

183 *50 Shades of Black (wheat and weeds)*

Humans are very inventive, in that we can find a million and one ways to get things wrong – hence my title. Thankfully God wants to bring good, and so, over the centuries, God has inspired a number of movements to bring change for the good, but then, within each, there are seeds of evil sown – hence my subtitle.

Through my writing journey, I've challenged many things that I think might be wrong in the church's teaching and that might have contributed to the almost 50 years of wrong emphases on my part – and I'm sure there are ways in which I'm not right even now! However, I think I've picked up a number of strands by which each of us, in our own journeys, can get a little less wrong and, more importantly, can get a little closer to God.

My first target was penal substitution: I could see how unhelpful it was to many people, so I foolishly just rejected it. Eventually I realised that 'substitution' wasn't the problem – Christ really did die *for* us. It was the 'penal' bit that I decided was mistaken. God majors on *restorative* justice, not punitive or retributive justice. But through over-stressing one single issue, it has taken me a long time to spot other 'gotchas' that have hampered my Christian journey.

Below, I've given a whistle-stop tour of some of God's good movements, each of which sadly contained seeds of evil, which later blossomed and needed yet another move of God to help restore things – '50 shades of black' is not too much of an overstatement!

As I mentioned last time, when Jesus' Jewish followers came to the startling realisation that Jesus was God's wonderful fulfilment of the story of Israel, the people who journeyed with the Risen Jesus (and that journey continued after his ascension, too) were called 'The Way'.

That feels significant to me. Jesus said he was 'The way (and truth and life)', and the Christian life itself is definitely a journey – importantly, a journey based around a **person**. So the story of Jesus' life and the story of our lives form the continuation of the life story of the patriarchs.

As I've discovered, the Christian life is not about being right, not about finding 'the answer', but about travelling with a Person, moving through life with fellow travellers each of whom, like me, has got loads of things wrong. It's about learning from that Person, learning from each other, learning from the terrible mash-ups we have made over the centuries, supporting each other through the inevitable suffering and hard times, and rejoicing with each other in the good times.

What a joy it has become, for me, as I've discovered some of these things, and while I really thank God, of course, I also thank you folks too, who have been patient with me, as I've bumbled along seeking to get back on 'The Way'.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart!

Paul Bev. 30.10.21

P.S. Because I hate being negative, I've highlighted some positives in the following.

This is my attempt to set out some of the issues that I've picked up as being significant through the centuries of the church's history. I make no claims as to the correctness of the history or the Christian interpretation; it's a draft version, so please contribute more information and views).

It's here to show that there have been a lot of good movements, but that a lot of them went horribly wrong. (I use the shorthand of, say, C16 to mean 'in or around the 16th century'.)

Mid C3 Constantine gave Christians protection under Roman law. Great to give Christians relief from persecution, but it opened the door to Christianity becoming a state religion, with all the power games that unleashed.

Late C3 the church split into Eastern Orthodox and Western churches. Pluses and minuses on the two sides. Interestingly, a small number of 'biblically active' Protestant leaders have recently gone over to the Eastern church, seeing some real positives there.

Late C3 Augustine enunciated the idea of 'original sin'. Not a biblical view, I would say,^[163] and it gave clergy power over people at a time when infant mortality was high, plus it gave people a very negative view of their own value in God's sight.

Synod of Whitby, 664, opted to follow the Roman church not the Celtic leaders. Many Christians have recently found great value in going back to Celtic forms of life and worship: emphasis on community and a 'rule of life', rhythms of worship, and hearing God speak through nature and through silence.

C12/13 Crusades (I'm totally ignorant here) presumably started with good intent, to protect Christians in their pilgrimages, but in many ways they weren't a 'good thing' for promoting the love of Jesus.

C15/16+? Spanish Inquisition (I'm totally ignorant here) presumably started with good intent, to maintain the biblical faith of the Christian church, but in many ways it wasn't a 'good thing' for promoting the love of Jesus.

C16/17 Reformation and the formation of Protestant churches. A great many positives in rooting out some of the corruption of the church at the time, e.g. restoring the place of individual faith for salvation **by faith alone**, and cutting the ties of clergy being the only way to God, plus having the **Bible translated into the vernacular**, again releasing the grip of the clergy.

Negatively (and this side of the Reformation is still with us, hence I give it more stress), the idea of **penal** substitution was put forward. Substitution had been articulated by Anselm in C11, but the 'penal' idea was new, adding to the negativity of 'original sin'. For example, the 1662 Prayerbook (I recited it as a new Christian from age 20!), *'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.'*

Further examples: Luther portrayed humans as 'a pile of manure', John Calvin enunciated the doctrine of 'total depravity' and Jonathan Edwards (see below) talked about 'sinners in the hands of an angry God'.

But this massive negativity continues, even today. From a 2020 book that a friend lent me, about the incredible love of God for us, titled: ‘Gentle and Lowly – the Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers’ by a young US pastor: *‘It is probably impossible to conceive of the horror of hell and of the ferocity of retributive justice and righteous wrath that will sweep over those found on the last day to be out of Christ.’* (Can you imagine Jesus saying that? Not as I interpret the Bible!)

Late C16 – C17 – With European colonialism came also the missionary movements that brought Christianity to Africa, India and South America, also bringing health and education, but creating a form of Christianity that negatively affected the indigenous cultures and, I guess, replicated the negative ‘penal’ Christian culture of C16/17, scaring people into faith.

C18 Revivals of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, et al. Mass movement, bringing faith to vast numbers of people, but often based on this same negative view of God, misusing Scriptures such as ‘the wages of sin’ to scare people into confessing belief.

C19 Revivals of Whitefield, DL Moody et al. Mass movement, bringing faith to vast numbers of people, but with the same negativity.

C18/19 Denominationalism – Increasing fragmentation of the faith into a wide range of different Protestant denominations with increasing insistence on, ‘My church is right; yours is wrong.’

C20 Revivals of Billy Graham, Bill Bright and (US-based) Youth for Christ. Brought faith to many, but, influenced by the rapidly growing individualism of the age, ‘the gospel’ ceased to be the story of Jesus, as fulfilment of the Story of Israel and the universal authority of the Christ. Instead it became ‘The Four Spiritual Laws’ etc – personal salvation as a way to get to heaven, so that follow-up and discipleship became a real problem, and many fell away.

Early C20 Rediscovery of charismatic gifts and formation of Pentecostal denominations Great to have the revival and increased impact of the more dramatic gifts, but it formed yet more splits into yet more denominations, with a ‘my church (or my group within it) is right’ ethos.

C20 Rise of the Evangelical right wing in the States, and growth of the ‘prosperity gospel’ I can’t think of anything positive to say about that.

Early C21 What now?! My feeling is that a growing number of people (certainly in my own range of contacts) are beginning to acknowledge some of the above negatives, especially (1) our growing individualism, (2) our focus on ‘getting to heaven’ and therefore being less concerned about things like injustice in the here and now (3) losing our grip on the idea of proclaiming the gospel as the whole story of Jesus, including his reign as the Christ now and in the future, (4) our continued insistence that our interpretation of Scripture is ‘the biblical view’, i.e. other churches/denominations are wrong.

God has never given up on us before, and I know he never will, but let’s be willing to admit that we, or our spiritual ancestors, got it wrong in various ways. Ships that are too tightly rigged – and are therefore inflexible – often founder on the rocks!

Paul Bev. 30.10.21

