

The gospel – a panoramic view

As I've said repeatedly, I'm not a theologian, but I've listened to what a few theologians have said in their books and done a wonderful course on the creeds by Alex Irving, here in Norwich. I have then tried to re-express the ideas I have picked up, to try to work them out in my own head. I've tried to do this in non-theological ways – though obviously I have to use some English words that were invented specifically to express certain theological concepts – and I hope that some of what I've written has been helpful to you.

I realise that the overall view I'm expressing is not uncontroversial, but as I have again said repeatedly, this view is one that, to me, makes sense of the mess that my own faith was in for many years, and it has brought me to a point where I don't feel the need to justify my beliefs; I can just enjoy trying to put them into practice.

In the following, my aim is simply to lay out my beliefs in a logical way, and I present them here in case they are helpful for others trying to make sense of their own faith. So, here goes...

The gospel (as preached by Jesus and the early church) is simply the story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the huge range of prophecies in the Old Testament: the incarnation (i.e. birth and life), death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Salvation is God's plan and purpose – based entirely on his grace and mercy – to restore humankind to the pre-Fall immortality, that is, conquering sin and death.

Salvation metaphors are the pictures used within the Bible, expressed particularly in the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter etc, to help us to appreciate that salvation, to receive it by faith and to apply it to our lives.

Atonement theories are human-derived theories, based on our exegesis of the Scriptures, to help us to appreciate and apply those biblical metaphors.

The Big Mistake that the church has made, and that has muddied the waters and made it difficult for me to fully appreciate the wonder of God's salvation and to apply it effectively in my life (a process we might call discipleship) is to take one particular atonement theory (penal substitution), call it "the gospel" and preach it exclusively. Penal substitution is an atonement theory that can only be justified as 'true' by our exegesis of the Scriptures.

The church has turned the gospel upside down.

Rather, it is the **gospel** that is supposed to bring in God's **kingdom** which will then turn the **world** upside down!

The way forward? We can never, ever 'understand' salvation (any more than we can understand God). However, I believe that we can do the following:

- 1) Affirm, as many of us do, week by week, that salvation is won by Jesus, who died “for us and for our salvation”.
- 2) Study the Scriptures, revelling in the various biblical metaphors – what I’ve pictured as wonderful facets of a beautiful diamond – and see how we can apply them to our lives, thereby discovering those “good works prepared beforehand for us to walk in”.
- 3) Preach the gospel; that is, tell anyone who will listen, about the wonderful story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the story of the Old Testament.

Next time I’ll look at a few of those metaphors, and I hope we can all revel together in those metaphors – and others – as we read our Bibles day by day – an exciting prospect!

Paul Bev. 6.2.19

P.S. I laughed like a drain this morning when I awoke and thought towards finishing the above and had a sudden realisation: If you wanted to preach the gospel to the children of our nation, what would you do? You would take the gospel (= the story of Jesus set in the context of the way the OT leads up to it) and you would tell those stories in an entertaining way in schools. But a growing number of people are going into schools to do just that. They are not proselytising, but they are most certainly preaching the gospel. God is awesome, isn’t he?!

P.P.S. Those of you who worship in a staunch Anglican church, where you are “forced to use the use the lectionary” and are “locked into celebrating the seasons of the year”, please stop complaining! Rather see it as I now think God intended it to be – constant, week by week revelling in some of the glorious facets in the diamond. Remember what Paul said to Timothy: “All Scripture is inspiring by God and profitable...”