

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

The expression, “The apple didn’t fall very far from the tree” is another way of saying “Like father, like son.” This is certainly the case with Robert H. Schuller and his son Robert A. Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame. Like his famous father, “Bob” Schuller promotes a very “man-centered” theology.¹ God exists to serve us. To further expand on this, he writes in his newest book, “John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible, says God loved us so much He came to earth to meet with us and provide what we need to live life. Jesus Himself said, ‘I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of’ (John 10:10 *The Message*). Think about that. Whatever life you have dreamed about having, Jesus came to provide it and more. I’m sure these words of Jesus are what inspired the apostle Paul (who discovered a life better than he had ever imagined) to write, ‘Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope’ (Eph. 3:20 NLT).”² Schuller impregnates the word *Life* with a concept of personal fulfillment that is defined by images better suited to Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous! Conveniently, Schuller glosses over the critically important term in John 3:16 – *perish*. Naturally, like his father, he is silent about *sin*. The Cross of Christ recedes into the background to the point of completely disappearing. After all, if sin is of no consequence to God, then the whole concept of God’s wrath is meaningless, and so is the Cross of Christ. To put it bluntly, Schuller’s Jesus is *another Jesus* (II Cor. 11:4).³ When any alleged “Jesus” is received as something less than the all-sufficient and all-satisfying savior from sin and death, he is not the “Jesus” Paul proclaimed. Is the “Jesus” you received the single, solitary basis for the forgiveness of your sins? Is the “Jesus” you received the one whose death satisfied the Father’s wrath by providing a penal, substitutionary sacrifice for your transgressions? Is the “Jesus” you believed the one who rose physically from the dead and will return personally to consummate his eternal kingdom? Any other “Jesus,” says Paul, is a theological fiction, a religious cul-de-sac that will lead you in circles but never open up the pathway to heaven and eternal life. D. A. Carson is certainly right to ask: “Is it a biblical Jesus who promises us nothing but health, prosperity, wisdom, and joy? Is it a biblical Jesus who guarantees heaven and says nothing of hell? Is it a biblical Jesus who promises eternal life but says nothing about entailed righteousness? Is it a biblical Jesus who needs to have his saving work supplemented by our merits, ceremonies, and sacrifices if we are to be redeemed?”⁴

The great Charles Hodge properly noted that, “In the Scriptures, wrath, anger, fury are attributed to God. These in man are perturbing, agitating, painful, states of mind, and generally more or less malignant. All these elements must be eliminated. What then remains? 1. A calm disapprobation, which is both a judgment and a feeling of which sin and sinners are the objects. 2. A determination to express this disapprobation. 3. This expression results in the banishment of the sinner from God. This is cutting him off from the source of all holiness and happiness, and consigning him to endless, hopeless, inevitable sin and misery. This is the death of the soul, the second death.”⁵

I. THE CHARACTER OF GOD AND THE NECESSITY OF JUDGMENT

God *must* punish sin. He cannot do otherwise. Since God is just, then He will act justly and He cannot be indifferent to sin. John Owen helpfully pointed out, "Let it be observed that the nature of mercy and justice are different in respect of their exercise: for between the act of mercy and its object no natural obligation intervenes; for God is not bound to any one to exercise any act of mercy, neither is he bound to reward obedience, for this is a debt due from his natural right, and from the moral dependence of the rational creature, and indispensably thence arising. But between the act of justice and its object a natural obligation intervenes, arising from the indispensable subordination of the creature to God; which, supposing disobedience or sin, could not otherwise be secured than by punishment. Nor is the liberty of the divine will diminished in any respect more by the necessary egresses of divine justice than by the exercise of other attributes; for these necessary egresses are the consequence, not of an absolute but of a conditional necessity,--namely, a rational creature and its sin being supposed, and both existing freely in respect of God, but the necessary suppositions being made, the exercise of other perfections is also necessary; for it being supposed that God were disposed to speak with man, he must necessarily speak according to truth."⁶

II. THIS JUDGMENT INEVITABLE AND UNAVOIDABLE.

This is no escape. (Heb. 9:27) In this life it appears that evil often goes undetected and unpunished. But in His own time, God will judge. (Rev. 20:1-15) He will not allow sin to go unpunished (Nahum 1:3). Charnock wrote, "The wicked are the subjects of his long-suffering, but not of his acquitting, grace. He doth not presently punish their sins, because he is slow to anger; but without their repentance he will not blot out their sins, because he is righteous in judgment. If God should acquit them without repentance for their crimes, he must himself repent of his own law, and righteous sanction of it. He will not acquit, *i.e.*, he will not go back from the thing he hath spoken, and forbear, at long run, the punishment he hath threatened."⁷

CONCLUSION: The Schullers are not the only ones soft-peddling the Biblical witness to the doctrine of God's judgment. Even more influential than the Schullers is N. T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham and considered a top New Testament scholar. Wright is often insightful and to his credit, he has defended the doctrine of Christ's resurrection against the claims of the infamous *Jesus Seminar*. In a recent popular book, Wright contends that Jesus never spoke about His second coming; Wright also endorses the Roman Catholic doctrine of praying for the dead. More importantly, he rather astonishingly argues that the doctrine of God's judgment is a *minor* theme in the New Testament. Thomas Schreiner, in a perceptive review noted, "Too often Wright prosecutes his case by caricaturing a view and then introducing his own view as the solution. Hence, he rightly rejects the notion that hell is a torture chamber, but his own view of hell seems to be shorn of any notion that God punishes those who refuse to believe in Christ. Wright argues that those in hell lose the divine image, and this may well be part of the picture. Nevertheless, many texts speak of God's active punishment of the wicked. Since Wright summarizes his view and does not engage in detailed exegesis. I assume he would offer a different interpretation of the relevant texts. Still, it's difficult to see how God's active punishment of the wicked can be denied (e.g., Rom. 2:8-9, 16; 2 Thess. 1:8-9, etc.) Wright appeals to many because he is brilliant and fascinating, and some of what he says is helpful. Nevertheless, his failure to emphasize the centrality of the gospel is troubling, and pastors who find his work illuminating need to be careful that they do not veer away from their central task of proclaiming the good news to a lost generation."⁸ David Wells stands in sharp contrast to Wright. At last year's Founders Conference, David Wells spoke on "Preaching the Truth of Heaven and Hell in a Modern Age." Here is a summary of what he had to say.

