

337 True or false – even more thoughts

(This is a more negative article than I like writing, but I'm trying to counter the negative impression of God that, sadly, I have promoted for most of my Christian life.)

One friend I disagree with – a vicar – told me that they do sometimes use the Prayer Book confession that refers to ‘manifold sins and wickedness ... provoking most justly thy *wrath and indignation against* us’. As a new believer, a college student, I used to recite that at every communion service.

When I expressed surprise in my email at his use of that wording (I tried not to sound too shocked), his single-line response was, ‘What do you do with Romans 1?’ What indeed?! ‘The wrath of God is revealed **against**...’

Knowing the importance of context, I reread the whole chapter. Amazing! Paul is bubbling over with the glory of the good news about Jesus, and his joy in sharing it, and how it transforms lives when we trust in God. He clearly loves them and he’s revelling in the positive changes that have occurred in their lives...

...then something really weird happens; it’s like someone has turned a switch. At v. 18, he suddenly seems to get angry and pours out a litany of the terrible things that people do. What’s going on? (It’s ironic that my friend should think I’m ignoring this passage. I’ve just checked: Romans 1 appears in 43 of my 336 articles!) But, yes, what **do** I do with it?

- 1) I read it (18–32) in its context – especially 1–17 and ch. 2 (more anger there, against the Christians).
- 2) I read it in its historical and cultural context. (To whom is Paul referring when he mentions *their* wickedness, *their* godlessness, *their* suppressing the truth?)
- 3) Only then do I try to interpret it and apply it to 2024. But...
- 4) I also try to check it with my ‘Bible study leader’, Jesus.^[335] In other words, if the conclusion I reach from 3) is **not** something that I could imagine Jesus saying, then I go back and check the passage and its context – maybe I’ve wrongly interpreted it?

When confessing your sins using that prayer, could you imagine Jesus standing in front of you expressing wrath and indignation against you? I can’t.

As a student from a loveless family I discovered God’s love in the Christians I met, and I did wonder about that wording. But if it’s what the church says, it must be right. Right?!

No! Just because a minister or a vicar or a Christian book says something, don’t just accept it. If nothing else, hold it up to the template of Jesus and ask, ‘Would/did Jesus say that?’

When the human Jesus showed wrath and indignation it was against people who caused others to stumble. Sadly, by promoting a negative image of God, I’ve been guilty of that.