

**IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD - The Biblical Pattern of the Atonement - Part one - Sunday, April 24th, 2022 - Teaching #2183
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THE SUBTLE SHIFT - HOW THE DOWNSIZING OF THE ATONEMENT IS EFFECTING THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

I believe we are at a crisis point in the evangelical church. I know there have always been squabbles over all sorts of things. Some like traditional worship, some contemporary. The list of domestic skirmishes in the family of God is endless. While these are sad, they aren't as deadly as what's taking place today. Something much darker is on the horizon.

What's being questioned out loud in the evangelical church used to be the ammunition of atheists and antagonists to the cause of Christ. It's the nature of the atonement - the cause of the cross - the nerve-center of salvation - that's being broadly questioned as though it were of no more consequence than the hymn versus chorus debate.

Let me open with more background than I'd usually take time for on a Sunday morning. I want to just briefly circle over the kind of debate that percolates among people calling themselves evangelical Christians:

Consider the following words: ***“The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child-abuse - a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love.”If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.”***

Now, there have always been people saying things like that. But what’s different is those words didn’t come from Deepak Chopra or Eckhart Tolle. They come from the lips of the perhaps the most prominent Baptist pastor in the U.K. (***Steve Chalk and Brian Mann in “The Lost Message of Jesus”***). This book is heavily endorsed by ***Brian McLaren***. And those words are being broadly echoed by a host of progressive leaders and authors in North America.

In fact, **Brian McLaren**, in one of his earlier popular books, ***“The Story We Find Ourselves In,”*** places his own view of the atonement in the words of the story’s main character, Neo. Neo outlines the difficulties of the old substitutionary view of the atonement, saying, it fails to address the real question of why, if God is loving and wants to forgive us, doesn’t he just do it? How can punishing an innocent person make things better? - ***“That sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation”***

McLaren’s fictitious character, Neo, then expounds his own more satisfactory and much less retributive view of what happened on the cross: ***“....When I think about the cross, I think it’s all about God’s agony being made visible - you know, the pain of forgiving, the pain of absorbing*** [how this “absorbing” takes place without substitution is nowhere explained] - ***“....the pain absorbing the betrayal and forgoing any revenge*** [So there’s no divine retribution against our sin associated with the cross. Jesus does not carry the wrath from God the Father against my sin on the cross.] - ***“....when I think about the cross I think about the pain of risking that your heart will be hurt again for the sake of love, the pain of the very worst moment, when the beloved has been least worthy of forgiveness, but stands in the worst need of it....”***

So it's the cost of loving others that stands out clearly on the cross. It's not easy to love. It costs a lot of abuse and suffering to extend love to needy people. And goodness knows, we can all be more self-giving when we love people in the middle of their anger and loss and confusion. That's the message of the cross.

Remember, these are some of the largest selling books in Christian bookstores and online centers. Our evangelical churches are devouring these ideas. McLaren then contrasts the **conventional** view of the substitutionary atonement with what he calls the new **emerging** view in his book, ***“Everything Must Change”***:

“Conventional View: Jesus says, in essence, ‘If you want to be among those specifically qualified to escape being forever punished for your sins in hell, you must repent of your individual sins and believe that my Father punished me on the cross so he won’t have to punish you in hell. Only if you believe this will you go to heaven when the earth is destroyed and everyone else is banished to hell.’ This is the good news.”

“Emerging View: Jesus says, in essence, ‘I have been sent by God with this good news—that God loves humanity, even in its lostness and sin. God graciously invites everyone and anyone to turn from his or her current path [Why they need to turn is never explained] and follow a new way. Trust me and become my disciple, and you will be transformed, and you will participate in the transformation of the world, which is possible, beginning right now.’ This is the good news.” (Brian D. McLaren, Everything Must Change, 2007, p. 79).

Now certainly the second view is carefully worded to sound much more inviting. All the nasty New Testament words from the atonement view are removed (“hell”, “punished”, “banned”, “destroyed”). This is clever writing designed to make the first view look almost Nazi-like in comparison.

Notice especially the way that in the second view McLaren’s theory makes the death of Jesus on the cross merely an ***invitation*** as these words are put into Jesus’ mouth - ***“I have been sent by God with this good news....God graciously invites everyone and anyone to turn from his or her current path and follow a new way.”*** Why exactly Jesus had to ***die*** just to ***invite*** isn’t made clear. An email could invite. Just come and change. And if you don’t ***feel*** like changing, well, no harm done, it would appear.

