

## THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST<sup>1</sup>

You have let go the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. (Mark 7:8 TNIV)

Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. (1 Corinthians 8:2 TNIV)

### PICKING UP THE THREAD

In a series of BRAINWAVES reports I have been endeavouring to disentangle some of the knotted thinking which has made the five hundred year old gulf between Roman Catholics and Protestants (and especially evangelical Protestants) so very hard to bridge. In BW/010 and BW/012 I looked at the Protestant deficiency in respect of mysticism and contemplative prayer. In BW/012 I suggested also that some confusion has arisen from the two distinct meanings which are given to the word *euaggelion*, 'gospel', in the New Testament. Then in BW/016 I focussed on the Roman Catholic Church's attitude to sex, which acquired some very negative, gnostic, connotations during the early centuries which have never been properly disposed of, and which are still causing trouble today. I concluded:

For it would seem from the case presented both here and in reports BW/010 and BW/012 that there is a parallelism between the Churches on both sides of the Reformation gulf which may help to explain why the traditional bones of contention - the nature of the Eucharist, the priesthood and papacy, and the meaning of St Paul - have proved so intractable. Both sides have for understandable reasons rejected as unworthy one of God's greatest gifts to humanity: mystical, contemplative prayer on the one hand, and sex on the other. Each of these gifts may be experienced as a means of grace through which God may be encountered. The loss or rejection of either will inevitably have damaged His Church. The pair of losses has been catastrophic.

### ON SELF-AWARENESS

Why is it so dreadful that many evangelicals have acquired their faith in the absence of contemplative prayer? Because one of the fruits of contemplation is a heightened self-knowledge, which grows hand in hand with one's knowledge of God. Without self-awareness we can think we are doing one thing, whereas in reality we are doing something very different.<sup>2</sup> I am going to argue that in a number of critical issues where evangelicals believe they are reflecting biblical teaching, they are in fact following their own strong traditions which are at variance with the Bible.

Further, this process is circular: Bible passages are interpreted in the light of those traditions in such a way as to reinforce the traditions themselves. And so the system perpetuates itself. This I suspect goes part of the way towards explaining its longevity.

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<sup>1</sup> This report expands some of the ideas presented in my 'The Four Last Things', and in report BW/012 n.7.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 8, 'On Self-deception' in my booklet *Alternative Christianity*.

## THE SCHIZOPHRENIC FAITH

In re-examining the basis of our faith it is pertinent to ask, What exactly was achieved by the incarnation? What would have happened to the human race had Jesus never come and died for our sins?

The traditional if unhappy answer will commonly be drawn by evangelicals from the fate of the 'goats' in Matthew 25:41,46, who are consigned to 'eternal punishment' in

the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:41 TNIV)

This will be supported by the reference to the Last Judgement in Revelation 20:12-5 in which the wicked are thrown into the lake of fire, there to remain for eternity.

This leaves us with a considerable mismatch between the ethos, the sense, the feeling of traditional Christmas - the broad embrace of God's blessing to the world, of peace and goodwill<sup>3</sup> - and the content of the exclusivist gospel which holds that unless you die a born-again Christian you are doomed to spend eternity burning in the flames of hell. And, for many an evangelical, especially on the Calvinist fringe, this includes all those who were born before Jesus and all who have lived outside the range of the Christian gospel. How is it that what started off as being good news has suddenly become very bad news for the vast majority of the human race? The warm, universal appeal of Christmas does not last very long in such circles. The faith with which we are being presented has become severely schizophrenic.

## EVANGELICAL TRADITIONS<sup>4</sup>

Evangelicals believe sincerely that theirs is the religion of the Bible and of the New Testament in particular. They are on occasions critical of Roman Catholics and others whom they charge with placing tradition on a par with, or even higher than, holy Scripture. After all, did not Jesus teach in Mark 7:1-13 that Scripture is more important than tradition? The case is put eloquently, and as ever most lucidly, by John Stott in chapter 2, 'Authority: Tradition or Scripture?' of his flagship book *Christ the Controversialist*. But evangelicalism is itself firmly rooted in its own traditional interpretations of the Christian gospel, four of which are these:

(1) *Salvation by faith*: Entry into God's kingdom is granted only to those who believe in Jesus. So at no time under any circumstances is salvation granted on the basis of 'good works' - the living of a moral life.

