

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE JUDGMENT OF GOD: A MOST INCONVENIENT TRUTH (PART I)

Salvation was once clearly understood to refer to the work of Christ in delivering people from the awful reality of eternal damnation. Nowadays, however, *salvation* has been construed to imply something altogether different. Sadly many professing Evangelicals are falling into this mindset and using the term in the context of a personal quest for self-fulfillment or, in a broader sense, of correcting society's ills. Emergent guru Brian McLaren in a chapter titled "Jesus: Savior of What?" says, "Let's start simply. In the Bible, *save* means rescue or heal. It emphatically does not automatically mean *save from hell or give eternal life after death*, as many preachers seem to imply in sermon after sermon. Rather, its meaning varies from passage to passage, but in general, in any context, *save* means *get out of trouble*. The trouble could be sickness, war, political intrigue, oppression, poverty, imprisonment, or any kind of danger or evil."¹ Read our passage over and note the four times the word *saved* is used. What do you think the Apostle Paul had in mind when he used the word in this passage? Contrary to the claims of McLaren, the Apostle Paul, especially in Romans, used the word 'save' to denote salvation in the ultimate sense of the word. But McLaren is not alone in this reconstructing the doctrine of salvation. Recently, the Rev. John Killinger spoke at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (a group of Southern Baptists) and declared, "Now we are reevaluating and we're approaching everything with a humbler perspective and seeing God's hand working in Christ, but not necessarily as the incarnate God in our midst," Killinger said. "Now, that may be hard for you to hear depending on where you are coming from, but we can talk more about it." Executive minister and theologian in residence at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, Killinger's views are well known. His presentation was titled after his book 'The Changing Shape of Our Salvation,' a 2007 release from The Crossroad Publishing Company. Although Smyth & Hellwys – a CBF publishing partner – is not the publisher, the company sponsored the workshop and promoted the book during the General Assembly. Smyth & Helwys is also hosting a book-signing for Killinger at its booth in the resource fair. In the computer age, Killinger argued, religion moved from a belief in doctrines to a quest for self-fulfillment drawing on useful tidbits from an eclectic variety of faith traditions. 'Doctrine isn't the driving force to many people today' except 'to the fundamentalists who insist on it,' Killinger said. 'But doctrine is a thing of the past now religiously.' Pastors can follow this cultural shift by preaching about Jesus' human side rather than insisting that He was God and that He always existed,' Killinger said. 'There's an altered view of Scripture and of the role of Christ,' he said of Christianity in today's world. 'Christ is still Savior to most of us, but maybe in a slightly different way than before.' 'I find from pastors a greater and greater reluctance to preach from the Gospel of John, which used to be the greatest pleasure for most preachers because John was so assertive about the incarnation and the role of Christ' versus 'the tendency to go back to Mark and Matthew and Luke to see the more human side of Jesus, who was anointed at the time of His baptism to be the savior of Israel, but not necessarily to be the preexistent one that we find in John.' When an audience member asked if this view compromised the Gospel, Killinger replied that it represents a more advanced understanding rather than a compromise. 'Jesus Himself has had a lot of things said in His behalf that He never intended. This is one of the things that's going on today in biblical studies – and I think is much more promising than some of the fundamentalists will allow – is that we are questioning whether

Jesus Himself said this or whether an institutional church that grew up in Jesus' wake said this. This was the purpose of the so-called Jesus Seminar,' Killinger said. 'I'm just suggesting that I think we need to be a little less certain about what Jesus meant, what He was about, what His life and work were about. I think we're reevaluating all that.' For example, Jesus did not conceive of Himself as the Savior of the world and may not have viewed Himself a sacrifice at all until the crucifixion, Killinger said. Killinger said he benefits from the mystical experience of reading John's Gospel privately but cannot advocate John's high view of Christ in serious preaching or scholarship. 'There are moments when I can do that privately and mystically myself,' Killinger said of benefiting from John. 'But at the same time, in terms of the cultural development of Christianity, I have to look at what the scholars are saying about the first three Gospels.' Many CBF pastors agree with his views of salvation, Killinger said, citing an experience at a gathering of pastors in South Carolina. When he asked them what salvation meant to them, they all talked about self-fulfillment and love rather than doctrine, Killinger said. The pastors also said they did not disbelieve in an afterlife but were not overly concerned about it, Killinger said. When asked whether they thought people of other world religions are going to hell, the pastors replied that they did not think in terms of heaven and hell, he said.²

