

Finally, a faith that I can be really proud of

(One definition of an optimist is someone who put his shoes back on when the preacher says, 'And finally ...')

I've just checked on the spiritual timeline I keep, where I record significant events in my life, and it was in 1994 that I received a spiritual gift that I didn't ask for – tears for the lost: I would spontaneously start to weep as I thought about or talked about people not knowing the Lord. It came during the time when I was doing a lot of 'internet evangelism' – discussing the Christian faith via email.

At the beginning of the new millennium, a Bible study group I attended for a number of years, effectively became a small sect, and during that time, that gift atrophied because under the influence of the leader, I simply became scared about losing my own salvation.

Thankfully, seven years ago, I escaped that sect, but I then hit spiritual Ground Zero where I wondered if God even existed – maybe it was all made-up, wishful thinking. And from there I started trying to rebuild my faith.

Throughout my 50 years as a Christian, a recurring feeling has arisen (and then been lost again) that 'if we really believed this stuff, our lives would be totally different, and people would be attracted to the faith'. And this was related, always, to the idea of faith-as-relationship.

For five years after Ground Zero, my faith rebuilding programme continued, along traditional Evangelical lines, until two years ago I 'discovered' the Trinity – God-as-relationship. As my faith started to take off, God sowed the seed that it was time for us to change churches. It took just three days for Sue and me to decide to leave the church in which we had brought up our children and had worshipped for 37 years, and we joined the local Anglican church where we now live. Ironically, the church we left was called 'Holy Trinity'.

Once we had made that decision, the 'coincidental' events came thick and fast to reassure us that we had made the right decision. God put us in a church where it was OK to doubt, OK to question 'what I've always believed'. Thank you, Lord!

Over the past two years, I've faced my doubts, challenged my accepted Evangelical beliefs, read several really helpful books and, in the past six months, started writing about my beliefs as a way of processing my own ideas. This is 'article' number 42! Just at the time I started writing, a 'coincidental' meeting led me to attend a monthly course in Norwich about the creeds of the church – a major factor in God's building plans for my faith.

The past two traumatic months of Sue's illness (is it only two months ago that we first thought something might possibly be wrong?!) have given me time – hours each day – to think through all this. I'd like to say 'think and pray' but I'm not sure how honest that would be. Certainly, Sue's illness has meant that we've been carried on a huge wave of prayer that has been almost tangible.

So, here we are. Where? Well, Sue is on the mend (thank God, and thank you!), though there's still a longish healing process to go, and I feel that, in the past few days, my thoughts have crystallised. Some of you aren't going to like the conclusions that I have reached about my faith

because it represents a major criticism of my Evangelical roots, but all I can honestly do is present what I think has gone wrong.

As those close to me well know, I've had a growing sense of excitement about my faith, and the tears have returned (big time!), as I've realised what the Lord has given me: a more beautiful faith, a more beautiful gospel, a more beautiful Good News that I can offer to anyone and everyone.

Now, I'm afraid this is going to come out as rather critical and negative, and I don't like doing that, but it has occurred to me that if some of the ideas I've been searching out this past six months are true, then mainline Evangelicalism has served us badly. I've put together here the negatives, but only so that we can realise what we have lost, and regain it, and thereby have a faith of which we can be really proud.

1) We have promoted salvation by penal substitution¹ as if it were 'the gospel'. However, I now believe that the New Testament shows that the gospel – as preached by Jesus, Paul, Peter and all the early church – was simply the story of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Jesus, as the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures. This view has been supported by my study of the church's creeds, which say **nothing** about the 'how' of salvation: 'for us and for our salvation' was all we need, according to the church, for the first few hundred years.

Our over-emphasis on penal substitution started, I believe, around the time of the Reformation, and it has devalued the gospel and made it into a mechanism by which **I** can receive **my own** personal salvation, rather than being – as it was in the early church – the means by which **we** are brought back into **covenant relationship**² with God's people (e.g. note how the Lord's prayer is about 'we'/'our', and not 'I'/'my').

2) Our emphasis on penal substitution makes it all too easy to slide into picturing God as angry with us because we have sinned, and that if we don't repent he will 'send us to hell'. If we allow Jesus' representation of God the Father to take precedence (as we should and must, if Jesus is The Word of God), then that view of God is, to my way of thinking, totally wrong.

Nowhere in the Gospels do I see a picture of God as wrathful – please correct me if I'm wrong. Can you see any anger in the Prodigal Father? I see only intense longing for his son to show even the slightest sign of returning, and then extreme rejoicing when the son returns.

But what about, for example, Matthew 5:29?! *If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.* Doesn't this prove that God will throw us into hell if we sin? No! Jesus didn't mean **literally** throwing into hell any more than he meant **literally** gouging your eye out. He was using a hyperbola – which he often did in his teaching (e.g. camel and needle's eye). And he used images that would relate to the mindset of the people of his day, who **did** see God as throwing people into hell. So to counteract that view of God, Jesus repeatedly portrayed the Father as

¹ Penal substitution is the view of salvation that pictures Jesus' death on the cross as paying the penalty that we deserve for our sins. It is as if he is dying instead of us – he is our substitute.