(2) *No second chance*: Evangelicals traditionally hold that this faith in Jesus must be professed in this life. Hence salvation is granted only to those who are professing Christians at the time of their death. After death there is no second chance.

(3) Conversely, evangelicals reject vigorously any form of *universalism* - the suggestion that

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<sup>3</sup> As the familiar Authorised Version renders Luke 2:14, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.'

<sup>4</sup> I write as one who has spent most of his spiritual formation among the evangelical church and who is proud to count among his ancestors the Revd Charles Simeon of Cambridge.

anything like the entire human race will be saved. Some evangelicals even blanch at describing Jesus as the 'Saviour of the world' for fear of being considered universalists.

(4) *Hell*: All those who are not Christians at the point of death are to suffer as the penalty for their sins permanent exclusion from the presence of God. This mode of expression is often used as a euphemism for the belief that all such persons will be sent to 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'. This is the fate that we all deserve, from which Jesus died to save us.

On each of these the weight of evangelical tradition is very strong. And although there are variations and gradations within evangelicalism (liberal, conservative, open, charismatic and so forth), to deny any of these four doctrines is in the main to risk losing one's credentials as a *bona fide* orthodox evangelical, or even as a Christian at all. In this paper I propose to challenge all four of these doctrines in turn on the ground that each of them constitutes a misreading of the New Testament. Now the New Testament is a diverse collection of writings by a variety of authors from differing standpoints, and on some points there are bound to be problems of interpretation. Nevertheless I believe that a better synthesis of its teaching is available to us than that which has so long predominated within evangelicalism.

## 1. SALVATION BY FAITH

As every evangelical knows,

a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Romans 3:28 TNIV cf. John 3:17-8, 1 John 5:5,13)

Under no circumstances will anyone ever enter God's kingdom except by this principle of faith. This we are told is what the Bible teaches. The rediscovery of this principle by Luther and the Reformers in the writings of Paul, and notably his letters to the Romans and Galatians, was one of the flashpoints which sparked the Reformation, replacing the (supposed) Roman Catholic view that salvation could be obtained by good works, and the Jewish view that it could be won by keeping the law. Mere being good will never get you into heaven. Here, according to evangelicals, you have the heart of the Christian faith. Judgement of our eternal salvation will only ever, can only ever, be conducted solely on the basis of whether or not we have faith in Jesus - *sola fide* - and emphatically never in terms of what we have done. This is above all the belief which makes an evangelical an evangelical.

There is only one thing wrong with this view. It is contradicted just about everywhere where the New Testament teaches about the Last Judgement.

On the basis that 'the servant is not greater than his lord',<sup>5</sup> we begin by consulting the teaching of Jesus before examining Paul. Hear then the Master:

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward everyone according to what they have done. (Matthew 16:27 TNIV)

Hear Him also pronounce judgement on the 'sheep' and the 'goats' in Matthew 25:31-46, both of whom are assessed in terms of what they have *done* or not done to Jesus' brothers and sisters during their

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<sup>5</sup> John 13:16 cf. Matthew 10:24.

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lifetimes.

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:40 TNIV, cf. 25:45)

This is not a judgement between Christian 'sheep' and the rest. Jesus is after all emphatic that His followers will not come up before Him for judgement:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24 TNIV)

So if the 'sheep' are Christians we have a real problem in explaining why they are up for judgement at all. Where have they been since they died? This in itself would call into question the central doctrines of the Reformation. Famously, according to reformed doctrine, once one belongs to Jesus by faith and has submitted to His Lordship, sins are forgiven and eternal salvation is secure, for in Jesus' own words 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away' (John 6:37 TNIV). The 'sheep', on the other hand, have their salvation still unknown and in the balance right up to the Last Judgement. If in their lifetimes they were justified by faith, then clearly this has counted for nothing. 'Saving faith' has not saved them after all; their destiny is still undetermined. Even Jesus' mighty resurrection has evidently not availed to open for them the gate of heaven. They are still outside.