Just this week, this item from Time caught my attention. *Christians: No One Path to Salvation*. "Americans of every religious stripe are considerably more tolerant of the beliefs of others than most of us might have assumed, according to a new poll released Monday. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life last year surveyed 35,000 Americans, and found that 70% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Many religions can lead to eternal life." Even more remarkable was the fact that 57% of evangelical Christians were willing to accept that theirs might not be the only path to salvation, since most Christians historically have embraced the words of Jesus, in the Gospel of John, that "no one comes to the Father except through me." Even as mainline churches have become more tolerant, the exclusivity of Christianity's path to heaven has long been one of the Evangelicals' fundamental tenets. The new poll suggests a major shift, at least in the pews. The Religious Landscape Survey's findings appear to signal that religion may actually be a less divisive factor in American political life than had been suggested by the national conversation over the last few decades. Peter Berger, University Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University, said that the poll confirms that "the so-called culture war, in its more aggressive form, is mainly waged between rather small groups of people." The combination of such tolerance with high levels of religious participation and intensity in the U.S., says Berger, "is distinctively American – and rather cheering." Less so, perhaps, to Christian conservatives, for whom Rice University sociologist D. Michael Lindsay suggests the survey results have a "devastating effect on theological purity." An acceptance of the notion of other paths to salvation dilutes the impact of the doctrine that Christ died to remove sin and thus opened the pathway to eternal life for those who accept him as their personal savior. It could also reduce the impulse to evangelize, which is based on the premise that those who are not Christian are denied salvation. The problem, says Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is that "the cultural context and the reality of pluralism has pulled many away from historic Christianity." Quizzed on the breadth of the poll's definition of "Evangelical," Pew pollster John Green said the 296-page survey made use of self-identification by the respondents' churches, denominations or fellowships, whose variety is the report's overriding theme. However, he said, if one isolates the most "traditionalist" members of the white Evangelical group, 50% still agreed that other faiths might offer a path to eternal life. In fact, of the dozens of denominations covered by the Pew survey, it was only Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who answered in the majority that their own faith was the only way to eternal life. Analysts expressed some surprise at how far the tolerance needle has swung, but said the trend itself was foreseeable because of American Christians' increasing proximity to other faiths since immigration quotas were loosened in the 1960s. Says Rice's Lindsay, the author of *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*: "If you have a colleague who is Buddhist or your kid plays with a little boy who is Hindu, it changes your appreciation of the religious 'other.'" While the combination of Americans' religiosity – more than

half those polled said was “very important in their lives” – and their tolerance for the beliefs of others may suggest creedal confusion, this appears not to trouble good-hearted U.S. pew-sitters. Says Lindsay, “The problem is not that Americans don’t believe in anything, but that they believe in everything, and the two things don’t always fit together.” But he adds, the views are consistent with tolerant views expressed by Evangelicals he met in various cities as he toured while promoting his book. Mohler agrees: “We’ve seen this coming,” adding that the query about whether others can make it to heaven “has been the question I get asked by more college students and on my radio program.” More so than Christ’s divinity or Resurrection, he says, “the exclusivity of the Gospel is the most vulnerable doctrine in the face of the modern world.” Liberals and conservatives will interpret the numbers in different ways, says Pew’s Green. “The liberal [interpretation] is that Americans are becoming more universalistic, religiously. The conservative one is that Americans are losing faith and becoming more accommodationist.” But he says the truth may lie elsewhere. “Just because they don’t want to believe that there’s only one way to salvation doesn’t mean that they don’t take their religion very seriously.” The political implications of the Pew findings are more difficult to gauge. Green says that while Americans’ unexpectedly high tolerance for one another’s creeds might seem to blunt the sharp religious edge of some of today’s campaign-trail discourse, it could also lead to larger religious coalitions around certain issues as pious believers overcome their inhibitions about working with others. The survey’s biggest challenge is to the theologians and pastors who will have to reconcile their flocks’ acceptance of a new, polyglot heaven with the strict admission criteria to the gated community that preceded it.”³

Not too long ago I listened to a nationally known “expert” on how to Grow a Mega-Church. Here are the talking points he used:

