

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SAVE SINNERS?

Russell Moore, in a very perceptive article on Christians and pop culture, made this penetrating observation. The world around us, he said, is full of people who “want a gospel, just not the one God provides.”¹ This state of affairs has produced a growing number of self-identified “Evangelicals” who are doing everything they can to repackage the gospel so as to make it more appealing to the surrounding culture. Salvation in this shell-game becomes something altogether different from what it once implied. It used to mean deliverance from the penalty our sins deserved by the redemptive cross-work of Christ. But that message presupposes a holy God who judges sin – and that sinners are in fact guilty as charged. That won’t sell today, or as some like to put it “that won’t preach!” – so now salvation is seen primarily as deliverance from difficult personal circumstances and how to secure a more fulfilling and meaningful life. “God wants you to be happy, successful and doing your best to reach your full potential!” has become the new tonic now being hawked by these Evangelical snake-oil salesmen.² In such a scheme, doctrines like the deity of Christ and the nature of the atonement are not only unnecessary, but are considered a downright noxious noisome embarrassment! Such things can be tucked away in some hidden “doctrinal statement” to satisfy the curious that these people’s “Evangelical” credentials are above suspicion – but that is about all. After all, if we are going to reach people for Christ, we have to be “relevant,” don’t we? But at what cost? Who wants a “relevant” gospel that ends up being no gospel at all? Who wants a gospel that cannot save sinners? There are no shortages of *gospels* all competing with one another. The apostle Paul warned the Church at Corinth about this very thing (2 Cor. 11:4). As I sought to demonstrate last week, our doctrinal understanding of God is critically important to understanding the substance and nature of the Biblical gospel. The 19th century Scottish church historian William Cunningham, in answering these probing questions, asked: “What is the relationship between the doctrine of God and the atonement? And how should we think of God’s attributes in connection to the cross? Does the former have a controlling effect on our understanding of the latter?” Cunningham correctly saw a striking parallel in the theology of the forerunners to modern-day Unitarianism in the Socinians. In his discussion of Socinianism, Cunningham noted that: “Socinianism – and indeed, this may be said of most other systems of false religion – represents God as a Being whose moral character is composed exclusively of goodness and mercy; of a mere desire to promote the happiness of his creatures, and a perfect readiness at once to forgive and to bless all who have transgressed against him. They thus virtually exclude from the divine character that immaculate holiness which is represented in Scripture as leading God to hate sin.”³ Cunningham went on to point out that this dispute over God’s being and attributes has a direct bearing on how the atonement is understood, since it touches on the issue of the necessary or voluntary punishment of sin. Either God punishes sin because of his holy nature or else he punishes it, or overlooks it, as a mere act of his will. Of course if he doesn’t need to punish it, then he can freely forgive it merely by speaking a word. But if sin must be punished, then will he freely forgive it merely by speaking a word? But if sin must be punished, then it must be by the substitutionary death of His Son. It is interesting to note that Cunningham’s description of the Socinian recasting of God’s attributes is seen in some contemporary authors like open theist Richard Rice, who declares: “Love is the most important quality we attribute to

God. The tragedy is that over the centuries the Church has time and again failed to communicate, even to understand, this greatest and deepest of all truths. Perhaps some of the most disastrous examples of this are, paradoxically, the Church's historic creeds . . . the fact that the God of the universe is the God who claims, not only *that* he loves, but also that *he chooses to define himself as love* has become one of the world's best-kept secrets. People still believe that the Christian God is a God of power, law, judgment, hell-fire and damnation."⁴ Brian McLaren, who is generally recognized as the leading voice for what went by the label "The Emergent Church," has also poured his own contempt on this by declaring that this doctrine makes God look like some ill-tempered bully who has to go around stomping on people in order to feel good about himself.⁵ McLaren has also enthusiastically endorsed a book by Steven Chalke and Alan Mann, where they echo McLaren by declaring, "The Bible never defines God as anger, power or judgment – in fact it never defines him as anything other than love."⁶ Again however, listen to the analysis of William Cunningham, who made this striking observation about the doctrine of God by saying, "Socinian or orthodox, and the implications of this for other doctrines: It is true of all systems of theology – taking that word in its wide and common sense, as implying a knowledge of all matters bearing upon our relation to God and our eternal destinies – that they are materially influenced, in their general character and complexion, by the views which they embody about the divine attributes, character, and government – that is, about theology in the restricted meaning of the word, or the doctrine concerning God. Hence we find that, in many systems of theology, there are introduced, under the head 'De Deo,' and in the exposition of the divine attributes, discussions more or less complete, of many topics that are afterwards taken up and illustrated more fully under their own proper heads – such as providence, predestination, and grace."⁷ We are told by the apostle Paul that "Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). So then, what does it take to save sinners? The Bible states there are six things required to save sinners.