There is a further problem. If the 'sheep' are Christians, who are Jesus' brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*) to whom they have shown love? They are left undefined. However any attentive reader of Matthew's Gospel will know who they are. For they are consistently identified there as His disciples, people who are already doing God's will (12:50; 28:10). That also is how the early Church would have understood them, as is plain from Hebrews 2:11-12:

Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*). He says,

'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*);  
in the assembly I will sing your praises.' (TNIV, quoting Psalm 22:22)

The same usage is found in the Gospel of John at 20:17 and in Paul at Romans 8:29 where Jesus is described as

the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. (*adelphoi*, TNIV)

It seems to have been widely adopted after the resurrection.

By contrast, both 'sheep' and 'goats' are surprised: they have not recognised Jesus. The 'sheep' are thus carefully distinguished from the Christian Church. *They are accepted by Jesus on account of their loving actions towards those whom He also loves*, in spite of never having known Him. This is precisely the principle whose workings Jesus has explained at Matthew 10:40-42:

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded. (TNIV)

It follows that salvation by faith alone does not, according to Jesus, apply at the Last Judgement.

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Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

But does not this conflict with the well-known teaching of Paul in Romans and Galatians which exploded into the Reformation? How dare we so expound Jesus in such a way as to make Paul look wrong! Actually, the boot is on the other foot. In a passage seldom reported by evangelicals, Paul himself explains in black and white terms that the Last Judgement will be conducted on a basis of rewards for good and evil lives:

God 'will repay everyone according to what they have done.'<sup>6</sup> To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But among those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile....

This will take place on the day when God judges everyone's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. (Romans 2:6-10,16 TNIV)

Evangelical embarrassment with Paul at this point is considerable. Hear *The NIV Study Bible* commentary *ad loc*:

Paul is not contradicting his continual emphasis in all his writings, including Romans, that a person is saved not by what he does but by faith in what Christ does for him. Rather, he is discussing the principle of judgment according to deeds....If anyone persists in doing good deeds (i.e. lives a perfect life), he will receive eternal life. No-one can do this, but if anyone could, God would give him eternal life, since God judges according to what a person does.

Well, does He or doesn't He?

Hear also the book of Revelation, written (according to the earliest traditions) by St John the Apostle. In this passage we have perhaps the most direct teaching to be found anywhere in the New Testament about the Last Judgement:

The dead were judged *according to what they had done* as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and everyone was judged *according to what they had done*. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. All whose names were not found written in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-5 TNIV; emphasis added)

This poses a problem for Francis Schaeffer:

I have known evangelicals who have been somewhat embarrassed by this, and say that this passage really means that people will be judged on whether they have accepted Christ as Saviour or not. That is not what God says. He says, 'I'm going to judge you by your works, and your works will fail. They will fail on the basis of your own moral judgments against others. No matter who you are or where.'<sup>7</sup>

But Schaeffer himself is embarrassed. He is absolutely right to deny that the judgement will be on the basis of faith. But 'and your works will fail', which he has added, has been imported from outside the Bible. It corresponds to nothing whatever in the text, which makes plain that among those being judged 'according to their works' are many whose names will be found in the book of life. But as a conservative evangelical Schaeffer is unable to accept this. So his whole prior discussion of Romans 1-2 makes no mention of God's stated intention, reported plainly by Paul there as we have seen, to

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<sup>6</sup> Quoting for his authority Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12.

<sup>7</sup> Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, 100.

grant life at the Last Judgement to those who have persistently done good. Upon this the thoroughbred evangelical Schaeffer is unable to comment. It doesn't say what he wants it to say.

This selectivity in his use of Scripture affects Schaeffer even when quoting Jesus Himself. On Matthew 12:36-7, which he quotes from the Authorised Version as

But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned,

his exegesis is that one day we may hear ourselves speak all our moral judgements - the very words - that we spoke in our lifetime.

Then God will ask, 'Are you condemned or are you not condemned? And every man in all the world will say, 'It is just, it is just, I am condemned.'<sup>8</sup>

This is the grossest misrepresentation of what Jesus actually said in the passage quoted. Jesus states plainly that some will be *justified* by their words - 'acquitted' (TNIV). But Schaeffer is too hidebound by his tradition to see what is there in Scripture before his very eyes even when he is quoting it. He selects from the Bible those phrases and passages which support what he already believes, rejecting or ignoring those which are at variance with this. Yet he is as articulate and intelligent a thinker as the evangelicals have ever produced. If these are pitfalls into which even he falls, we need to be exceedingly circumspect in taking at face value the claim made by evangelicals generally to be totally dependent upon the Bible. Overconfidence - lack of self-awareness - can be fatal (see 1 Corinthians 8:2 quoted at the head of this article).

