

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE GREATEST RESCUE MISSION

A few years ago *The New York Times* carried a story about Floyd and Rita Rupp. “One balmy Summer day in 1997 Rita Rupp (57) from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was on a lengthy road trip with her husband Floyd (67). For no reason in particular, she began to sense that they may be in danger. She started thinking, ‘What if someone hijacks our car and kidnaps us? No one [would] even realize we’re missing for days, and no one would come looking for us.’ So she hatched a plan. Rita wrote a note, just in case she got kidnapped. She scrawled the note in appropriately distressed handwriting, ‘Help I’ve been kidnapped. Call the Highway Patrol.’ She also supplied her name and a helpful description of the van they were driving. This eccentric emergency plan would actually have proven to be a pretty good idea in the event that at some point she had actually been kidnapped, and managed to dispatch the note before being incapacitated. At the time the idea was rather harmless, albeit a bit quirky. Except for one unforeseen eventuality. Mrs. Rupp’s paranoia would have remained her private problem if on a bathroom break at a gas station the note hadn’t inadvertently dropped out of her handbag. Oops. A conscientious attendant found the alarming note and quickly notified the authorities, who then immediately issued alerts, mobilized patrol vehicles, and set up roadblocks in four states. All the while, Mr. and Mrs. Rupp were cruising along to their destination, blissfully unaware of the multi-agency, national rescue operation that had been launched to save them. Eventually, Mr. Rupp called his workplace to brag about the ocean view he was enjoying. His colleague responded, ‘You have no idea what’s going on, do you?’ Evidently, he didn’t. I wonder if this type of behavior from his dear wife was something he had grown accustomed to. (Incidentally, Floyd is a chiropractor so he is used to dealing with a recurring pain in the neck.) In the spiritual realm, many people are blissfully unaware of the epic, eon-spanning rescue operation that has been underway on their behalf for millennia. They coast blithely through life without any idea of the sacrifice and planning that has been invested in their salvation. But unlike Mr. and Mrs. Rupp, everyone does actually need to be rescued, whether they realize it or not. As we prepare for the Christmas season, let’s use the opportunity to link the ubiquitous baby in a manger scene to the metanarrative of the rest of the Bible: God’s orchestration and execution of the ultimate rescue operation, launched in the recesses of pre-history and culminating in the advent of the God-Man Jesus Christ.”¹

The atonement, wrote John Murray, “as a completed work of Christ, must always be viewed in the light of the *inter-Trinitarian economy of salvation*.”² Herman Bavinck has explained it this way: “Father, Son, and Spirit share one and the same Divine nature and characteristics. They are one being. Nevertheless, each has His own name, His own particular characteristic, by which He is distinguished from the others. The Father alone has fatherhood, the Son alone has generation, and the Spirit alone possesses the quality of proceeding from both. To that order of existence in the Divine Being the order of the three persons in all Divine work corresponds. The Father is He *from* whom, the Son is He *through* whom, and the Spirit is He *in* whom all things are. All things in the creation, and in redemption, or re-creation, come from the Father, through the Son and the Spirit. And in the Spirit and through the Son they are come back to Him. It is to the Father that we are particularly indebted, therefore, for His electing love, to the Son for His redeeming grace, and to the Spirit for His regenerative and renewing power.”³ At the center of the biblical doctrine of the atonement is what theologically has been called *penal substitution* – that Christ bore the wrath of God in the place of sinners. Even though this doctrine is taught throughout the Bible, it has

historically never lacked critics. J. Gresham Machen wrote early in the 20th century: “Upon the Christian doctrine of the Cross, modern liberals are never weary of pouring out the vials of their hatred and their scorn. Even at this point, it is true, the hope of avoiding offence is not always abandoned: the words ‘vicarious atonement’ and the like – of course in a sense totally at variance from their Christian meaning – are still sometimes used. But despite such occasional employment of traditional language, the liberal preachers reveal only too clearly what is in their minds. They speak with disgust of those who believe ‘that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner.’ Against the doctrine of the Cross they use every weapon of caricature and vilification. Thus they pour out their scorn upon a thing so holy and so precious that in the presence of it the Christian heart melts in gratitude too deep for words. It never seems to occur to modern liberals that in deriding the Christian doctrine of the Cross, they are trampling upon human hearts.”⁴ Machen might be shocked if he were around today to discover that self-proclaimed Evangelicals like Rob Bell express an equal disdain for the doctrine. In Bell’s most recent book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (Harper, 2011), he talks just like the liberals in Machen’s day. Kevin DeYoung, in his review of Bell’s book, wrote: “Bell categorically rejects any notion of penal substitution. It simply does not work in his system or with his view of God. ‘Let’s be very clear,’ Bell states, ‘we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer.’ (182). I see no place in Bell’s theology for Christ the curse-bearer (Gal. 3:13), or Christ wounded for our transgressions and crushed by God for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5, 10), no place for the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), no place for the Savior who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), no place for the sorrowful suffering Servant who drank the bitter cup of God’s wrath for our sake (Mark 14:36). In Bell’s theology, God is love, a love that never burns hot with anger and a love that cannot distinguish or discriminate. ‘Jesus’ story,’ Bell says, ‘is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody, everywhere’ (1). Therefore, he reasons, ‘we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he’s anybody else’s’ (152). This is tragic. It’s as if Bell wants every earthly father to love every child in the world in the exact same way. If you rob a father of his unique, specific, not-for-everyone love, you rob the children of their greatest treasure. It reminds me of the T-shirt, ‘Jesus Loves You. Then Again He Loves Everybody.’ There’s no good news in announcing that God loves everyone in the same way just because he wants to. The good news is that in love God sent his Son to live for our lives and die for our deaths, suffering the God-forsakenness we deserved so that we might call God our God, and we who trust in Christ might be his children. The sad irony is that while Bell would very much like us to know the love of God, he has taken away the very thing in which God’s love is chiefly known: ‘In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (1 John 4:10).”⁵ The passage in Galatians that is before us is laden with references to the Trinitarian outworking of redemption, especially at its center around the purpose of the atonement.