- I. ***A TRIUNE GOD.*** The "gods" of Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, et al., are *not* Trinitarian, and their "gospels" are impotent to save sinners. Mormons, for example, say things like "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believes in God the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." But this is very misleading, for embedded in these nice sounding Christian buzzwords is the Mormon belief that the Eternal Father was not always the Eternal Father, and neither was Jesus Christ, who Mormons claim was the spirit-born brother of Lucifer, not the Holy Ghost. In Mormonism, all three have been in a constant state of flux, changing forms and progressing up the divine scale to become what they are. And what is equally obtuse is to tell people how these three are united, yet completely contradict the godly unity of the three by saying that the one, true God is not one substance.⁸ Likewise, in Islam, God is a monad, and therefore cannot really be personal, and certainly cannot be described as love. In this context, Letham notes that "God is love" implies the Trinity, since love is inherently other-focused. If God is just a monad, then He could not be love until the creation came about. Therefore, in order for God to be love, He must exist in Trinity. Islam holds to no such teaching (also falling in this camp are Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses [plus other Arians]). As a result, human love has no basis in their theology.⁹ The doctrine of the Trinity, as Gerald Bray observes, is the big difference between the Christian faith and any kind of philosophical theology. Christians claim to know God, the ultimate reality, personally. The belief that God is a personal being is one which is shared with other monotheistic religions, especially Judaism and Islam, but Christianity is fundamentally different from them in that it claims that the *one* God in whom we all believe is known to us not as one, but as three distinct persons. To a Jew or to a Muslim, this appears to be a denial of monotheism, and it must be admitted that many Christians also find it difficult to hold the Trinity of persons together in the unity of a single divine being. Yet without the Trinity, there would be no Christianity. Our belief in the saving work of Christ the Son of God and in the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit demands that we worship God in that way.¹⁰
- II. ***AN INCARNATE SON.*** Paul F. M. Zahl has correctly noted that, "The doctrine of the Trinity is a reflection on the doctrine of the incarnation, which in its turn is a reflection on the

successful substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross.”¹¹ This is the only “Jesus” that can save sinners. The “Jesus” of the ancient and modern Arians is powerless to save sinners. The atoning death of Christ, observes Robert Letham, “is the outflow of a loving decision by the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three persons work together in harmony. In the eternal counsels of the Trinity, the loving and gracious decision was made to head up the created order in Christ, the incarnate Son, who would take into permanent and eternal union human nature. In this way, as Christopher Wordsworth put it in his ascension hymn, ‘man with God is on the throne,’ Christ has taken our humanity to the right hand of the Father. In union with Christ we are now seated in heavenly places, made by grace a partaker of the divine nature. In this sense, all that was to be accomplished for the redemption of the human race from sin, including the atonement, was and is of cosmic and universal significance and extent. In this eternal decision and indivisible purpose of the three Trinitarian persons – some have called this a ‘covenant of redemption’ – is embraced the whole panorama of humanity’s creation, fall into sin, and deliverance by the incarnate Son. His incarnation is crucial in this, for it was in his incarnate and mediatorial life that he offered himself up on the cross to the Father in and by the same Spirit (Heb. 9:14). Throughout that time, as God manifest in the flesh, he took Adam’s place, living an obedient and sinless life, such that his offering was without blemish and spot, remedying the defect caused by the first Adam. As the Second and Last Adam, he brought into being a new humanity by his resurrection, under the direction of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:20-28, 35-49). The result is that all united to him are made partakers of the divine nature and live and reign with him forever, over the new creation that is the great and consummate goal of God.”¹²