- Blitz ad campaign. Make use of the best in advertising at all levels
- Create a very casual atmosphere.
- Accent fun and excitement. Very important.
- Contemporary, upbeat style – including fashion. Dress down. Don’t stand behind a pulpit. It comes across “preachy.”
- Messages (do not call them sermons! cf. above) emphasis on relational “practical” principles with “Biblical” points. Go light on theology. Doctrinal distinctives kept to a bare minimum.
- Make easy to follow application. Refrain from making demands on attenders and avoid any appearance of judgmentalism.
- Work to create a sense of belonging, but at the beginning do not ask or expect commitment.
- Very important - you must not come across as intolerant to any group or lifestyle. Avoid at this stage words that are emotionally laden, i.e., repentance, sin, God’s judgment.
- Be patient. The formula will work over time. Don’t listen to negative critics.
- Finally, weed out any in the congregation who question the direction you are taking the church. This will be painful but it must be done (an appeal was made to Jesus’ words about a house divided against itself cannot stand)!

I. JESUS AND THE CERTAINTY OF JUDGMENT

The notion of divine judgment, as indicated in the recent Pew poll, is extremely distasteful to people regardless of their religious background. Despite the overwhelming Biblical support (cf. Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 5:9; I Thess. 1:9; II Peter 2:9; 3:7; I John 4:17; Jude 6; Rev. 6:17; 14:15; 20:11-15) growing numbers of self-professing Evangelicals are likewise very reluctant to mention the subject for fear of offending people. The concept of God as judge must be carefully distinguished from that of our judicial system. “The analogy of human tribunals, writes E.A. Litton, must not be applied too literally. The ordinary notion we form of these is that, whereas before the trial commences the guilt or innocence of the accused party is matter of doubt, now the case is judicially investigated, evidence produced, and, after the verdict of the jury, sentence pronounced. The prisoner is assumed not to be guilty before proof, nor is he acquitted before his innocence is established. The reason is that both judge

and jury are fallible men, who can neither read the heart nor possess a certain knowledge of all the facts of the case. A human trial, therefore, is strictly a process of *investigation*. But we cannot ascribe this character to the so-called judgment of the quick and dead. The Judge is omniscient, and has no need of evidence to convince Him; He presides with a perfect knowledge of the character and history of every one who stands before Him; He has already in Himself pronounced a judgment from which there is no appeal, and respecting which there can be no mistake.”⁴ One very common misperception is that Jesus, as he is popularly portrayed, was not the least bit judgmental and as such no appeal can be made to “the sweet and lowly Jesus” for support to such a contemptible doctrine. But as W. G. T. Shedd long ago pointed out, this simply isn’t the case. “The mere perusal of Christ’s words when he was upon earth, without note or comment upon them, will convince the unprejudiced that the Redeemer of sinners knew and believed that for impenitent men and devils there is an endless punishment. We solicit a careful reading and pondering of the following well-known passages:

When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall he say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment. (Matt. 25:31-33, 41, 46)

If your right hand offend you, cut it off: it is better for you to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dies not and the fire is not quenched. And if your foot offend you, cut it off: it is better for you to enter into life than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dies not and the fire is not quenched. And if your eye offend you, pluck it out: it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into hellfire, where their worm dies not and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:43-48)

What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? What is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world and be cast away? (Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25)

The rich man died and was buried, and in hell he lifted up his eyes being in torments. (Luke 16:22-23)

Fear not them which kill the body but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt. 10:28)

The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend and them which do iniquity and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 13:41-42)

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? Then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity. (Matt. 7:22-23)

He that denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. Unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Spirit, it shall never be forgiven. (Luke 12:9-10)

Woe unto you, you blind guides. You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell? (Matt. 23:16, 33)

Woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born. (Matt. 26:24)

The Lord of that servant will come in a day when he looks not for him and at an hour when he is not aware and will cut him in sunder and appoint him his portion with unbelievers. (Luke 12:46)

He that believes not shall be damned. (Mark 16:16)

You, Capernaum, which are exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell. (Matt. 11:23)

At the end of the world, the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. (Matt. 13:49-50)

Then said Jesus again to them, I go my way, and you shall seek me and shall die in your sins: whither I go you cannot come. (John 8:21)