This dependence upon tradition is confirmed by J. I. Packer:

And when evangelicals of any denomination are invited to see their theology as one strand or fragment of truth needing to be set in a larger evangelical framework they demur, humbly but firmly insisting that, on the contrary, evangelical theology itself provides the framework into which all biblical insights should be fitted, and that any deviating from this framework will be to that extent a deviating from Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear. 'Biblical insights' must conform to the pre-existing framework of 'evangelical theology', and not vice versa. The framework of tradition is itself beyond question. In Thomas Kuhn's term, it provides the paradigm within which the Bible is to be understood.

In fact the solution to the faith/works issue is simple. It is by faith that - like Abraham in Galatians 3 - we begin a walk with God *in this life*. It is by believing in Jesus that we are saved *in this life*. Those who have not done so may expect to be judged according to their works at the Last Judgement, as we read above from Revelation 20:12-5. Furthermore, since 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8), they can be confident that their Judge will be the same loving, compassionate Saviour who gave His life for them on the cross, of whom it is said that

A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,  
till he leads justice to victory.  
In his name the nations will put their hope. (Matthew 12:20-1 TNIV)

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>9</sup> J. I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem: an analysis* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978), 16, quoted in Kings, 'Canal, River and Rapids', 3.

It is evident that this is how Matthew intends us to understand this, for the word *ethnê*, nations, which he uses here is the same as in 25:32, at the start of his description of the Last Judgement. The nations who will come before Jesus have every expectation that they will meet with the same boundless love which has already atoned for the Christian Church.

So if evangelicals continue to maintain that entry into God's kingdom *at any time* is solely on the basis of faith, as their vigorously held tradition has been teaching for the last five hundred years, they are going to need a new Bible. The one we have too frequently contradicts them. They believe sincerely that their message is a biblical one but lack the self-awareness to recognise that the paradigm they are following is no more than human tradition.

## 2. NO SECOND CHANCE?

Mainstream evangelicals hold that the act of believing in Jesus, through which salvation is received, must take place in this life or not at all. Upon death, it is a case of

Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,  
in the place where it falls, there it will lie. (Ecclesiastes 11:3 TNIV)

If you are not a believer at death, that's it. So convinced of this are evangelicals that the New Testament itself has to be amended in order to make it clear, where face value interpretation appears to indicate otherwise. Consider 1 Peter 4:6, which appears to discuss Our Lord's descent into Hades (cf. 3:19-20) where the majority reading is exemplified by the NRSV:

For this is the reason why the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

However NIV, followed by TNIV, reads, 'those who are now dead', which is justified by *The NIV Study Bible* with commendable honesty as follows:

This preaching was a past event. The word "now" does not appear in the Greek, but it is necessary to make it clear that the preaching was not done after these people had died, but while they were still alive. (There will be no opportunity for people to be saved after death; see Heb 9:27).<sup>10</sup>

In the previous section we noted the evangelical habit of ignoring passages which tell against them. Here instead the text has been amended in favour of the preferred tradition.<sup>11</sup>

However the reference to Hebrews 9:27

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (TNIV)

takes us to the heart of the problem. This verse is commonly used as a proof text for the 'no second chance' teaching, as by *The NIV Study Bible* just quoted. But the proof text only works if the judgement merely confirms the *status quo* at death. *This is a gross caricature of the great and glorious doctrine of the Last Judgement as described in the New Testament.* The evangelical doctrine

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<sup>10</sup> So also David H. Wheaton, discussing 1 Peter 4:6 in *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, considers 'a doctrine of the second chance of responding to the gospel being given after death; but this does not suit the context, and is not supported anywhere else in Scripture.'

<sup>11</sup> Evangelicals are not alone in this practice. See the comment on Catholic renderings of Matthew 1:25 in BW/016 p.6.

of 'no second chance' reduces the Last Judgement to a mere rubber-stamping of an outcome which is already determined at someone's death.

To put it crudely, any low grade angel could know whether an individual at death has been baptised or has gone forward at an evangelistic meeting or prayed a prayer of commitment. By contrast, the New Testament sees the Last Judgement as a momentous unravelling of human history when God brings to light people's deepest secrets and motivations (Romans 2:16 quoted above). St Paul actually forbids us to make such judgements prematurely:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of people's hearts. At that time each will receive their praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5; cf. Jesus' parable of the weeds in Matthew 13 discussed below).