III. A SECOND ADAM. This has to do with Christ fulfilling the Covenant of Works as the second, and last Adam. The great John Owen explains, “the Lord Christ as our mediator and surety fulfilling the law, by yielding perfect obedience thereunto, he did it for us; and to us it is imputed. This is plainly affirmed by the apostle, Romans 5:18, 19, ‘Therefore, as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s obedience many were made sinners; so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.’ The full plea from, and vindication of, this testimony, I refer unto its proper place in the testimonies given unto the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto our justification in general. Here I shall only observe, that the apostle expressly and in terms affirms that ‘by the obedience of Christ we are made righteous,’ or justified; which we cannot be but by the imputation of it unto us. I have met with nothing that had the appearance of any sobriety for the eluding of this express testimony, but only that by the obedience of Christ his death and sufferings are intended, wherein he was obedient unto God; as the apostle says, he was ‘obedient unto death, even the death of the cross,’ Philippians 2:8. But yet there is herein no color of probability. For – (1.) It is acknowledged that there was such a near conjunction and alliance between the obedience of Christ and his sufferings, that though they may be distinguished, yet can they not be separated. He suffered in the whole course of his obedience, from the womb to the cross; and he obeyed in all his sufferings unto the last moment wherein he expired. But yet are they really things distinct, as we have proved; and they were so in him who ‘learned obedience by the things that he suffered,’ Hebrews 5:8. (2.) In this place (Romans 5) *hupakoe*, verse 19, and *dikaiooma*, verse 18, are the same – obedience and righteousness. ‘By the righteousness of one,’ and ‘by the obedience of one,’ are the same. But suffering as suffering, is not *dikaiooma*, is not righteousness; for if it were, then every one that suffers what is due to him should be righteous, and so be justified, even the devil himself. (3.) The righteousness and obedience here intended are opposed *tooi paraptoomati* -- to the offense: ‘By the offense of one.’ But the offense intended was an actual transgression of the law; so is *paraptooma*, a fall from, or a fall in, the course of obedience. Wherefore, the *dikaiooma*, or righteousness, must be an actual obedience unto the commands of the law, or the force of the apostle’s reasoning and antithesis cannot be

understood. (4.) Particularly, it is such an obedience as is opposed unto the disobedience of Adam – ‘one man’s disobedience,’ ‘one man’s obedience’ – but the disobedience of Adam was an actual transgression of the law: and therefore the obedience of Christ here intended was his active obedience unto the law – which is what we plead for.”¹³

IV. A VICARIOUS PENAL ATONEMENT. Sinners need an atoning sacrifice for their sins. Any doctrine of the atonement that does not have at its core the notion of penal substitution is hopelessly inadequate to save sinners. Paul Wells has well said, “In its relational aspect, sin is enmity and rebellion against God. In its judicial aspect, it involves all that is illegal for God. An enslaving power, it renders man helpless and spiritually dead with regard to God. Sin, rather than God, has become man’s lord and master; the sinner is a slave, in bondage to sin. Is God *angry* with sin? Certainly, and to use this word is not too strong, even if it is most disagreeable to think God is angry with us. God is angry precisely because he is personal and sin is not just harm done to humanity, but an affront to God and his goodness. ‘This injury is not mere damage to property, it is an injury done to the divine person himself. In accordance with this personal sin is the personal reaction of God: that is the wrath of God . . . God is angry because he is personal, because he really loves.’ To reject the idea of God’s anger is also to reject the love of God. Efforts to create a god who does not react to sin render God less than personal, and at the same time make a true understanding of his love for *sinful* man, in its breadth and depth, impossible. God’s love appears in its true light only in the context of man’s sin and misery, and his rebellion against God. God hates sin.”¹⁴

