

The Gospel Destroyed

Is the Church preaching the right concept of God?

The gospel usually proclaimed these days by traditional and many evangelical Christian churches goes something like this:

God is holy. Mankind has sinned against him and incurred the penalty of death. God is just and justice demands punishment. But God is also love so he sends Jesus Christ to pay the penalty and take our punishment upon himself. The moment when Jesus cries from the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is interpreted as the time when the Father, being too holy to look upon sin, forsakes Jesus as he takes our sin upon himself. The agony of this forsakenness translates into Jesus receiving the ultimate punishment for our sins as he also pays the death penalty for us.

If this was all true, however, it would drive a coach and horses through the unity of the Trinity and stand Jesus' work on its head. And nowhere does the Bible state that Christ came to reconcile the Father to us, neither does it say that Christ came to placate the Father's anger, nor to satisfy the Father's demand for punishment to enable him to forgive us.

It's quite the opposite, in fact. The Bible states clearly in **Colossians 1:20** that the Father sent his Son to "reconcile all things to himself." Not reconcile himself to us, but reconcile us to him. We are the ones who need reconciling to the Father, not the Father to us. It's *our* state of mind and *our* attitude to the Father that needs changing, not the Father's state of mind and attitude to us.

Jesus did not come among us so that the Father could now have mercy on us, or to change the Father's attitude from demanding justice to being able to love and forgive us. The Father sent Jesus because he loves us, not because he demands punishment. The Father wants us forgiven and brought close to him, and that's why he sent Jesus. He sent him into our fallen existence to remove everything that separated us from him and bring us home. And that's exactly what Jesus did. He completed what the Father sent him for. "It is finished," Jesus said on the cross (**John 17:4, 19:30**). The job was done.

If, instead, the gospel is about the Father being too holy to look upon sin, then why would the Son become sin? Would that not make the Father holier than the Son? And is the Trinity so split that the Son has to rescue us from the Father's holy anger by taking our sin upon himself? And if the Father "cannot" forgive us until his demand for justice is satisfied, or he "won't" forgive us until his anger is appeased by bloody sacrifice, does that not put the church and all mankind in the horrible position of hiding from the Father's anger behind Jesus Christ's blood? It drives an ugly wedge through the Trinity, too.

Where does this idea come from, then, that the Father is so holy that he cannot be near to sin and he demands just punishment for those engaged in it?

It's based on a false but familiar concept of God as a singular, abstract, unknowable entity, standing above the creation in unapproachable holiness, in control and omnipotent. His relationship with mankind is remote and mediated through the law. He is a God of rules and justice, keeping account and exacting due payment and penalty before there can be forgiveness.

This is the awful "legalized" God taught to many sincere Christians, and they live in fear and anxiety. I've seen the churches where these Christians attend, too. They have signs out front that announce "All are Welcome," attached to which are statements like "Your sins will find you out," or "Be prepared to meet your God," designed to scare people into church, not welcome them! So instead of drawing people to Christ, they're driving them away..

The Trinitarian God of the Bible is the exact opposite of this horrendous picture. The true picture of God is love. The Father, Son and Spirit live in unimaginable, joyous, loving, creative fellowship and unity. So close is their mutual and reciprocal love that it can only be expressed as

being "in one another." And the underlying nature of the Father, Son and Spirit is one of self-giving love openly expressed in their desire to share their love and draw us into their beautiful relationship as God's adopted children (**Ephesians 1:3-5**). That's the God of the gospel, the "Good News" God who planned for us to be at one with him, re-created in Jesus Christ to be perfect for him and share everything he is and has. It is this unswerving purpose and the love of the Son for the Father that drove Jesus to the cross to bring about the Father's will for us.

At the Father's decree, Jesus entered into our wretched human condition, took our fallen and alienated human nature upon himself and turned it back to the Father in faith and obedience. During his sacrificial life Jesus defeated Satan and took the old fallen humanity inherited from Adam to the cross and destroyed it. The Father then resurrected Jesus as a new creation, a new humanity, and Jesus now sits incarnate at the right hand of the Father.

And that's where the really great news - the real gospel - comes in, because we are now "hidden WITH Christ in God (**Colossians 3:3**)." If we can only see ourselves as the Gospel sees us, as a new creation, hidden with Christ at the right hand of God as his adopted children, sharing in all he has and is through the communion of the Spirit. See ourselves that way and we have what is perhaps the greatest gift that God bestows upon us - total assurance. We rest in Christ, accepted, cherished and loved in him. We're at peace, freeing us up to reach beyond ourselves and give of ourselves to others. And released from ulterior motives, self-centredness and obsession with our own life and anxiety, we can begin to care for others and turn to God in free, unrestrained love and joy. We are also released from the burden of being "good enough" and from the restraints of trying to achieve that which Jesus has already accomplished in our place.

Compare that to the legalized God and the gospel of fear so often preached in Christian churches today. That kind of God and gospel offer little relevance to our every day life and they provide no answer to our inner anxieties. They give no assurance, no peace and no joy. No wonder churches are closing and the world has stopped listening to anything they have to say.