This process is going to be so fearfully complex that only Jesus will ever be capable of carrying it out, as the early Church taught that He would (e.g. Paul at Acts 17:31). And as we have seen, there are going to be many surprises among both 'sheep' and 'goats'. As Jesus Himself taught elsewhere,

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23 TNIV)

The notion that issues of this magnitude and complexity can be decided at death, rather than at the end of the age, stands in flat contradiction to the entire New Testament teaching on the subject and trivialises the role of Jesus the returning King and Judge.

Hence Hebrews 9:27 proves, if anything at all, the very reverse of what is claimed for it. Similarly John 14:6,

Jesus answered, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (TNIV),

frequently adduced to support the exclusivist view that salvation will be granted to Christians only, proves nothing of the sort. Any 'sheep' acquitted at the Last Judgement will have come to God through Jesus.

### 3. UNIVERSALISM

We have here a paradox which has exercised the minds of the greatest theologians throughout Christian history. How is that, if Jesus died for all, yet not all are saved? On the one extreme are the evangelicals - especially the conservative evangelicals - who tend strongly towards the exclusivist view that only Christians can be saved, the rest being condemned to eternal hell whether or not they have heard the Christian gospel. On the other extreme are the universalists, who cannot accept the thought that a loving God could send anyone to hell at all, in spite of what Jesus appears unambiguously to teach.

Various attempts have been made to escape from this dilemma. Some have proposed a doctrine of 'conditional immortality' under which only the ransomed are immortal; the damned burn only until they have paid their penalty, after which they become extinct. Others, like Rahner, have suggested a category of 'anonymous Christians' under which a lot of people are really Christians

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although they don't actually acknowledge Christ. Others have suggested that there is a hell, but it will be empty; or that there is no hell at all. However positive biblical support for any of these positions seems very scant. And there are problems. For instance to describe a practising Buddhist as an 'anonymous Christian' seems to empty the word 'Christian' of any meaning beyond the level of, say, 'nice religious chap'. One wonders whether the Buddhist would feel complimented.

For the exclusivist, there are numerous embarrassing passages which appear very plainly to teach universalism:

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all. (Romans 5:18 TNIV)

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:32 TNIV)

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:22 TNIV)

...God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all people. (1 Timothy 2:3-6 TNIV)

...the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:10 TNIV)

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2 TNIV)

Evangelical commentaries such as *The NIV Study Bible* and *The New Bible Commentary Revised* then work very hard to explain why 'all' in these passages does not simply mean *all*. Apparently, 'all' has to mean 'all the Christian Church', since in evangelical teaching although all have sinned, only the Christian Church is saved. Yet why in the first three passages does the second 'all' not mean the same as the first 'all'? It begins to become clear that, for all their protestations of literal adherence to the New Testament, at one critical juncture after another, evangelicals do not teach what the New Testament actually says. Time and again - as we have already seen in the matter of salvation by faith and the doctrine of no second chance - they have to interpret it as meaning something very different, in order to make it conform to their own traditions. We need to go deeper.

I suggest that the key to the problem lies in Jesus' parable of the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43. Jesus is teaching that there are two types of people - real people, the good wheat, sowed by Himself, albeit now Adam's fallen race, and another breed, imitations, the weeds sown by the evil one. On this interpretation the wheat represent ordinary sinners, the multitudes over whom Jesus had compassion 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34), the lost sheep of Luke 15:3-7 whom the shepherd left all in order to recover. Some will be Christian, some not. But 'all have sinned' (Romans 3:23). The weeds on the other hand, are a different breed altogether. They are the

false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. (Matthew 7:15 TNIV)

False messiahs also, they

will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. (Matthew 24:24 TNIV)

They are the opponents of Jesus to whom He said,

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the

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beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me! (John 8:44-5 TNIV)

It is characteristic of them that

All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. (John 3:20 TNIV)

Or in Paul's words, they

reject the truth and follow evil. (Romans 2:8 TNIV)

They even infiltrate the Christian Church (Matthew 7:21-3, already quoted). Their primary characteristic is deception. They are enemies of God, of Jesus, of His kingdom, and of humanity. They would seem to be the 'antichrists' of 1 John 2:18-23, who cannot be saved because they reject the only means of saving them, that is, exposure to the light and truth of Christ. And although in this age we can identify them up to a point by their fruits (Matthew 7:16-20), the final and ultimate identification of them cannot be made until Jesus does so at the Last Judgement. So Jesus teaches in the parable of the weeds. Today we might think of them as wasps among bees.