I. ***THE MISSION OF THE SON.*** Paul has been arguing that the Law acted as a preparatory instrument. I want you to notice how the Apostle develops his case in light of God’s program. It has design and purpose. The expression “when the time had fully come” (verse 4, NIV), indicates that the divine program of the ages is ultimately under the sovereign oversight of God the Father. He *determines* the exact time and circumstances under which the Son shall enter human history to accomplish the Father’s will.

A. ***He was Sent by Divine Commission.*** The majestic statement, “*God sent forth His son*” is filled with doctrinal content. The verb *sent forth* (*exapeteilen*) suggests the fact the Lord Jesus came out from God Himself and must, “in view of the apostle’s belief in the pre-existence of Jesus, as set forth in 1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:6ff; Colossians 1:15, 16 and of the parallelism of verse 6, be interpreted as having reference to the sending of the Son from his pre-existent state into the world.”⁶ Notice that He is called God’s Son (not His child); He was sent as *the Son* (Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1).

- B. ***The Manner in Which He Came.*** He was *made* (KJV) or *born* (ESV) of a woman. He possessed true humanity. In this one passage we therefore have a clear reference to the uniqueness of Christ. We have the preexistent Son sent forth from God, assuming true humanity in order to make redemption.
- C. ***The Condition in Which He came.*** He was born under the Law. This relates to the Law of Moses (Luke 2:21, 22, 27; Mathew 3:15, 5:17). This pertains to Christ's *active* obedience to the Law. He perfectly fulfilled all that the Law required. "The obedience of Christ," wrote John Flavel, "hath a double relation, *relation legalis justitiae*, the relation of a legal righteousness, and adequate and exactly proportioned price. And it hath also in it *ratio superlegalis meriti*, the relation of a merit over and beyond the law."⁷
- D. ***The Purpose of His Coming.*** There are two stated purposes of His coming (note the two *hina* purpose clauses).
 1. ***Redemption.*** He came to redeem (*exagorazō*, to buy back). Note that Paul does *not* speak of this in terms of *conditionality*. Christ did not come merely to make redemption a possibility, but He actually redeemed. Paul's language is that of *certainty* (cf. Galatians 1:4; 3:13).
 2. ***Adoption.*** Christ does more than just rescue slaves – He makes them sons! The verb *receive* in verse 5 (*apolabōmen*, literally *to get from*) is an intensive one and describes the receiving of the status of sonship.

II. THE MISSION OF THE SPIRIT. God confirms or attests that the adoption is genuine by sending forth His Spirit. How is the Spirit's presence made evident?

- A. ***He Works in the Heart.*** In distinction from the Law, which is solely an *external* authority and cannot by itself change the heart (Jeremiah 31:33), God sends the Spirit into our innermost being (John 7:37-39).
- B. ***He is the Spirit of Christ.*** (cf. Romans 8:9; John 16:13, 14). Note how the inter-Trinitarian activities of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are highlighted.
- C. ***His manifestation.*** How do you know you have the Spirit? He prompts the sons to cry *Abba Father*. *Abba* is Aramaic for father. The term is one of deep affection and is very personal.⁸ Jesus used the word in Mark 14:36, and now believers have the same privilege.