Or, listen to these words from **Doug Pagitt** in his book **“A Christianity Worth Believing”**: **“....I’m not sure I would have been interested in the Christian faith if the story on the stage had been about a removed God [The fact that the Bible says, far from being removed, God was *in* Christ on that cross is swept aside.]a removed God who needed to be placated with a blood offering before he was willing to cross the chasm and participate with humanity....In this view, God is not a softy but rather a hard-nosed, immovable, infallible judge who cannot abide defiance of the law. And boy, did we defy it!”**

“When Adam and Eve broke God’s law in the garden, they offended and angered God. So heinous was their crime that their punishment extended to all of humanity for all time. The antidote to this situation is the crucifixion of the Incarnate Son of God because only the suffering and death of an equally infinite and infallible being could ever satisfy the infinite offense of the infinitely dishonored God and assuage his wrath. Yikes!....” (Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 2008, pp. 154-155).

I could pile up hundreds of contemporary quotes, but I think you can at least begin to get the point. It's OK to talk about the cross. It's OK to talk about God's love. Those won't make you any enemies. The disturbing elements of the Scriptural teaching on the atonement are basically two.

The first unacceptable concept is the idea that we are somehow under God's wrath for our sin. I don't mind being told in some vague fashion that I'm not quite perfect - a sinner in some sense. But the notion that my sins are ***eternally consequential*** is unacceptable.

The ***second unacceptable concept in the atonement is the idea that Father God's wrath somehow falls on Jesus in my place when Jesus didn't do anything wrong.*** So it's Jesus dying as my ***substitute*** that smacks of unfairness on God's part. Those are the troubling aspects of the traditional view of the atonement. They are increasingly unacceptable among multiplied thousands of evangelicals. I believe the actual word, ***"substitution"*** may have been removed on our denomination's revised **Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths.**

My question, the central question of this entire series, is ***what happens when these two elements are left out?*** Does the Bible have anything to say on this issue? And what is left to our message of the cross when we delete these two themes?

And, while it will take weeks of digging to flesh all of this out from the Bible, let me tell you my conclusion now, right up front. My conviction is if these two aspects are removed what you have left is a different religion. It's not Christianity anymore. It may prop up self-esteem. It may make us feel good. It may - and does - fill up contemporary churches. It will sell millions of copies to soothing-craved church goers. But it's a re-jigged Christianity and God may not be as tolerant of it as we. I think there's a lot at stake.

Admittedly, most of the teaching time today has been taken with introductory considerations. We won't do this again to the same extent. But I wanted to raise the issue. I wanted everyone to see this isn't an exaggerated danger. We're not fighting a straw man here. We are now, in a way seen by very few generations in the church's history, forced to, in the apostle Jude's words - "**....contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints**"(3).

That first verb - "**contend**" - a New Testament command. That's what we're interested in. How do we find our way through these issues? Exactly how knowable are the exact terms of the gospel? How much stretch is there in our theology of the atonement? What help can we get from the Scriptures? Does God have expectations of people **contending** for these truths? I have these closing thoughts:

1) **THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BRIGHT, RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO HAVE DISTORTED THE WORD OF GOD AND WHO SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER**

Jesus encountered them in His day just as we encounter them in ours: **John 3:10 - “Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’” - IPAD TEXT**

Mark well Jesus’ amazement that one charged with the duty of teaching the law of God to the people didn’t grasp the whole purpose of the law in the first place.

It was situations like these that brought out some very stern words of warning from our Lord on other occasions:

IPAD TEXT - Matthew 15:1-6 - "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, [2] "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." [3] He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? [4] For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Who ever reviles father or mother must surely die.' [5] But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, [6] he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition *you have made void the word of God.*"

It's those last eight words that fascinate me. Religious teachers have always run the danger of allowing their own agenda to cause them to ***"make void the word of God."*** Sometimes for power, sometimes to make a name, but most often for the less obviously sinister desire of simply being ***relevant*** to the surrounding culture, people can ***use*** the very Word of God but take all the ***authority*** out of it when it might offend. They still use most of the terms. They ***refer*** to the Word. But they make it ***void***.

Void is the very word Jesus used. That means they dump out all of the content that matters. There's no risk in this gospel. They pass on an empty shell of revelation where there's not so much to disagree with. So we know at least this much. This kind of situation isn't new. We can watch Jesus confront it and learn.

