

Vain Are the Hopes

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Vain are the hopes the sons of men
On their own works have built;
Their hearts by nature all unclean,
And all their actions guilt.

Let Jew and Gentile stop their mouths
Without a murmur'ing word,
And the whole race of Adam stand
Guilty before the Lord.

In vain we ask God's righteous law
To justify us now;
Since to convince and to condemn
Is all the law can do.

Jesus, how glorious is thy grace!
When in thy name we trust,
Our faith receives a righteousness
That makes the sinner just.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

A Response to Criticisms: Implications of the Gospel

Kevin T. Bauder

The gospel is events. The gospel rests upon evidences. The gospel relies upon interpretations. All these elements are necessary to the gospel, rightly understood. Nevertheless, they do not exhaust a right understanding of the gospel. The gospel also rests upon a theological foundation that is implicit in the explanations.

Consider the gospel proposition, “Christ died for our sins.” This statement is freighted with meaning. For example, it implies something about us. In this statement, Paul assumes that we are sinners. He further assumes that our sins must bring dire consequences—otherwise, why should Christ die for them? He also assumes that we can do nothing to ameliorate the consequences of our own sins. Christ would not have to die for consequences that we ourselves could correct.

The statement, “Christ died for our sins,” also assumes something about the work of Christ. It is “for” our sins. Other texts define that word *for*. 1 Peter 2:24 says that Jesus “himself bare our sins in his own body on the tree.” In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul states that God has “made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” These and similar texts echo Isaiah’s teaching that “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). Both testaments clearly teach that the death of Jesus was substitutionary. Christ took the place of sinners. God imputed or charged the guilt of our sins to Christ, and Christ suffered the penalty in our place. Without the doctrine of a substitutionary atonement, the gospel becomes meaningless or, worse still, takes on the wrong meaning.

If the death of Jesus was “for our sins,” then He became our sin-bearer. That truth leads to another question: what sort of person is qualified to bear our sins? Obviously, a sin bearer must be personally guiltless: sinners must pay for their own sins and cannot pay for the sins of others. Sinlessness, however, is not the only qualification. There are many sinless beings. Michael is sinless. Gabriel is sinless. The cherubim and seraphim are sinless. Yet they did not and could not die for our sins.



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These holy spirit beings, while sinless, are still finite persons. This finiteness matters because the guilt of our sins is infinite. The measure of guilt is the value of the being against whom a sin is committed. All sins are committed against God, and God is an infinite being of infinite value. Therefore, all sin causes infinite offense, and we bear infinite guilt. Since we bear infinite guilt, the only person who can pay for our sins must be an infinite person.

Only three infinite persons exist: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For God's justice to be satisfied, one of those three had to pay for our sins. The one who did was the Son. Because He is an infinite person, He could bear the infinite penalty for our guilt. The penalty was death, so Christ died for our sins. Christ's true deity is essential to the gospel.

To be able to die, God the Son had to become mortal. To be mortal, He had to have a body. More specifically, to save humans from their sins He had to become a human Himself (Heb 2:10–14). Consequently, He added a full and complete human nature to His eternal, divine person. He now subsists as one person in two natures, fully divine and fully human, such that His person is never divided, and His natures are never confounded. All of this is essential to the gospel.

If someone asks how we know any of these things, Paul provides an answer. Our knowledge is "according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3–4). Without God's inspired Word, we would not have the divine revelation that we need to interpret the events of the gospel. The inspiration and authority of the Bible is essential to the gospel—and that includes the Bible's inerrancy. If we cannot trust the Bible in areas of science or history that we can test and observe, then how can we trust the Bible for doctrinal explanations that we cannot observe?

One more thing. The events and explanations of the gospel do not save anyone automatically. The gospel needs to be applied to sinners, and Paul states clearly how it is applied. He says that the gospel is "received" (1 Cor 15:1) and "believed" (1 Cor 15:2). These are themes that the New Testament expands greatly elsewhere, teaching that salvation is by grace through faith and not of works (Eph 2:8–9, et al). The doctrine of justification *sola fide* is essential to the gospel.

As we have seen, the gospel is much, much bigger than the plan of salvation. Of course, it deals with soteriology. It also deals with topics in bibliology, anthropology, hamartiology, eschatology, theology proper, and Christology, at minimum. Consequently, when Paul, in 2 Corinthians, talks about someone who preaches another Jesus and another gospel, he is not talking about two different things. Another Jesus implies another gospel. The one is bound to the other. To say that Paul is dealing with two distinct topics, Christology and soteriology, is to commit (at minimum) an embarrassing interpretive *faux pas*.

But Paul also includes "another S/spirit" in this complex. Is he dealing with a separate area, pneumatology? Or is he making an oblique reference to bibliology, introducing the topic of revelation by using a circumlocution? Or is he doing something else entirely? This is the question that we will answer in the next essay.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