1. **It is almost impossible for us to imagine what heaven and hell will be like.** We can't fathom goodness as good as heaven or badness as bad as the badness of hell. These things are impossible for us to conceive. This life is ambiguous. We never experience goodness without being in the context or the vicinity of badness, and vice versa. We don't

actually see evil in its total nakedness unrestrained in this world. Evil is restrained by human conscience, divine providence, and government. We experience good and evil side by side, and sometimes in mixture. So we can't really conceive of unmitigated evil, such as will exist in hell, or pure goodness, like that of heaven. The biblical descriptions of heaven and hell are so full of imagery.

2. **We live in a realm where human autonomy reigns** (and has “an unusually potent expression right now” in this postmodern moment). People say, “This talk about judgment is talk about another world crashing into mine, and I resent it.” People in a postmodern culture deeply resent talk about heaven and hell, the narrow way, the exclusivity of Christ, and all the corollary realities. In Christ, the judgment we deserve has been brought forward in time and fully exhausted in the person of our Substitute. Thus heaven and hell are not just peripheral truths for Christianity; this is what Christian truth ultimately points to. The key to understanding both heaven and hell is the supremacy in Christ. He is supreme in our redemption, and He is supreme in the conquest of all those enemies that have blighted creation and human life. Our thinking about heaven and hell therefore needs to be considered in our theology a long way before we get to eternity. It begins in the doctrine of Christ. We're so consumed with our lives and what is going on around us that we lose sight of Christ's centrality. We are strange creatures with a foot in two worlds: one that is passing and dying and one that is coming and vibrant. By recreation and longing we are part of the world to come.
3. **Christian faith is *only* about this kind of Christ, who is supreme in our redemption as He is supreme over His enemies.** About two decades ago, some decided that the preaching of this kind of Christ is a little bit off-putting to postmoderns, so they began to proclaim a toned-down view, without mentioning heaven, hell, judgment, or the supremacy and lordship of Christ. They created a diminished imitation of Christianity, and the results have been disastrous. We have only one Christ to preach, and He is supreme over all and Lord of all.
4. **We are living between the “already” and the “not yet.”** We need to keep that perspective. Even though the trials of this present life may seem as if they threaten to consume us, they are not the final word. “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). One of our duties as pastors is to remind our people that the evil in this world will be overthrown. This is not all there is. So we must proclaim the answer to the problem of evil. We must preach heaven, hell, and God's judgment exactly as Scripture presents it. How can we withhold these truths from people?⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ The senior Schuller declared that the Reformation badly erred by insisting that Theology be “God-centered” and not “man-centered” cf. his Self-Esteem: The New Reformation (Word, 1982) p. 64.

² Robert A. Schuller, Walking in Your Own Shoes: Discovering God's Direction For Your Life (Faith Words, 2007) p. 10.

³ Spurgeon could well have been speaking of the Schullers when he said over a hundred years ago, “There are some cringing, fawning spirits in this world, who must always go with the majority. What everybody says, they say. They take their cue from those who lead the fashion of the hour. They ask leave of common custom to breathe or eat. They dare not swallow down their spittle till they have obtained permission so to do. Cringing, fawning sycophants of all that is great, and all that is fashionable, scarcely could a soul be found in them if they were searched through and through with a microscope.... Shame on [men of that sort who] are called Christian ministers! They believe in Christ, but it is a Christ without his crown, his atonement, his judgment-seat, or even his Godhead. They mock us with orthodox phrases, from which the essential truth is gone. They pretend that they believe in the atonement, and when we listen to their atonement we find that it does not effectually atone for anyone. It is a mere fiction, and not a fact. It saves nobody, but is a mere sham.... There are pretty things said of our Lord Jesus by those who deny the faith which are sickening to me. I loathe to hear our true Lord praised by false lips. They deny the doctrines which he taught, and yet prate about believing him. It is a shallow trick, but yet it deceives shallow souls. Poor, weak minds say, ‘The man speaks so beautifully of Jesus, surely he cannot be in error.’ I tell you it is the old Judas trick—the Son of man is betrayed with a kiss. How nauseating their praises must be to him whom they are betraying! Think not that they are honest; their designs are far other than appear upon the surface. They laud him as man that they may dishonor him as God: they cry up his life, and his example, that they may cast his atoning sacrifice into the ditch. They lift up one part of the divine revelation with no other intention than that they may dash down the other: they crouch at his feet that they may stab at his heart.” A sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on Sunday Evening, Feb. 17, 1884. This can be accessed at Phil Johnson's, The Spurgeon Archive <http://www.spurgeon.org>.

⁴ As cited by Sam Storms, The Horror of a Different Jesus, June 27, 2008. "Enjoying God Ministries" <sam@enjoyinggodministries.com>

⁵ C. Hodge, Conference Papers (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879) p. 22.

⁶ The Works of John Owen X (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1976) p. 511.

⁷ Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1974) p. 761.

⁸ Cf. T. Schreiner's review, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, HarperCollins, 2008.

<http://marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598014%7CCIID2427332,00.html>.

⁹ <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2007/06/david-wells-preaching-truth-of-heaven.html>.