

The Gospel

Part 2 – In Our Place

By Todd Pruitt

The Gospel is all about the work of God on behalf of sinners. It is the news that through His beloved Son, God has done everything necessary for sinful man to be forgiven of his sins and receive full pardon from the sentence of death. This was all done through the ministrations of a crucified Savior who fully satisfied the Father's just demand that sin be punished to the utmost. What is more, man is completely unable either through kind intentions or good works to contribute in any way to the work of his Divine Redeemer. Even our responses to the Gospel, repentance and faith, are owing to God's gracious work to draw us to Himself (John 6:44).

One prominent evangelical leader appearing recently on Larry King Live said that one of the main themes of the Bible was redemption. Good enough so far. But then he went on to explain that redemption is when we love God back as much as He loves us. What?! This is not a negligible error. This is a flub up of monumental proportions. It is precisely this kind of error which turns the Gospel upside down and leads to the common misunderstanding that the Gospel is something we do. This will inevitably lead to the heresy that our standing before God is determined more by our good works than Christ's work of atonement on the cross in our place.

The theme of substitution is the heart of the Gospel. It is expressed in the biblical term "propitiation" which New Testament scholar Leon Morris defines as "a sacrifice that bears God's wrath to the end and in so doing changes God's wrath toward us into favor." Romans 3:25 refers to Jesus "whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood..." So the cross vindicated God's righteousness in that sins would indeed be judged. We refer to the propitious nature of the cross as the "substitutionary atonement." Christ died the death we deserved. He paid the debt we owed. He died *in our place*. Unfortunately, this essential doctrine is under attack within the church today.

One of the men recently identified by *TIME Magazine* as being among the twenty-five most influential leaders in evangelicalism denies this cardinal doctrine of biblical faith. But this is nothing new in American evangelicalism. Charles Finney, the 18th century revivalist, is revered in many evangelical circles today as a pioneer of mass evangelism. No one much reads Finney anymore. If they did they would find that the great evangelist was a Pelagian (Pelagias was a fifth century heretic) who denied such essential Christian doctrines as original sin and the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the very essence of the Gospel. Finney considered the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners "a theological fiction." He insisted that it was impossible for Christ to die in our place and that

our justification before God was dependent upon our ability to obey the letter of the law. Nevertheless, Finney was able to make an indelible mark on evangelicalism through his emphasis on revival meetings and a new innovation often referred to as the “altar call.”

If the substitutionary nature of the atonement is dispensed with then the cross is, at best, nothing more than an example of God’s love. Certainly the cross is the ultimate example of God’s love. No greater love has ever been seen than that shown in the torn and anguished body of Christ. But God was doing much more on the cross than just saying “I love you.” He was saying, “I love you so much that I will punish your sins in the person of my only Son.” This is what the cross meant above all else. From the beginning the gospels point us to Jesus’ rendezvous with the cross. The Gospel of Mark, for instance, is often described as a passion narrative with a long introduction. The entire movement of the account is toward the cross. Jesus is presented as the ultimate Passover Lamb, covering us from God’s wrath (Mark 14:12). Jesus described his mission to his disciples by saying that he would “give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

*Thy works, not mine, O Christ,
speak gladness to this heart;
they tell me all is done;
they bid my fear depart.*

*Thy pains, not mine, O Christ,
upon the shameful tree,
have paid the law’s full price
and purchased peace for me.*

*Thy cross, not mine, O Christ,
has born the awful load
of sins that none in heav’n or earth
could bear but God.*

*Thy righteousness, O Christ,
alone can cover me:
no righteousness avails
save that which is of thee.*

- Horatius Bonar 1857