Do such people exist? The American psychotherapist and psychiatrist M. Scott Peck writes as follows:

I have come to conclude that evil is real. It is not the figment of the imagination of a primitive religious mind feebly attempting to explain the unknown. There really are people, and institutions made up of people, who respond with hatred in the presence of goodness and would destroy the good insofar as it is in their power to do so. They do this not with conscious malice but blindly, lacking awareness of their own evil - indeed, seeking to avoid any such awareness. As has been described of the devil in religious literature, they hate the light and instinctively will do anything to avoid it, including attempting to extinguish it. They will destroy the light in their own children and in all other beings subject to their power.

Evil people hate the light because it reveals themselves to themselves. They hate goodness because it reveals their badness; they hate love because it reveals their laziness. They will destroy the light, the goodness, the love in order to avoid the pain of such self-awareness. (*The Road Less Travelled*, 278)

The way is open to us then to think of Jesus as indeed the Saviour of the world, of Adam's fallen race to which the children of the evil one have never belonged. So we are not universalists who believe there will be no judgement or condemnation at all; nor are we exclusivists who believe that everyone except Christians will be damned.

Evangelicals have reasoned from a false dichotomy. To the question, 'Who will be saved?', they have behaved as though only two answers are possible:

- (1) Only Christians (exclusivism), and
- (2) Everyone (universalism).

In the light of clear New Testament teaching that there is a hell, they have rejected (2) and concluded that the only alternative is (1). *Non sequitur*. For there is a third option,

- (3) All the 'wheat' of Matthew 13, fallen sinners, Christian or otherwise, that is, everyone except the pathologically wicked 'weeds'.

This over-simplifying tactic of presenting a false dichotomy is one we have met before. In BW/010, 'Healing of the Nation', p.2, we noted how evangelicals have habitually represented Reformation history as a two-party affair between

- (1) Corrupt Catholics, and
- (2) Biblical Protestants.

This is to ignore

- (3) The flourishing mainstream mystical tradition within the Catholic Church.

Reconciliation and healing become possible in each case when we recognise the third alternative. How can this middle way be sustained?

#### 4. THE TWO HELLS

I believe that the present confusion owes much to a failure to recognise that in Scripture there are *two hells*.

##### Hades

The first hell is in the New Testament commonly termed Hades, foreshadowed in the Old Testament as Sheol, the pit. It is seen as a prison<sup>12</sup> in which sinful humanity is permanently trapped upon (first) death. God is not to be found there;<sup>13</sup> it is presided over by the enemy of souls, the devil. This subjection to death is seen in the Bible, and in many a traditional Christmas carol, as a result of Adam's fall, of which he was warned by God as described in Genesis 2:17. Hades and death are therefore concomitant concepts. *This is the universal human predicament from which Jesus came to save us:* we sinners are all going to die, and once dead, we would be forever stuck in Hades. So for our sakes, Jesus our Redeemer died, descended into Hades,<sup>14</sup> and burst forth from his 'three day prison', thereby conquering death and reopening the path to heaven. Of this great news He made His Church the ambassadors to all humanity.

We now have an explanation of Paul's 'all' in our foregoing discussion of universalism. He meant, *all!* - *all* of Adam's race, the good wheat sown by Jesus, the lost sheep, all indeed but the non-people, the sowing of the evil one, who are as different from God's children as weeds are from wheat. Yippee! - or in religious terminology, hallelujah! Barnabas, writing later on to the same Roman church,<sup>15</sup> put it in these terms:

he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-5 TNIV).

And St John:

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 3:19.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Psalm 6:5; 88:4-5,10-2; 115:17.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Acts 2:27,31.

<sup>15</sup> Probably; see *The Three Gospels*, 316-7.

