

# ***The Tale of Two Gospels***

**Romans 5:1-11**

Amidst the headlines and alarm of this past week, the Southern Baptist Convention met in Phoenix for their annual meeting. Usually, the SBC will make headlines of their own for some outlandish resolution or a public harangue on current society, voted upon by the thousands of messengers who gather every year to stew in their collective cauldron of cultural and religious conservatism. Whatever they proclaim, you can be sure will embarrass the rest of us Baptists, requiring us to apologetically explain once again that “we’re not one of those types of Baptists!”

Well, I might have missed this year’s pronouncements if I hadn’t heard on NPR that Southern Baptists voted on Wednesday to oppose racism, specifically the white supremacy imbedded in the Alt-Right movement, even though in doing so they recognized a percentage of their members might leave the denomination. It was quite a remarkable pronouncement when you think about it. The resolution read, in part, that the SBC would “denounce and repudiate white supremacy and every form of racial and ethnic hatred as a scheme of the devil intended to bring suffering and division to our society.” Congratulations, Southern Baptists! To their credit, it was a noble and civil statement to make, especially given the tenor of our times.

However, if you imagine this to be a breakthrough moment—a sign that the fiery fundamentalism of Southern Baptist culture is finally beginning to abate, we would be mistaken. While scrolling through the list of other resolutions passed by the convention this past week, one in particular caught my eye. More doctrinal in nature, it focused on the atonement, where messengers affirmed “the truthfulness, efficacy and

beauty of the biblical doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as the burning core of the Gospel message and the only hope of a fallen race.”<sup>1</sup>

What does that mean? One of the authors explained: “In truth, the biblical precept that the righteous must die for the wicked is the very core of the Christian faith...Here is the burning heart of divine love: Christ crucified for us.”<sup>2</sup>

We truly believe that a loving God has put his Son on the cross in order to satisfy his just demand for holiness... Without the cross of Jesus Christ, there is no hope for sinful humanity. That is why we believe it is time to defend the atonement.<sup>3</sup>

The resolution itself cites “Bible passages promising ‘a warrior savior who would crush the head of the serpent to obliterate the enemy,’...and ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ of sin.”<sup>4</sup>

Why would this declaration be important to the SBC at this particular time? Why reaffirm something their members probably hear from pulpits every Sunday? Could there be some other purpose for this resolution? The answer is written right into the text: namely, to attack rival theological interpretations that view God as promoting nonviolence and acting in nonpunitive ways. Quoting the resolution:

Anti-violence...weakens the Bible’s teaching by recasting the atonement as a basis for pacifism...[contradicting] Romans 13:4: ‘For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.’<sup>5</sup>

“Anti-violence weakens the Bible’s teaching”—really? Why this specific verse from Romans to affirm the doctrine of the atonement—a reference to government authority and punitive rule? Why would this be more relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Allen, “Satisfaction Guaranteed: Southern Baptists Refute Efforts to Soften the Atonement,” [www.baptistnews.com](http://www.baptistnews.com), June 14, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

as a biblical reference than highlighting Jesus' own commands to love our neighbors and to do good (not evil) to those who do harm?

This is precisely why theology matters. Implications are drawn for application in every day issues of concern. As the statement infers, if God is portrayed as fundamentally angry at humanity (thus requiring a violent resolution to sin), then it becomes easier to justify a similar stance by Christians toward the rest of the world (as if we need more angry and judgmental people in these times!). What's the logical extension? It shows up in advocating for a punitive system of justice and in morally validating the use of violence, whether referring to interpersonal conflict to armies marching off to war. It's a strong law and order ethic.

Making law and order the basis for the atonement and salvation furthermore implies something about those who are not Christian, i.e., they are categorically viewed as spiritually inferior, defective, deceived by Satan, and godforsaken apart from having a "saving belief in Jesus Christ." How ironic it is for the SBC to pass an enlightened resolution on racism, while reaffirming with another, the spiritual inferiority of those who do not accept Christianity, meaning they are rejected by God and ultimately condemned for a lack of belief. Is this not bigotry of a different type? It's a repackaged version of the old revivalist formula: "Come to Jesus...or go to hell!"

To be fair, Southern Baptists are not voicing a strange, aberrant doctrine. They are affirming the traditional and orthodox dogma of much of Christianity, particularly within Protestantism. Their resistance to opposing views and alternative beliefs is because their tradition maintains uniformity of doctrine and that orthodox dogma alone is revealed truth—a divine Word not to be altered or revised. Their certainty is based on a

conviction that the Bible is not only authoritative and infallible in its message, it is timeless and inerrant—without error—perfectly true and consistent in every word and detail—not to be challenged, but to be obeyed. This is a critical point, because without it, then like a house of cards the certainty of divine truth and the authority of their beliefs collapse into moral relativity—where no one can then claim absolute and supreme spiritual authority over others. The voice of God devolves into a cacophony of sound with many voices, instead of the clear, unerring word from the inspired *man* in the pulpit (Southern Baptists still don't allow females to have authority over males). In short, what we have here is the fear of losing an entire cultural and religious worldview unless the essential aspects of it are reaffirmed and upheld by each generation. That's why I believe this declaration was made at last week's convention.

