is John 3:36: *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.* A great start!

His second sermon is also about heaven and hell, about the sheep and the goats, but this time he says that people will go to heaven if they *do good*: those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit people in prison. His text is Jesus' sermon on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Worse still, he says that people will go to hell if they *don't* do good! [60]

What kind of theological college did this chap go to?! A very unsound one, obviously.

OK, I'm messing about here, but I do wonder what kind of reception Jesus, son of David, would get if he started preaching in our church, your church. Why does he insist on saying things he's not supposed to say, things that don't fit in with our systematic theology?!

Yes, I know that we need to read Scripture in context, but let's be honest, some of the things Jesus says are, frankly, contradictory. Why does he do that?! It's so unhelpful to those of us who are trying to understand Jesus and what his message is to us, so that we can get it across to others!

And as I've suggested, maybe we have ended up selecting only those Scriptures that we feel communicate Jesus' basic message, and ignoring those that don't!

So why does Jesus say different, sometimes contradictory, things at different times? Maybe it's because being a believer is about knowing a person and not about knowing the theology? Maybe we each need to hear different things at different times in our lives, at different stages in our relationship with the Father?

So as churches, how do we try to get people to come into that relationship, especially when people are at different places on their journey towards the Father?

Well, I'll tell you how *not* to do it. [Watch out, there's a hobbyhorse about to come riding by...]

Clearly, people can't come into a relationship with Jesus unless and until they understand the good news that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins, right? And they can't appreciate how much that is **good** news unless and until they understand that they are **sinners**. So we have to preach that: "You're a sinner and you need to be saved!"

If that's the insistent message that our churches put across, is it any wonder that people don't seem to want to come into a relationship with Jesus!

¹ "Joshua shares origins with the name Jesus, which comes from the Aramaic variation Yeshu'a."

Mine isn't to judge any church, but if you're a committed member of a church, what's wrong with challenging yourself about your own church? How does *your* church come across? What do *your* preachers bang on about all the time? (How do *you* come across to your friends and family?)

As I was writing this article, a few days ago, that's as far as I could get.

Then today I read Jesus' words to the Pharisees: *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.* (John 5:39,40)

That is, I feel, what God has been showing me: I have spent years of my life, searching the Scriptures to know whether or not I 'possess' eternal life; am I going to be saved or not? When I was off in that cult, this was highly exaggerated, and I was driven by real fear, fear that I wouldn't be one of the chosen ones – it sounds stupid, but that's what happened to me [article 0].

In these past few exciting years, I've realised more and more how much I had become a Pharisee, and how destructive that has been for my life, and how destructive it has been for the lives of the people I have tried to influence, people I love.

Having discovered anew the amazing love of the Trinity, I now just want to demonstrate that love to people around me – anyone around me. If people show an interest in my faith, I will talk about the person of Jesus, whom I love with all my heart.

God is perfectly capable of bringing people into a conviction of sin, as and when they need to; mine is to concentrate on God's love for them – as the Scriptures do, from beginning to end.

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