CONCLUSION: Joel Osteen, the most celebrated of the new breed of TV “superstar” evangelists, repeatedly tells his listening audience things like, “God does not care about your mistakes and failures! He only wants your best effort!” Or, even worse is this foolish stupidity, “Whenever you do something good, God takes notice, so the next time you have a need, you can remind Him of that!”¹⁵ This not only trivializes sin, but makes a mockery of the Gospel and everything Christ came to accomplish, which was to *save* sinners. The word “save” is short for “salvation,” and has historically been used as a synonym for “redeem,” which in turn is derived from “redemption.” But like so many other words that were once almost exclusively a part of our Christian vocabulary, this word has been hijacked to simply convey the notion that we can and will make up for our past failings by saving our reputation through self-sacrifice and renewed effort. This loss of meaning of words that once enriched our understanding of important Biblical themes was observed by the great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield, who noted, “You see, that what we are doing today as we look out upon our current religious modes of speech, is assisting at the deathbed of a word. It is sad to witness the death of any worthy thing – even of a worthy word. And worthy words do die, like any other worthy thing – if we do not take good care of them. And these good words are still dying all around us. There is that good word “Evangelical.” It is certainly moribund, if not already dead. Nobody any longer seems to know what it means. I think that you will agree with me that it is a sad thing to see words like these [redeemer and redemption] die like this. And I hope you will determine that, God helping you, you will not let them die thus, if any care on your part can preserve them in life and vigor. But the dying of the words is not the saddest thing which we see here. The saddest thing is the dying out of the hearts of men of the things for which the words stand. The real thing for you to settle in your minds, therefore, is whether Christ is truly a Redeemer to you, and whether you find an actual Redemption in Him – or are you ready to deny the Master who bought you, and to count His blood an unholy thing?”¹⁶

We’ll look at the final two things to save sinners next week.

ENDNOTES

¹R. Moore, "Retaking Mars Hill: Paul Didn't Build Bridges to Popular Culture," *Touchstone: A Journal of More Christianity* (10/9/2007), p. 9.

²This is the predominant message of Joel Osteen, cf. his interview with *Time* magazine and its cover story, "Does God Want You to be Rich?" (Sept. 18, 2006), p. 53. Cf. also "The Joel Osteen Sermon that Changed Oprah's Life," @Challies.com (July 26, 2018).

³W. Cunningham *Historical Theology II* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 172.

⁴Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge To The Traditional Understanding of God* (IVP, 1944), p. 15.

⁵Cf. McLaren's article, "If Christianity Is True, People I Love Will Burn in Hell," an excerpt from his book *The Last Word And The Word After That* (Joesy-Bass, 2005), http://www.beliefnet.com/story/173/story_1737_1.htm/

⁶S. Chalke and A. Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003), p. 182. This book also carried a glowing introduction of N. T. Wright. For an excellent response to this position cf. "Punished in Our Place, A Reply to Steve Chalke on Penal Substitution," by G. J. Williams, prof. of Church History & Doctrine at Oak Hill College, U.K., available at <http://beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/punishedinourplace.htm>.

⁷Op. cit.

⁸For an excellent resource on refuting Mormonism, cf. <http://apologeticsonline.net/Subjects/Mormonism/7.13.htm>.

⁹R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (P & R, 2004), p. 442.

¹⁰G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1993), p. 111.

¹¹P. F. M. Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 71.

¹²R. Letham, "The Triune God, Incarnation, and Definite Atonement" in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical and Theological and Pastoral Perspective*, eds. D. Gibson & J. Gibson (Crossway, 2013), p. 459.

¹³*The Works of John Owen V* (rpt. Banner of Truth), p. 323.

¹⁴P. Wells, *Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of The Atonement* (Christian Focus, 2007), p. 72.

¹⁵How much more Biblical are the words of John Calvin, "Now if we ask in what way the conscience can be made quiet before God, we shall find the only way to be that unmerited righteousness be conferred upon as a gift of God. Let us ever bear in mind Solomon's question: 'Who will say, 'I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?' [Prov. 20:9]. Surely there is no one who is not sunken in infinite filth! Let even the most perfect man descend into his conscience and call his deeds to account, what then will be the outcome for him? Will he sweetly rest as if all things were well-composed between him and God and not, rather, be torn by dire torments, since if he be judged by works, he will feel grounds for condemnation within himself? The conscience, if it looks to God, must either have sure peace with his judgment or be besieged by the terrors of hell. Therefore we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God. When our souls possess that by which they may present themselves fearless before God's face and receive his judgment undismayed, then only may we know that we have found no counterfeit righteousness." *Institutes*, Bk. 3, Ch. 13, sec. 3.

¹⁶B. B. Warfield, from the opening address delivered in Miller Chapel, Princeton Theological Seminary, September 17th, 1915.