

Fear-based religion

In article [70], I set out in two columns the contrast between my Christian faith of 2 or 3 years ago and what I now believe. Since then I've read a book that someone recommended as giving a good end-to-end view of the teaching of the Bible and I found a Bible on Sue's bookshelf, with Jesus' words highlighted in red, so I could pursue an idea I had of looking at how Jesus related to different types and groups of people, plus individuals. Both studies were eye-opening!

The book, *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts, turned out to be an extremely well-researched support of the left-hand column of [70]. Because the book was so well put together, I felt I ought to do it justice by explaining to my friend why I could no longer support that view. I've put my comments as article [00], as it will probably only be of interest if you have read the book.

Then my reading of what Jesus said to different people convinced me that what we actually say, and to whom, is very, very important. We really need to *listen* to people, so that we can know where they are at; and just because something is *true* doesn't mean that it's the right thing to say. I have quoted before:

*“Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with **gentleness and respect**.”* (1 Peter 3:15)

My recent studies have reinforced my view that the church has, to a greater or lesser extent, become a fear-based religion. This is because we see the gospel as totally predicated on the idea that, because we are sinners, we incur God's wrath – that's the problem, and Jesus is the solution.

If outsiders visit those churches that like to “preach the gospel” regularly, they will hear repeatedly that they are sinners. And, however hard we try to say that “we are *all* sinners”, the outsiders all too easily hear us telling them that *they* are sinners. And because we try to tell society what is right and wrong (being ‘salt and light’), they see us as saying that Christians are better than them – hence the repeated complaint of Christians being ‘holier than thou’.

And those who are willing to explore Christianity more closely can all too easily get the idea that God is angry with us because we sin. (In [8], [14] and [18], I've given my view of what the Bible means by God's wrath: it's *not* anger, but in love, he allows us to receive what our sin causes.)

OK, there will be a spectrum between fear-based religion and churches that really do promote a love-based relationship, but I feel that we need to do all we can to steer away from fear and towards love – and that's *exactly* what I saw by reading all of Jesus' actual words. The Scribes and Pharisees studied the scriptures and came up with a fear-based religion, but Jesus taught people about his loving heavenly Father – no wonder the people flocked to hear him!

One serious problem though is that, because our belief system is predicated on the idea of “sin and a holy God”, this then affects our reading of scripture and, indeed, it biases our very translation of the Bible. As I've argued in [5], [7] and especially [11], what we believe necessarily affects how we translate the scriptures.

But even if our Bible is *not* intrinsically loaded towards an over-emphasis on sin, our *interpretation* can still bias us away from viewing God principally as the Great Lover, and

towards God as the Great Judge. And as I've discovered, the judgement-biased view can cause us to quote scriptures totally out of context.

The worst example I've seen is our total misuse "*the wages of sin is death*". In Romans 6 (written to **believers**) Paul talks enthusiastically of our freedom from sin and our new life in Christ; he says that, having received life, we'd be bonkers to go on sinning, because *sin spoils* that wonderful new relationship. He underlines this in the very final verse: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" We then take those first seven words, totally out of context, and use it to tell **unbelievers**: "If you sin, you'll go to hell." Forgive me, but that made me very angry when I realised what we had done [52]!

OK, gross misinterpretation of scripture is rare, but our over-emphasis on sin can lead us to the mistake that I referred to at the head of the article: we apply scriptural truths to people for whom they were never intended. Let me give you an example.

In a discussion the other day, someone said that John 3:16 clearly showed the reality of hell. Because there was someone in the group who was not a committed Christian, two of us were unhappy and spoke out, but to be honest it was just a gut reaction. I therefore decided to go home and check out the context – I've done several context-checks, since the Romans 6:23 debacle.

The explanation is long, but please bear with me; the result is very surprising. You must know John 3:16, which we use to tell unbelievers: "If you believe in Jesus you'll receive eternal life, but if you don't, you will perish." And Jesus makes it even clearer for the unbeliever: "*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe **stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*"

Plain as a pikestaff! Listen, my dear unbelieving friend, I'm very sorry, but Jesus says to you "Because you don't believe in me, you **are** condemned already!"

Nooo! That is **not** what Jesus says to your average unbeliever!

Check the context!! In John 3, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee; indeed, "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (v1). Jesus starts by complaining that they are **refusing** to believe in him: "*you people do not accept our testimony*" (v11). And although the Pharisees think they know what people have to do to please God, Jesus says: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **anyone** who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Nicodemus shifts uneasily in his seat: Is Jesus **really** saying that **anyone** can have eternal life, just by believing in him?! And as if reading his mind, Jesus adds, "***Whoever** believes in him is not condemned...*"

And I'll bet Nicodemus is thinking, "What?! Even the tax collectors and the prostitutes?! Is he really saying they are not condemned, despite the fact that they sin all day every day?!"

Then Jesus hits Nicodemus hard with "*...but whoever does not believe **stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*" This really shocks him! He's not daft; he knows darn well that Jesus is referring to **him**! Jesus is saying, "You Pharisees say you believe in the scriptures – you study them diligently – yet you **refuse** to believe in me. [John 5:39,40] Therefore **you are already condemned!**"

Jump now to 2019, and look at what we do with these words that were addressed to a Pharisee, words that Jesus was using to shock him into realising what a terrible thing the Pharisees were doing – seeking to condemn God’s own son. We apply these words to *unbelievers*, to warn them that if they don’t believe in Jesus, they will perish – they will be condemned.

Quick! I need an antidote to all this fear-based religion:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. (1 Jn 4:18)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (Jn 10:10).

Ah, that’s better – and there are lots more, positive, love-based, affirming scriptures where those ones came from! Praise God!

(Oh hang on! Quick hypocrisy test here: check your own contexts, Paul! ... Yes, it’s OK, the whole of 1 John 3 and 4 is about love. And John 10? Yes, that’s all about love too. Phew!)

Finally, here’s a quick summary of some scriptures we’ve misapplied, in the name of convincing people about sin and a holy God:

Scripture	Spoken to	About	We apply it to	To say
Romans 6:23 (the wages of sin)	believers	life in Jesus	unbelievers	repent or perish
John 3:16-18 (whoever believes)	Pharisees	their refusal to believe	unbelievers	repent or perish
Romans 1 (wrath of God revealed against sin) [8]	believers	don’t you dare judge other people! Rom 2:1 [8]	unbelievers	you deserve to be punished for your sin
Jn 14:6 (the way, the truth and the life)	Jesus’ closest disciples	follow me to get closer to the Father	unbelievers	Jesus is the only way to be saved <i>(I’ll study this again some time)</i>

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