## The Good News of Jesus Christ

The reason why the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (1 John 3:8 TNIV)

And in the words of the carol,

God rest you merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
For Jesus Christ our Saviour  
Was born upon this day,  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we were gone astray:  
*O tidings of comfort and joy,*  
*comfort and joy,*  
*O tidings of comfort and joy.*

### Gehenna

The second hell is described as a fiery furnace termed Gehenna, named after the smouldering rubbish dump in the Vale of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. It is the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels, to which Jesus makes reference in Matthew 25:41 cited above. It was never intended for people at all. However in the parable of the weeds Jesus says that the 'people of the evil one', 'all who do evil', sown by the devil, will ultimately be sent there (Matthew 13:37-43).

We learn from Revelation 20:12-5 quoted above that at the end of the age, once Satan has been hurled into this lake of burning sulphur (20:10), there will be a sorting process for all those who remain trapped by death and Hades. Then when Hades is empty, death and Hades will be destroyed in this lake. The ending of death and Hades is admirably captured by the old Welsh hymn commonly known as Cwm Rhondda:

Death of death, and hell's destruction.<sup>16</sup>

Thus death and Hades are enemies of God to be destroyed by Jesus; Gehenna is God's instrument for the destruction of death, Hades, Satan and all his kind. The two hells are opposites.<sup>17</sup>

It is now plain what the evangelicals - and not only they - have done. They have swapped one hell for another. When they read in Paul that

the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23),

they have replaced death-followed-by-Hades with an unwarranted death-followed-by-Gehenna. The distortion of the gospel which this involves is dramatic. The God of Love who sent his Son to rescue humanity from our universal problem - first death and consequent Hades - has been transformed into one who would consign the vast majority of us to the fires of eternal damnation, second death, Gehenna. This I submit is an utterly horrendous misreading of the New Testament.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer', W. Williams (Tr. P. and W. Williams), *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised*, 296.

<sup>17</sup> The only place known to me where this distinction is blurred is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. However this does not seem to represent Our Lord's definitive account of the afterlife. For one thing, He Himself does not appear in it, either as Judge of the rich man or as Saviour of Lazarus. The consensus view seems to be that Jesus has adopted a contemporary picture as a vehicle of His own moral teaching.

<sup>18</sup> A missionary society with which I was once associated used to require all participants to affirm their belief in 'the eternal

## GREAT NEWS: THE VICTORY OF CHRIST

St Paul celebrates the conquest of death and Satan as the ultimate victory of the resurrection:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead comes from a human being. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But in this order: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, kingdom and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26 TNIV)

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death is your sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:54-5 TNIV)

This according to the New Testament is ultimately what Jesus came to achieve: not only the forgiveness of the sins of individuals but also the conquest of Satan, the abolition of death, the emptying and final destruction of the prison of Hades and the liberating of sinners who had been kept there by Satan's power. Now this is great news for all humanity! We may all at present be subject to death, but beyond this lies not extinction, not torment, not a shadowy half-existence, but the prospect of Life, Life in all its fullness, the paradise of God. The human predicament has been beaten, for the benefit of all mankind. The promise of Christmas has been fulfilled! So Paul expounds the gospel of grace at the end of his life:

This grace...has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1:9-10 TNIV)

This defeat of death is in large measure how the Early Fathers understood the victory of Christ. Hear St Athanasius (295-373) on the incarnation:

The Word of God did not abandon the human race, his creatures, who are hurtling to their own ruin. By the offering of his body, the Word of God destroyed death which had united itself to them; by his teaching, he corrected their negligences; and by his power, he restored the human race....

For if it is through ourselves that death attained dominance over us, conversely, it is through the incarnation of the Word of God that death has been destroyed and that life has been resurrected....It is no longer as condemned that we die. Rather, we die with the hope of rising again from the dead, awaiting the universal resurrection which God will manifest to us in his own time, since he is both the author of it and gives us the grace for it.<sup>19</sup>

Hear also Basil the Great (c.329-379):

Look deeply into this mystery. God comes in the flesh in order to destroy the death concealed in flesh. In the same way as remedies and medicines triumph over the factors of corruption when they are assimilated into the body, and in the same way as the darkness which reigns in a house is dispelled by the entry of light, so death, which held human nature in its power, was annihilated by the coming of the Godhead. In the same way as ice, when in water, prevails over the liquid element as long as it is night, and darkness covers everything, but is dissolved when the sun comes up through the warmth of its rays: so death reigned till the coming of Christ; but when the saving grace of God appeared and the sun of justice rose, death was swallowed up in this victory, being unable to endure the dwelling of true life among us. O

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separation from God of all those who die without Christ.' I do not know what this is; but whatever it is, it is not Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 10,14; PG 25, cols 111-14, 119; ET by the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (1974) (adapted). Quoted in Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons*, 72.