As you know, 2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and of all the countries where Protestantism has taken root throughout these centuries, the American soil has been by far the most fertile. Protestantism has flourished and developed in (and been exported by) American culture more than anywhere else. As a result, the Protestant tradition has likely been more influenced by American cultural values and economic ambitions than it has even influenced our way of life. This is evident in the individualistic character and application of most Christian beliefs and doctrines, especially regarding salvation. Divine love and grace is sold to address a personal fear of death and ultimate judgment (by living on the straight and narrow), instead of inviting people into a community that embodies the life and spirit of Jesus in their values and ethics which lie at the heart of Christianity.

This has occurred in large part because the Christian Gospel has been almost entirely defined within Protestantism by the theology proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in his letters. As much as we might assume our faith tradition has been shaped by Jesus and his teachings in one or all the four Gospels, the Protestant tradition is mainly a product of Pauline theology, with its emphasis on divine grace, substitutionary atonement, and justification by faith. This is a made-to-order formula for individualism, where the Christian faith is presented as mainly getting right with God. Much of Protestant orthodoxy has been anchored in Paul's theology of atonement and "justification by faith", as if this emphasis alone was the gospel Jesus himself proclaimed (which it wasn't, as we will see!).

Nevertheless, Paul outlines his theology in what is commonly referred to his *magnum opus* or masterpiece—that being, his letter to the Romans—where in chapter and verse he proposed a theology of atonement that was intended to account for and give meaning to Jesus' death by crucifixion and the belief in his resurrection. In many ways, the theology of justification and substitutionary atonement was a Pauline innovation—something that he likely came up with based on his mission in the Roman world and due to his personal experience on the Damascus road where he believed he encountered the risen Christ—a defining moment in his life that brought about his conversion to The Way, i.e., the mission of the Jesus community led by the Apostles. The reason I sense it is an innovation by Paul is because the only other biblical allusion relative to a human being as a sinner-bearer was in Isaiah 53, the passage of the Suffering Servant, where the Messiah (or Israel itself) suffered for the sins of her people. Even there the reference is somewhat ambiguous, so it appears Paul alone developed this theology on his own.

It would take me more time than I have to unpack the ramifications of what I just said, so let me focus on a few key points. First, as with any biblical text, it's crucial to note the audience to whom Paul is addressing in Rome. We can be quite confident Paul was not writing for a general, universal audience like us, but to a very specific one, i.e., Gentile sympathizers who at the time embraced Jewish beliefs. As New Testament scholar, Peter Lampe, described the Roman church:

Several times in Romans Paul presumes that the vast majority in the Roman church is Gentile. These clear and direct statements seem to contradict the impression that much of the contents of Romans could be understood only by people who were trained in Jewish culture. The solution of the paradox is at hand if we assume that most people in the Roman church were of Gentile origin but had lived as sympathizers on the margins of the synagogues before they became Christian...

Gentile Christians would have been recruited from the ranks of the *sebomenoi* [God-worshippers], who, on the fringes of the synagogues revered the God of Israel as pagan sympathizers of Jewish monotheism. These folk were the main target of the earliest Gentile Christian mission. <sup>6</sup>

So, again, Paul's target audience were mainly Gentile sympathizers of Jewish monotheism. One can understand, then, to reach a receptive audience with Jesus' story, why Paul would develop a theology which would free Gentile converts from having to conform to Torah requirements for circumcision and all the religious customs and dietary restrictions. Paul was calling them into a faith for which they would not otherwise be chosen because of their race and lineage. Following Christ, however, Gentile believers drawn to Israel's monotheism would not be marginalized as outsiders, as they often were in synagogues. It was a theology that would lead to Paul's conviction that in Christ no one possessed superior status before the God of Israel, for all had sinned and needed divine mercy and

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *In Search of Paul* by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, HarperCollins, 2004, pg. 39.

grace. But for Paul to make this leap, the theology that justified it had to have gravitas and legitimacy.

At the same time, Paul's main rivals within the synagogues resisted Christian claims about the resurrection and the messianic role of Jesus (especially given his crucifixion—not a big selling point!). So, again, the situation required a theology which would validate these messianic claims and root them in Israel's divine covenants and promises.