CONCLUSION: As I tried to show in the recent 3-part sermon on The Rich Man and Lazarus, for over 2000 years the mainstream Christian church has affirmed the biblical doctrine of eternal punishment in hell. In the last 50 years, however, a significant shift in belief has occurred among Christians – even evangelicals. The influence has come both from within and without. Philosophers like Bertrand Russell have claimed that any person who is profoundly humane cannot believe in everlasting punishment. Russell actually wrote a book entitled *Why I am not a Christian*, and the chief reason had to do with Jesus' teaching on hell. Postmodern society's love of "tolerance" and subjective truth means that the concept of a God punishing people in hell forever is not only intolerable, it's laughable. Inside the church, well-known evangelicals have brought the subject under increasing scrutiny. Some have even demoted the topic of hell to a secondary issue, encouraging the tolerance of both traditionalist and conditionalist interpretations. In short, the latter part of the 20th century has seen such a shift in thinking on hell that there is no longer a clear, evangelical consensus on the doctrine, nor the accompanying conviction to still believe in it. Instead, three main alternative positions have gained popularity within the evangelical church. In brief, they are universalism, annihilationism, or conditionalism, and definitive self-exclusion from the presence of God.⁹ Rob Bell's book is the most recent example of the kind of liberal theology that Machen confronted in his day. Like them, Bell dislikes the notion of God's wrath. He dislikes the doctrine of total depravity – believing instead in man's innate goodness. He dislikes the exclusivity of the Gospel that salvation is only by explicit faith in Christ. He dislikes the doctrine of penal satisfaction. The difference is that Bell claims to be an evangelical who is simply trying (much like the old liberals did) to

make Christianity culturally relevant. The danger inherent in this endeavor is that cultures are *never* value neutral. All cultures are the by-products of human beings – fallen human beings at that. And as Calvin duly noted, the human heart is an idol factory. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised that idolatry will always be active in cultures created by sinful human beings. David Wells perceptibly wrote about this: "It is always important for us to discern why, at a particular time, certain issues come to the fore and engage the church's attention. Usually the reason for this resolves itself into a choice between two options. Either the issue arises from within the church, as heretical deviations make their way through its life, leaving trouble and confusion in their wake, or the issue arises from without, as the surrounding culture intrudes worldly expectations and appetites upon the church, robbing it of its vision and conviction. And there is little doubt in my mind that in the case before us, the uniqueness of Christian faith and the reality of God's abiding judgment upon unbelief, it is our modernized and secularized culture that is principally unsettling the church. It is, admittedly, difficult to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that the blurring of the edges of faith that is happening within the church today is being fed by these cultural attitudes. But the awkward fact is that the church, for nineteen hundred years, has believed in the uniqueness of Christ, the truth of the Word, and the necessity of God's judgment on the impenitent; and we have to ask why, in the twentieth century, some of all of these beliefs now seem to have become so unbelievable. Is it that new exegetical discoveries now cast doubt upon what the church has always believed? Are there new archaeological finds? Is it that the church has simply misread the Bible and done so consistently over so long a period of time? No, these truths today have become awkward and disconcerting to hold not because of new light from the Bible, but because of new darkness from the culture."¹⁰ Albert Mohler summed it up correctly when he wrote concerning Rob Bell's book: "We are talking about two rival understandings of the Gospel here – two very different understandings of theology. Gospel, Bible, doctrine, and the totality of the Christian faith. Both sides in this controversy understand what is at stake."¹¹ The great work of redemption which the Apostle glories in is little understood and even less appreciated in many churches today. Until we take seriously the Bible's teaching on sin and God's holiness, we will never be captivated the way Paul was with Christ the Redeemer. Bavinck, writing about a hundred years ago, said, "True, there are many who try to banish these serious thoughts from their minds and plunge into life as though there were no God and no commandment. They deceive themselves with the hope that there is no God (Ps. 14:1), that He does not bother about the sins of men, so that whoever does evil is good in His sight (Mal. 2:17), that He does not remember evil nor see it (Ps. 10:11 and 94:7), or else that, as perfect Love, He may not seek out and punish the wrong (Ps. 10:14). And whoever holds to the demand of the moral law and lets the ethical ideal stand in its loftiness, can only agree that God must punish the wrong. God is love, indeed, but this glorious confession comes into its own only when love in the Divine being is understood as being a holy love in perfect harmony with justice. There is room for the grace of God only if the justice of God is first fully established."¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ This story was brought to my attention by Clint Archer, who blogs at *The Cripple Gate*.

² *The Collected Writings of John Murray II* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 143.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, translated by H. Zylstra (rpt. Baker Book House, 1977), p. 159.

⁴ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1946), p. 119.

⁵ K. DeYoung, "God is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of *Love Wins*." <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/pr...> 3/14/2011

⁶ E. DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (T&T Clark, 1977), p. 217.

⁷ *The Works of John Flavel I* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), p. 189.

⁸ Joachim Jeremias has shown that Abba was exclusively a family word. A neighbor might ask a child if his father is home, and the child would respond, "Yes, my Abba is home" – but the neighbor would never say, "Is your Abba Home?" Only the children could call their fathers "Abba." Cf. *The Prayers of Jesus* (Fortress, 1978), p. 95.

⁹ This is adapted from <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/5935/>

¹⁰ D. F. Wells, foretold to Robert Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (P & R, 1995), p. IX.

¹¹ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/03/23/a-theological-conversation-worth-having-a-resp...>

¹² H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 260.