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the depth of the goodness of God and of his love for all of us!<sup>20</sup>

And Ephrem of Syria (c.306-373):

Death trampled our Lord underfoot, but he in his turn treated death as a highroad for his own feet. He submitted to it, enduring it willingly, because by this means he would be able to destroy death in spite of itself. Death had its own way when our Lord went out from Jerusalem carrying his cross: but when by a loud cry from that cross he summoned the dead from the underworld, death was powerless to prevent it.

Death slew him by means of the body which he had assumed, but that same body proved to be the weapon with which he conquered death. In slaying our Lord, death itself was slain. It was able to kill natural human life, but was itself killed by the life that is above the nature of mortals. Death could not devour our Lord unless he possessed a body, neither could hell swallow him up unless he bore our flesh; and so he came in search of a chariot in which to ride to the underworld. This chariot was the body he received from the Virgin; in it he invaded death's fortress, broke open its strongroom and scattered all its treasure.<sup>21</sup>

Of this good and great news we the Christian Church are privileged to be the bearers to the rest of the human race. In support of this I am still unable to improve on Lesslie Newbigin's chapter 7, 'The Logic of Election', in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, which I quoted in BW/012:

To be chosen, to be elect, therefore does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost. To be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for his whole world, to be the sign and the agent and the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all. (86-7)

## CONCLUSIONS

To summarise: In respect of the four evangelical traditions listed on pp.2-3, evangelicals have on my understanding failed to make proper distinctions

between entry into God's kingdom by faith in this life, and by works at the Last Judgement;  
between the 'sheep' of Matthew 25 and the Christian Church;  
between ordinary sinful humanity and the 'sowing of the devil'; and  
between Hades and Gehenna.

Conversely, in Romans 5:18, 11:32 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, they have made a spurious distinction between the first and second 'alls' which is not supported by the text. In addition their teaching that one's eternal destiny is decided at death is a denial of the whole New Testament account of the Last Judgement.

Early in this paper we noticed a tension between the fundamental goodwill of God towards humanity expressed at Christmas and His supposed intention to cast the greater part of mankind into the eternal fire. To hold these two together would seem to require considerable mental gymnastics. Are there any other authorities which support our rejection of the latter?

There is one. We recall the story of Noah at the start of our Bible which sets the scene for the whole of salvation history which follows. God's benevolent intentions towards all generations of

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<sup>20</sup> Basil the Great, *Homily 2 'On the Nativity'*, 2-4; PL 183, cols 115-17. Quoted in Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons*, 54.

<sup>21</sup> Ephrem of Syria, *Homily 'On our Lord'*, 3-4; ET by the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (1974). Quoted in Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons*, 72

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humanity, and indeed all creatures upon earth, are spelled out unambiguously in Genesis 8:21-9:17. At no time subsequently has this fundamental goodwill of God been cancelled. We still see rainbows. Rather, it has been brought to its culmination by the incarnation of Jesus. God really is on our side. Our faith is therefore not after all schizophrenic.

Today the devil and hell are widely considered to be optional extras to the Christian faith. The notion that on death we might end up anywhere other than in heaven is foreign to many of us, even an insult. As a result we have lost the wonder at Jesus' conquest of death that for so many centuries enthralled the entire Church.

This is particularly true of those Protestant Churches which place such a strong emphasis on individual salvation in this life at the expense of any teaching about the collective destiny of the human race. So for instance the glorious doctrine of the Last Judgement has begun to drop out of the 'affirmations' which have in certain places been substituted for the creeds. The net consequence is that our witness to the outside world has been blunted as we focus instead on our own internal squabbles. A return from tradition to text on the part of us all would help to rectify this. And a rediscovery of contemplative prayer might in turn make this possible.

However none of the criticisms of evangelical theology which have been expressed in this paper detract from the simple gospel message of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus which has been consistently preached by evangelicals down the centuries, and in which they are an example to us all.

Laus Deo.

Martin Mosse,  
April 2010.

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