As I like to imagine it, the revelation came to Paul during the High Holy Days of the Jewish calendar, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when it must have dawned on him how Jesus' death on the cross could be understood in the same manner as the sacrificial offering—the goat whose blood served as atonement for the sins of the people (Lev. 16). In addition, at the Passover festival, the blood of a lamb was shed symbolizing the protection the Israelites received when the Angel of Death passed over Egypt. I can imagine how the religious symbolism provided Paul the means to present his good news about what God was doing through Jesus. The symbolism would weave together to give shape to Jesus' story that would remove the stain of scandal and shame from the cross and provide eternal salvific meaning to Jesus' life and mission. Jesus' resurrection would be proof positive of divine deliverance from the consequences of human sin—just as the Day of Atonement was meant to do in a more temporal manner. So, the hope of Israel symbolized throughout the generations in ceremony and tradition Paul reimagined in the story of Jesus. It's a profound insight and compelling theology—something from which Christians still derive much meaning.

However, this wasn't the “good news” as Jesus presented it, as we know from his teachings. The Gospels (apart from John's) present a

different sense of Jesus' mission and purpose. It was, of course, in a time of imperial occupation by Rome and to those who remembered Israel's freedom a few generations before during the Maccabean era, Jesus was proclaiming the great hope of the coming reign of God, and followers were to prepare themselves for its arrival. But this would not come by violent revolution, but through the transformation of her people. The focus of his proclamation was on what God was doing in their midst and not so much on who Jesus was; it was about living into the already revealed truth and spirit of Torah and the ultimate promises of redemption for Israel.

According to Luke, Jesus announced his ministry by quoting Isaiah 61 (Lk 4:16-21), which reflected the promise of ultimate Jubilee justice and right relations between people ("good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"). In the Synoptic gospels, when Jesus was asked about the path to eternal life (Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28), nothing is mentioned about atonement for sin; rather, it was in living out the two great commandments: Love the Lord with one's whole self and to love one's neighbor. The focus was on living in right relations with God and one's neighbor. Integrity of faith was expressed in what one did by loving and merciful deeds—not merely what was believed about God (Mt 7:21ff). Or, as we know so well in Matthew 25 (31-46), those who were righteous—who were embraced by God—were those who served the least of these in society. Again, in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus' emphasis was on a person's devotion to God being reflected in their concrete works of justice and mercy, summed up in the Golden Rule (a universal ethic among world religions): "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;

for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7:12). This was the Gospel according to Jesus—the way to find peace with God.

What we have in Christianity is the tale of two very distinct Gospels—one that Jesus espouses in traditional Jewish terms of living into the spirit of right relations with God and one’s neighbors (including enemies) helping to create the world as it would be in God’s heavenly realm—and one that Paul largely defines through his reflection on the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, a Gospel that brings Israel’s God to the Gentile world, reflecting a belief about Jesus and his role in human redemption.

These two Gospels overlap on many levels as they portray Jesus as the anointed Christ, but they serve as “good news” to humanity in very different, but complementary, ways. The one Jesus proclaimed brings humanity into right relationship with God by them being in right relationship with each other; the one Paul articulated focused on bringing human beings into right relationship with God and then into community with others. Instead of being rivals, they are two similar messages of paths to reconciliation between heaven and earth. They are two different proclamations of good news, to be sure, but not mutually exclusive.

This brings me back to explain to you why I struggle to embrace the views of our Southern Baptist friends, even if they are doctrinally orthodox within the Protestant tradition. The God I see in Scripture isn’t a permanently angry and powerful deity who relentlessly condemns the world for its sin; for me, God is much more loving and gracious, even to all humankind—addressing human sinfulness and limitations, but certainly not limiting grace and salvation over a matter of mere liturgy or belief. Nor do I believe that God needed to have Jesus killed to satisfy some eternal

penal requirement. In my view, God will extend grace and favor to whomever God chooses without having to resort to violence. Violence is the costly choice of desperate or arrogant humans—not of the Spirit of life.

For me, God is the positive presence of love and grace in life—human and divine—compelling us to be better than we are as humans in terms of being just and merciful toward one another and to live with humility and grace before God. According to Micah (6:8), that is what the Lord requires of us. That seems to fit very well into the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed throughout his ministry and one I believe Paul would affirm as well (in his better moments, anyway!).

Though, I recognize how and why Paul was innovative with the symbols of Jewish tradition to reach his target audience, his understanding of Jesus and his formulation of the Gospel should not take precedence over what Jesus himself taught, nor is his theology more germane to divine truth or our ultimate value and destiny than Jesus' own words as we have them. If anything, Jesus demands far more of us than mere belief.

So, start with Jesus and his story and allow his Spirit to teach you about life and how to treat others, for that is the essence of the Christian faith. For the rest, as they say, is commentary.

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