2) **JESUS RESPONDED TO SUCH DISTORTIONS WITH A MIXTURE OF BOTH ANGER AND GRIEF**

IPAD TEXT - Mark 3:1-5 - "Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. [2] And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. [3] And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." [4] And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. [5] *And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand."* He stretched it out, and his hand was restored."

This is the same group who Jesus said made void the Word of God. And this text is important because, at least on this one occasion, we're specifically told of Jesus' ***inward reaction*** - His ***thought process*** - what He ***felt in His holy heart*** - when He observed the way these teachers had abandoned the truth.

Mark records that Jesus was both **angry** and **sad**. And I think we need to consider both these reactions quickly. Jesus was angry when truth wasn't preserved and proclaimed. It didn't matter whether the crowds **loved** the religious leader's words or **hated** them. The point was the teacher's words weren't **true**.

So Jesus was **angry** because people **needed** to hear the truth. The truth was important and Jesus' anger was **righteous** anger. This was worth being divinely upset about because people **needed** to hear the truth more than they **realized** they needed to hear it. They had deeper needs than they were **aware** of. And these teachers of the law were **robbing** the people of eternal help and hope. It was Jesus' holy love for the lost that made Him angry with these empty religious thinkers.

Jesus was angry because He knew the Father's heart. And He knew it was the **job** of these religious leaders to deliver God's message. It wasn't their job to tailor a message for their hearers. They weren't **editors**. It was their job to teach and pass on exactly what **God had said**.

And we know this **mattered** to Jesus because when they failed to do that, they were, in Jesus' words, "**...like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it**"(Luke 11:44). There's nothing complementary in those descriptive words.

But Jesus was also **“grieved”** at their false message. Why grieved? Because He knew these Jewish leaders were also His kinsmen. He loved them deeply. He knew that they not only **spread** misinformation, but became the **victims** of their own blindness to the truth - **Luke 19:42 - “...Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. “ - IPAD TEXT**

It's an unloving act to let false teachers continue to drift from the truth. Spiritual blindness is incremental. And Jesus was too loving to not be grieved by their condition. We're hopelessly undone apart from the truth of the gospel. And we're surprised to learn in our relativistic age that **doctrinal error** breaks God's heart just as much as **hatred and disunity** break it.

3) **PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO A LESS OFFENSIVE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS THAN THE GOSPEL OF THE WRATH-BEARING LAMB OF GOD**

This is perhaps the most important point. If people in the twenty-first century find the message of the cross, in Steve Chalk's words, **“...morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith,”** it was no different in Paul's day - **1 Corinthians 1:23 - “...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...” - IPAD TEXT**

Paul cautioned about the culturally adapted desire to rescue God's image - to rescue Him from the image of intolerance. He warned against finding a more palatable approach. In future weeks we'll explore why this is so. My prayer right now is that we will always be a church that **glories in the cross of Christ Jesus**. Allow it to stand in all its **wrath-bearing, substitutionary glow**. Let God's mind-numbing grace stand out as **amazing** indeed. Let it stand in its pride-destroying, works erasing magnificence.

There have always been more popular crosses. It has always been easier to attract fallen minds around a more soothing message. The ways of Almighty God are usually a hard fit for our culturally-formed tastes. Never mind. Just gratefully bow before divine revelation.

I've always felt almost guilty that I'm not as much a lover of reading **Charles Spurgeon** as many others are. I have always found him a bit too wordy, laboring over being almost poetic in his sentence structure. But God will forgive me for my lack of taste. There is one quote, however, that I have cherished for years. Though it's only recently that I've been almost stunned by its relevance.

Listen to what he said one Sunday night, in 1888, to his congregation in London: ***“Of late, I have heard things that I never dreamed of before, alleged even by professedly Christian ministers against the fundamental doctrines of God’s Word - and some have even dared to say that the substitution of Christ, His suffering in our stead, is not just. Then they have added that God forgives sin without any atonement whatever....Depend on this, whatever modern philosophy may say, ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin,’ that is to say, without an atonement and an atonement consisting of the giving up of a life of infinite value, there is no passing by human transgression.”***

In future weeks we’re going to unpack line by line, text by text, argument by argument, objection by objection, why Spurgeon was right. It’s going to be a season for our whole church to ***re-learn*** why we stay close to the triune God only as we thoughtfully and passionately glory in the cross where the Lamb of God bore both divine wrath and human sin in His own body to bring me eternal life.