

Rebuilding my faith

This past two years have been the most exciting of my whole Christian life. Why? Well, I've shared with many of you how, several years ago, I ended up in what was effectively a Christian sect, and then how, when I pulled out, I even questioned whether God existed – I then tried to rebuild my faith.

Having moved out to Taverham (7 miles from our city-centre church of 37 years' attendance), two years ago we felt it was time to stop being 'commuter Christians' and maybe find fellowship locally (as we would probably eventually have to do anyway, with advancing years).

We found that our local Anglican church was small but incredibly welcoming, and we noticed that the church contained a lot of people who had been through (or were going through) very difficult relationship problems and/or were suffering in a variety of other ways. We noticed too that the church laid huge stress on pastoral care. (You'll see the relevance of that in a minute.)

So, let's get rebuilding... At about the same time as joining St Ed's, I started reading more widely, and one book in particular struck me very powerfully. It seemed to be echoing the exact unhappinesses I had long felt about my own faith: it should be more about developing a relationship with a person, and less about determining which beliefs are right or wrong.

In the 'new' model that this book proposed, God was effectively saying, "Yes, of course you want a relationship: you were created to be in relationship with me! I AM relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – come and join us!" The joy I felt in that discovery was just wonderful, and I have shared that with some of you already.

However, I shared the book with a theologically trained friend, because I realised that the teaching was somewhat radical by some Evangelical standards. This friend read the book and gave it as his opinion that the author "has rejected 30% of the Bible".

Now I'm not theologically trained, but I **am** highly motivated by the joy I have experienced, so I started reading what some other theologians had written.

No, I haven't come up with 'the answer'; I still think there are lots of discussions to be had, but here I want to share my progress(?), and hope that we can share our thoughts together, and maybe make some progress in making the Gospel accessible to our friends and families.

First, what's non-negotiable for me?

- 1) The central problem is human sin – broken relationships.
- 2) Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.
- 3) The solution (salvation) centres on the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- 4) We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.

Hopefully this is unarguable, but the big issue, of course, is “What do you mean by salvation?” But note that I didn’t just say that “salvation centres on the death of Jesus” or even “the death and resurrection of Jesus”.

Let me start by framing the problem in a (partly hypothetical) story.

Martha is a superb welcomer; she’s a “do anything for anyone” sort of person, but she was beating herself up because her church had told her that she had to “share the Gospel” with x-number of her non-Christian friends, and she doesn’t feel she could do that; indeed, she wasn’t sure she wanted to do that.

“Why ever not?!” I asked, but then, “Oh, hang on, what do you mean by ‘share the Gospel’?”

Well, here’s what I’ve always been taught as ‘sharing the Gospel’. You have to tell them:

(1) God is pure and sinless (2) I am not – far from it! (3) I therefore can’t get to heaven; indeed, I deserve to die for my sin (4) God is love, so he sent Jesus (5) Jesus died in my place, as a substitute, to take the penalty that I deserve (6) Because of this exchange, I am FREE and can go to heaven (7) Are you ready to accept Jesus into your life now? (And we might add (8) If you don’t accept what I’m saying, you’ll go to hell.)

“That’s all very well”, says Martha, “but my friend Jenny was abused as a child, and her husband had various affairs and eventually left her for another woman. So that won’t sound like ‘good news’ to her! What kind of God would say to Jenny, ‘The main problem is that you’re completely sinful.’ – What does this ‘good news’ say to her in her suffering?!”

Do you see the problem?! Martha’s trying to tell Jenny that God loves her, but her ‘sharing the Gospel’ could so easily be misunderstood as a wrathful, judgemental God punishing his own son to provide a legal loophole so that God doesn’t have to kill **us** for **our** sin.

And how many of your friends have suffered broken relationships? And add to that those who have suffered through illness – how does this version of the Gospel speak into their situation?

So does God actually WANT people to come to know his love? Of course he does!! Then you and I need to do some serious thinking about how we communicate that love in the 21st century (in whatever cultural environment we find ourselves).

From my theological investigations, I learn that my (1)–(8) presentation is given the technical term ‘penal substitution’, and this past year it has been the focus of a lot of my questioning. And looking back, I see that it was a theological requirement for my previous church’s specification for their new minister: the new incumbent must be someone who ‘keeps the penal substitutionary death of Christ and his resurrection at the centre of his/her theology and ministry’. (As a PCC member I passed this specification without having a clue what penal substitution was.)

Now, I haven’t rejected penal substitution outright, but I do think it’s really not the most helpful metaphor to use for the society I live in. For that’s what it is, a metaphor; if we’re using words to say what God is like and what God has done then we have to use metaphors – “It’s like this...”

My theological diggings have been exciting because I've discovered the huge range of metaphors that the Bible (and contemporary Christians through the centuries) have used for explaining what God has done in and through Christ: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth – it's a huge and glorious kaleidoscope that I'm revelling in exploring!

The problem is that I've always been taught that my (1)–(8) is 'the truth' and that I have to defend it against people who will try to water it down and even deny it. "Hold on to the truth!" I was told when I was a student in Cambridge. But in my sect, I thought that we were the last and final people who were holding onto the one true truth. Stupid of me, I know, but I think God was trying to teach me to always be willing to question "what I've always been taught".

So, where do we go from here? You may feel that my questioning of penal substitution is tantamount to rejecting 30% of the Bible, in which case we have to just agree to differ and each serve God in the way that we feel we can.

If you're willing to join me in my questioning, let's talk about it and see if we can't, together, help Martha to help Jenny; and you can multiply that up, over and over, including my own family!

I have more thoughts on this that I could share, and I'll write them up for my own benefit (I find I think best by committing my thoughts to words on a screen), but if you want to share in my exploration, please let me know.

Gosh, have you really read right through to here?! Well done! :-)