

60 Bloody hell!

(Beware: I was a bit cross the day I wrote this article, so it's a bit over-stated and provocative, but it's what I wrote at that particular point on my journey of faith, so please take it for what it is, not a carefully argued theological treatise, but a piece of self-expression – opening my heart and soul to those who have been listening to my thoughts as they have developed over the months.)

A good friend from St Ed's who, I think, is worried lest I become a universalist, emailed me, saying: (my emphasis) '*Surely God has to **deal with sin with justice**. In other words, if the unrepentant sinner rejects a relationship with Jesus and carries on his lifestyle of sin, what happens when the books are opened on judgement day? "OK son, into heaven you go", or what?*' And when I asked for clarification on 'deal with sin' he added, '*What I mean is to judge between the sheep and the goats, as Jesus put it, wheat and tares.*'

My friend knows that I'm not trying to 'prove him wrong', but I'm going to use his response to illustrate how unhelpful 'what I've always been taught' can be. Let's go backwards through it:

In the wheat and tares parable, Jesus is telling his disciples **NOT** to try to sort out who's in and who's out – leave it to God (and just get on with tending the field, I suppose).

And what does the sheep and goats parable teach? The plain meaning of this scripture is very clear and straightforward: The goats will be told '*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*' and '*they will go away to eternal punishment*'. (bloody hell!) And the sheep? '*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*' Well, thank God that we've found Jesus, and we are saved. Phew!

But how does God make the decision as to whether we go to heaven or hell? Jesus' own words make it very, very plain: on judgement day, when the books are opened, the questions will be whether or not we cared for the poor and marginalised. Can you interpret Matthew 25:31-46 in any other way?!

But that can't be right, can it?! *We've always been taught* that whether we go to heaven or hell depends on whether we have a personal relationship with Jesus, and here's Jesus saying that it's whether we have cared for the poor!

Who is right? *What I've always been taught* or what Jesus teaches?! Are you willing to argue with Jesus' own words?!

Oh, I'm sure you'll argue from other scriptures about personal salvation being the crux of the heaven/hell decision – after all, we've rehearsed that story over and over and over again:

If you do things wrong, you'll go to hell. The good news is you don't have to go to hell. God has provided a way you can escape your deserved fate. Jesus has died in your place, and if you believe in him, you'll get to heaven.

Isn't that the 'gospel' that you received, when you became a Christian? You received personal salvation. Hallelujah! After that, you were encouraged to be a disciple: (1) read your Bible,

(2) pray, (3) evangelise and (4) care for the poor too. (But we don't like to over-stress the last bit because we don't want people to think you get to heaven by doing good works!)

OK, I'm being deliberately provocative – but I know Someone else who was deliberately provocative! But can you see how **superficial** personal salvation is? How does that 'gospel' have any relevance to me if I'm suffering severe mental illness? or if I was abused as a child? or if I'm in grinding poverty because of the 'system', the moneyed meritocrats who keep me in poverty to feed their desire for more and more money?

If you think the cross is just the place where Jesus won your personal salvation, then don't you **dare** say yours is a Bible-based church or, worse still, a 'cross-centred church'!

If we treat sin as 'doing things wrong', then we're only treating the **symptoms** and not the **root cause**; we're ignoring the fact that sin is a fatal disease – a deadly cancer. The Bible does **not** teach that sin is doing naughty things; the Bible teaches that sin is broken relationships – with God primarily, but then with each other. **That** is the problem that needs solving, **not** 'sins' (the things we do wrong).

The root problem is selfishness: that we focus on ourselves (as Adam and Eve did) instead of focusing on our relationship with God, and then it all goes horribly wrong. So we can see it as:

sin (root cause) = broken relationships

sins (plural) = the result of broken relationships (= hell?)

This is why I keep jumping up and down and getting cross when people diminish the cross by treating it as if it were just a means of personal salvation – as a way to avoid 'going to hell'.

Even worse than that, if we're a 'cross-centred church', and we keep telling people 'the gospel' of personal salvation, then what outsiders will hear is:

You are a sinner; you keep doing things wrong, so you deserve to go to hell. But if you believe in Jesus, you'll be able to get to heaven. And as people who study the Bible, we'll tell you exactly which things are sinful and which not: [insert your own church's list of the worst sins].

Compare that with (just an idea, not a pat formula):

Welcome, God loves you! Life can be hell at times, but God loves you and you're welcome here among us – and many of us are suffering hell in our lives too. But the important thing is that we love you as you are. In our services we celebrate a man (God on earth, actually) who went through hell (through the worst that man could possibly do to anyone) and died, but he triumphed through that hell and came back to life. That same power that raised Jesus from the grave is available to **you**, to us, here and now, and it can transform your life! We don't have any simple pat answers to your suffering, but we're committed to bringing heaven into the hell you see around you. That's God's stock-in-trade!

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; this has diminished the power and meaning and significance of the cross; also, its focus on sin-as-transgression, has convinced outsiders that all we're concerned about is telling other people how to behave (and condemning them when they live differently).

And we're surprised that our churches are dwindling?! Well, OK, not all churches **are** dwindling. There are 'successful' churches, ones that attract large numbers of people, but if you're a member of one such church, look around you and do a tally of the number of 'successful' people and the number of people whose lives are a 'failure' (in man's eyes, in their eyes).

The scripture that came to mind just now was 'we preach Christ, and him crucified', which seemed to sum up the point I've come to: the gospel **IS** Christ, the narrative of his life, death and resurrection, and the cross is Christ's universal throne, where he overcame all the forces of evil. Hallelujah!

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Cor 1:20-25)

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