The hour is coming in which all that are in their graves shall hear my voice and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. (John 5:28-29)

To all this, add the description of the manner in which Christ will discharge the office of the eternal judge. John the Baptist represents him as one “whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor and gather his wheat into the garner, but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). And Christ describes himself as a householder who will say to the reapers, “Gather together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them” (13:30); as a fisherman “casting a net into the sea and gathering of every kind, which when it was full he drew to the shore and sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away” (13:47-48); as the bridegroom who took the wise virgins “with him to the marriage” and shut the door upon the foolish (25:10); and as the man traveling into a far country who delivered talents to his servants and afterward reckons with them, rewarding the “good and faithful” and “casting the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (25:19-20).⁵

CONCLUSION: The doctrine of divine judgment is a very inconvenient truth – but it is nonetheless, as we have seen, a valid Biblical doctrine. It is taught explicitly in the Reformed Confessions, for example, the Canons of Dort speak of God’s decision to “condemn and eternally punish” the reprobates for “their unbelief” and “all their other sins.” For God is a “just judge and avenger.” The Belgic Confession confesses that “the evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Even the irenic Heidelberg Catechism affirms that God “is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity.” But as DeYoung points out, “There’s actually nothing terribly Reformed about this doctrine of eternal punishment. Christians of all stripes have believed in the wrath and justice of God for most of Christian history. It’s only been in the last couple of centuries that the doctrine of divine retribution has come under serious attack. Protestant liberalism was one of the first to question God’s wrath, fearing that it made God look like a heartless, capricious tyrant. This squeamishness about the hard edges of Christianity is what prompted H. Richard Niebuhr to describe theological liberalism as “a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” But the avoidance of hell is not just a “liberal” problem. Evangelicals in recent decades have soft-peddled the doctrine as well, opting instead for a therapeutic God who encourages our self-esteem. Likewise, some missiologists argue that the missionary enterprise should no longer be seen as a venture to save people from hell, but only as an effort to bring God’s kingdom of justice and shalom to all people. More recently, emergent church leaders have practiced a studied agnosticism about hell and God’s wrath, deliberately avoiding the topic in sermons or writing, because, they say, it’s not our business who is there—if anyone is there at all. Divine wrath, when it is mentioned, often is caricatured as befitting a sociopath.”⁶ Many people choose to ignore it while others like Brian McLaren, seek to distort it into something very non-threatening. Note his take on this. “Sometimes *God saves by judging*. To speak of judgment as a form of salvation surprises people who have religious baggage and don’t actually read the Bible, but only hear it filtered by sermons or theological systems. They assume that judgment is something bad or awful. But in the biblical context, judgment is generally a good thing. It means the coming of truth and

justice into our deceived and oppressed world. If some bad and dishonest people are out to deceive or oppress others, God brings justice by bringing judgment—the natural consequences of their bad actions – on the evildoers so they are incapacitated and can't fulfill the additional evil they intended.”⁷ McLaren restricts judgment to simply the consequences of our actions. He also has a rather distorted view of who actually experiences judgment. In both cases, however, he departs significantly from Biblical teaching. Again, read back through the passages that Shedd cited and see if they can be harmonized with McLaren.

ENDNOTES

¹ B. McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy (Zondervan, 2004) p. 93. Mike Horton, on the White Horse Inn correctly observed that in this book McLaren is neither “Generous” or “Orthodox!”

² During the same workshop June 19, Killinger said the Old Testament book of Daniel “fibbed a lot.” Even though Daniel claims to be written earlier, it was actually written in the second century B.C., he said, and pretends to prophesy about events that occurred previously. “The scholars almost all admit Daniel fibbed a lot because, as a book, it was actually written in one time and set back in time to make it look as if the prophecies it made came true,” Killinger said. “That would validate other prophecies it was going to include, you see. So that’s cheating a bit.” Cf. David Roach, Baptist Press June 19, 2008. Original copy of this story can be found at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=28326>.

³ <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1817217,00.html>.

⁴ E. A. Litton, Introduction to Dogmatic Theology (James Clark, 1960) p. 592.

⁵ W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology (P & R, Third Edition, 2003) p. 889.

⁶ K. DeYoung and Ted Kluck, Why We're Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be) (Moody, 2008) p. 195.

⁷ McLaren, op. cit. p. 93.