² I can also now see how and why so much time and effort – not to mention heartache – has been wasted on arguments about infant baptism. You can see how the problem arose: if a baby dies will it go to heaven or hell?!

outrageously giving and forgiving, above all we ask or deserve! You can't hold both views of God – they are simply not compatible.

So, the concept of hell, real as it may be, is not where God **sends** us; it's where we will go if we continue to reject his free and loving gift of forgiveness and new life – a very different picture of God, a more Christ-like God.

Try this as just a dim reflection of the way God looks at us. We recently had a lady in our lounge in floods of tears over her middle-aged son who, because of his life choices, is effectively killing himself. In her love for him, is she angry with him for 'sinning'? Of course not! And can God's love for us be any **less** than this lady's love for her son?

The Bible, from end to end, portrays God's incredible love for us, and so, if we believe in the God that Jesus showed us, any talk of God's wrath has to be seen as the way God's heart is torn apart as we reject his love. And God is heart-broken because he is unable – yes unable! – to force us to accept that love. If he forced us, it wouldn't be love, but coercion.

3) Our over-emphasis on penal substitution has also devalued the cross itself. There are so many glorious ways in which we can picture the work that Jesus did there for us, so why do we have to concentrate on only one of them?! What's more, penal substitution is a metaphor that speaks of **retribution** (which we emphasise by totally misreading 'the wages of sin'³), whereas the other biblical metaphors speak of restoration.

As I covered in my (35) *The gospel – a panoramic view II*⁴, the Bible pictures the cross primarily as healing, but there's also lost-and-found, restoration, redemption and jubilee, ransom, atoning sacrifice, the Lamb of God – a kaleidoscope of beautiful pictures in which we can revel.

4) We have wrongly insisted on calling the Bible 'the word of God'. This is a smaller point, but not insignificant. Only Jesus is the word of God – the one through whom God spoke and it was created, and who speaks to us today. The Bible is extremely important – nay, essential – because it tells us about **THE** word of God – Jesus; but it is not of itself the word of God (see 41, *What is the Bible? II*⁵).

5) We have said, or implied, that the Bible is infallible (41, *What is the Bible? II*). If it's a translation we're reading, then it certainly can't be infallible, because those words are the creation of fallible humans, albeit hopefully inspired by the Holy Spirit. But even the original Greek and Hebrew can't, in my view, be infallible for the following reasons:

(a) It was written by fallible humans, and God did not turn them into robots, forcing them to write certain specific words.

(b) It clearly contains some mistakes, which we ought to honestly acknowledge, rather than glossing over them.

(c) In a few places, it portrays God in ways that go against the way Jesus portrayed God (wrathful, rather than forgiving), and I believe that what Jesus said – as **The Word of God** – takes precedence over the words written by the Bible's authors. (Actually, many of these apparent

³ We read it as if God were 'paying' us what we deserve – death! Rather God is trying to warn us: 'If you sin, the inevitable consequence is death'. Please read the rest of Paul's sentence – nay, shout it out! '**...but the free gift of God...**'!

⁴ See: <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/thoughts>

⁵ See: <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/thoughts>

contradictions can easily be understood if you acknowledge that the authors wrote – could not help but write – in the context of the then currently accepted norms and knowledge bases.) By saying that the Bible is infallible, we have devalued it, especially in the minds of outsiders to the faith – how can they be expected to take it seriously?! We play right into the hands of detractors such as Richard Dawkins.

So, I'm sorry if you feel that I've been negative, but it's only so that I can point anyone and everyone to Jesus, and people only have to 'meet' Jesus to discover what God is like and to realise that God is so amazing that I wonder that not everyone bows the knee to him as Christ.

I started this writing journey (odyssey?) in (1) *Rebuilding my faith* by pointing out that if penal substitution is our primary model, if 'the gospel' is just about salvation, then before we can give people 'the good news', we first have to get them to sit and listen to 'the bad news' – sin and a holy God. And how do we get them to listen to that essential precursor to 'the good news'? We give them hell!

Our faith message has become – 'Look out! You're heading for hell! Repent and believe the Good News!' That might attract some people, but others just can't take it seriously and still others are repulsed by it. 'It's nice for you, but I just don't feel the need.'

Our faith message could (should?) be, '*Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?*' (John 4:29) – in other words, 'I've met someone who has transformed my life. He's simply amazing! Come and see for yourself.'

I know that some of you reading this are church leaders who are desperately concerned about discipleship: people get saved, but then they don't grow as Christians. How can we get them to read the Bible and pray and witness to their friends?!

The answer to that is exactly the same: 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?' (Jn 4:29) Invite them into this glorious covenant.

Since I've really met Jesus these past six months, I can't seem to stop reading my Bible and talking about my new-found faith, and I've recently even started praying because I'm coming to believe that God is actually unable to work in this world unless we pray (but I'm still working through this idea).

Apologetics?! Whose idea was that?! There's absolutely no need to apologise for such

Wonderful GOOD NEWS!

Paul Bev. 24.2.19

P.S. Do you think there might be a clue, in what I've just written, to the question I've been asking God, 'Why do so many men, whose wives attend church, not do so themselves?'