

268 *What is your priority, relationships or behaviour?*

I thought I was being quite radical in my last two articles,^[266,267] but no-one has reacted, so far. After all, I was saying that churches (well, the evangelical churches that I have experience of) are presenting the gospel – and portraying God – in a way that is contrary to what Jesus preached and what the early church preached. As a reminder, here is a brief summary of my two models:

*Model A: God is a **righteous judge** (who is also loving) and God provides a mechanism to set things right.*

*Model B: God is **love** (and is also righteous) and so God does **whatever it takes** to set things right for each of us.*

The first model is a crime-and-punishment paradigm, while the second is sickness-and-healing. I scanned right through the Gospels the other day, and I cannot see anything in Jesus' words or actions to support Model A. (And I can find nowhere in the NT where we're told to fear God.^[263])

The other strand of my thinking (cycling 1000 miles round and round the same roads does give me *lots* of thinking time!) is that Model A is much more about 'sin as wrong behaviour', while Model B lends itself to seeing sin as broken relationships.

Am I wrong to prioritise relationships over behaviour? Wasn't it the Pharisees who talked loud and long about behaviour?!

And what is people's greatest need today – especially young people? It's to be loved and accepted; they need to find a community where they can belong. That's what Model B offers.

In my view, this is a fundamental mistake that the church is making, and is why we're only reaching a teeny, tiny proportion of young people. But one specific outworking of this error is the current debacle over gay marriage.

Some church leaders are so convinced that this specific *behaviour* is a sin that they are willing:

- (a) to split the church, forcing agonising decisions for those who disagree with their view
- (b) to force gay Christians into agonising decisions (celibacy vs. knowing intimate personal love)
- (c) to cause non-churchgoers to feel negative towards the church – sometimes *very* negative!

I hope those leaders are absolutely certain, before God, that their biblical theology on this specific behaviour is correct, given the potential relationship damage it will cause!

And to end on a personal note, I'm actually talking about the church where Sue and I worshipped for 37 years, and where we brought up our family.

Thankfully, we left on practical, non-theological grounds, having moved house, but ironically, I was on the PCC when we set up the person-specification for the new vicar, and agreed that:

- (a) we would not accept applications from women and
- (b) the new vicar must hold penal substitution as central to his life and ministry – definitely Model A! In my defence, at the time, I hadn't a clue what penal substitution was.

Your sad friend, (sad at the damage being done, I mean – otherwise joyful!!) *Paul Bev. 23.4.23*