

165 *A game of three halves*

I wonder if the following (grossly over-simplified, but based on my earlier writings) analysis of the development of the Christian religion might help us to understand it, see where it went so horribly wrong and appreciate what it might have to offer in the future?

The “first half” lasted 2000 years and took us from Abraham (~2000 BC) to Jesus, starting from when all people had the same very wrong idea of God as angry and needing to be propitiated. People gradually realised the loving nature of God, culminating in the teachings of Jesus.

Humans moved from a *retributive* idea of God to a God who is primarily interested in *restoration*: building good relationships between people.

The “second half” lasted roughly to the turn of the first millennium. The love of God spread like wildfire, and Christians (as they came to be called) were concerned with *restoration* of relationships and with combating evil – especially institutional evil.

In the “third half”, also of roughly 1000 years it all went horribly wrong – big time!

Christians thought it right to kill unbelievers, e.g. the Crusades.

Christians thought it right to torture and kill other Christians for their ‘wrong theology’, e.g. the Spanish Inquisition, and much more besides.

Even in the modern era...

(some) Christians justify racism and Apartheid on ‘biblical principles’.

(some) Christians hurl insults at other people in anti-abortion rallies and at gay-pride marches.

Christians split into a thousand churches saying, e.g. “We are a Bible-believing church!”

Why did this happen? What went wrong? That’s a very big question, but here are some ideas.

Old Testament writers thought that God was *retributive* and required propitiation, but God inspired those writers and cunningly hid the seeds of love and *restoration* within their writings.

In New Testament times those seeds exploded into new life as people realised that the God of love and *restoration* was now to be seen in human form in Jesus; he brought healing and hope, and taught that evil could be destroyed by loving your enemies – and he demonstrated it in his own death. Basic message: God loves and accepts us, so fight against sin in your own life.

That’s the really “good news”; that’s the “gospel” that I believe Jesus and his followers preached.

Then for hundreds of years, the church brought personal *restoration*, hope, healing and education in country after country.

But in the “third half” (second millennium), fear displaced trust, fear displaced love. Fear brought a more rigid and more literal interpretation of the Bible and, as a result, *restoration* was replaced once again by *retribution*. “God punishes sinners, but Jesus can save you!” became the main theme, and we became more concerned about fighting against sin in *other people’s* lives.

So is there any hope for a “fourth half”?

Could the third millennium be God’s fourth half? I believe it could, if we can get back to Jesus’ teaching and his example of selfless service, enemy love and of spiritually battling against evil in ourselves and against institutional evil.

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