

63 More matters arising

A friend has sent me a round-up of some queries he's come up with in reading my recent articles. I really appreciate this because I certainly don't have all the answers, so dialogue is much more helpful and monologue. Actually, I'm not sure I'm looking for 'answers' anyway – I'm trying to grow and develop my relationship with God, so any help I can get is much appreciated.

In article 54, I said *'I thought that my crusade was against penal substitution; it's not. As I've gone through this journey I've come to realise that my crusade is against reducing the gospel to personal salvation'* and my friend said he was unhappy about the idea of a crusade, saying that it smacked of an 'I'm right' attitude which is something I thought I'd rejected in myself.

Fair comment, sorry. Let me try to say it more carefully. I still feel that, for most of the people I want to witness to today, the penal substitution metaphor is a major turn-off, and so I simply won't use it in talking to people about what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Indeed, at one stage of my journey, I actually thought it was a mistaken interpretation of scripture; I'm not sure now, but certainly, I find it unhelpful. Anything that turns people away from God and Jesus is a no-no for me, sorry.

I was trying to challenge people on the way we reduce 'salvation' to 'whether I get to heaven or not' (and whether my loved one will get to heaven or not). Surely, God wants to restore the whole world – 'God so loved **the world**' – but we've just concentrated on ourselves. Rather, God sees the bigger picture and wants to bring healing more widely, and not just to a few individuals.

So I'd sum up the errors I used to make as:

- 1) an overly 'mechanistic' approach to the faith = penal substitution. We like it because it's cut and dried and we know who's in and who's out; who's really a Christian and who's not.
- 2) an over-insistence on a me-me approach to the faith = personal salvation. This appeals to the individualist attitude of today's society, which is all about my rights, my satisfaction, my choices. But as we know that doesn't make people happy, and people are, thankfully, beginning to see the value in community, whether it's choirs, or community farms/gardens, or sports/exercise groups or even churches(!). (We've had the local council approaching us saying 'We see you're doing community-type stuff, so would you be able to do more if we gave you some money?!')

And this brings me to my friend's next question:

'You seem to be downplaying 'individual' (personal) salvation and moving towards 'collective' salvation – please clarify.'

I'm certainly not trying to replace personal salvation with collective salvation. Rather I'm saying that our over-emphasis on personal salvation can diminish the power of the cross, which did **way** more than **just** bring us personal salvation. For example, the problems of the world are not, in my view, just down to personal sin; there's such a thing as institutional evil, and on the cross Jesus defeated **all** the powers and dominations, anything and everything that causes hurt to humans. Let's get a bigger and bigger view of the cross (article 54).

‘Sheep and goats – please clarify. Are you suggesting a works-based salvation through maybe social action?’

Nope! Individual salvation (amongst other things) comes through the cross of Christ. However, I was really amused when I re-read Jesus’ teaching in Matt 25:31-46. He says there that how the sheep and the goats are going to be judged is on the basis of whether or not we have cared for the poor and marginalised. That’s Jesus’ idea, not mine!

Those who **don’t** believe in a works-based salvation are going to have to find a way to interpret Jesus’ words to maintain their belief in personal salvation.

The problem, it seems to me, is that we are too focused on finding out exactly how salvation **works**, what’s the formula?! But Jesus’ teaching doesn’t allow that; indeed, some of Jesus’ teaching is frankly contradictory – well, it is if you try to insist on a strongly literal interpretation.

I don’t think it was ever God’s intention that we knew **exactly** how it all works; I think we have to have enough faith to look at the scriptures and be more willing to see things as metaphors that convey important truths. Yes, I know it’s nicer to know **exactly** what’s what, but I think we need to look at Jesus’ teaching – indeed, the whole of scripture – on the basis of faithful questioning, constantly discussing with one another what the scriptures might mean, rather than trying to nail it down.

Any other ‘matters arising’ would be welcomed.

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