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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 13

1. It's Not Fair!

By Joseph Tkach

2. Your Strange Dead GOD

By John Halford

3. Learning to Be Like Christ (Part 3)

By Michael Morrison

4. 4 Views of Revelation

By P.T. Editors (Eng.)

Something worth thinking about

By Joseph Tkach

It's Not Fair!

Jesus didn't carry any swords or spears. He didn't have an army behind him. His only weapon was his mouth, and it was his message that got him into trouble. He made people so angry that they wanted to kill him.

A dangerous message

His message was seen not merely as wrong—it was dangerous. It was subversive. It threatened to upset the social world of Judaism. But what kind of message could make the religious leaders so angry that they would kill the messenger?

One idea that could anger the religious leaders is found in Matthew 9:13: I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. Jesus had a message of good news for sinners, but people who considered themselves good often thought that Jesus preached bad news.

Jesus invited prostitutes and tax collectors into the kingdom of God, and the good people didn't like that. "That's not fair," they may have said. "We have been working hard to be good, and why can they get into the kingdom without working hard? If you don't keep sinners out, it isn't fair!"

Jesus was preaching that God is not fair. Even today, people don't like to hear that idea. Good Christian people want God to be fair—but he isn't.

Most people think that fairness requires equal treatment for everyone, but when it comes to salvation, God simply isn't fair.

More than fair

However, God is more than fair. His grace is far beyond anything we could deserve. God is generous, full of grace, full of mercy, loving us even though we don't deserve it.

That kind of message bothers religious leaders and all who say that the harder you work, the more you will get; if you behave better, you will get a better reward. Religious leaders like to have that kind of message, because it makes it easy to motivate people to work hard, to do right, and to live right.

But Jesus says, it isn't so.

If you have dug a really deep pit for yourself, if you have messed up time and time again, if you have been the worst sort of sinner, you don't have to work your way out of the pit to be given salvation. God simply forgives you for the sake of Jesus. You

don't have to deserve it—God simply does it. You just need to believe it. You just need to trust God, to take him at his word: Your million-dollar debt is removed from the record.

That is good news for ordinary people. But it seems that some people are distressed at this kind of news. "Look, I've been working hard to get out of the pit," they might say, "and I am almost out. You mean to tell me that 'those' people are pulled out of the pit instantly, without having to do any work at all? That's not fair!"

No, grace is not "fair"—it is grace—it is a gift we did not deserve. God can be generous to whomever he wants to be generous to, and the good news is that he offers his generosity to everyone. It is fair in the sense that it extends to everyone, even though this means that he forgives some people a big debt, and some people a smaller debt—the same arrangement for all even though there are different circumstances.

A parable of unfairness

In Matthew 20 is the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Some men worked all day long in the heat of the day. Some worked only half a day, and some worked only one hour, but they all got paid the same amount, a day's wage. Some got exactly what they agreed to, but others got more. However, the men who worked all day long said, "That's not fair. We worked all day long, and it's not fair to pay us the same as those who worked less" (see verse 12).

But the men who worked all day got exactly what they had agreed to before they began work (verse 4). The only reason they got upset was because other people got more than they deserved.

What did the paymaster say? He said: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (verse 15).

The boss said he would give them a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and that's what he did—and yet the workers complained. Why? Because they compared themselves with others and they got the shorter end of the stick. They got their hopes up, and then they were disappointed.

But the landowner said: "I am doing you no wrong. If you think it's not fair, the problem is in what you expected, not in what you actually got. If it hadn't been for the amount I paid the newcomers, you

Study Supplement No. 13

would be quite happy with what I gave you. The problem is in your expectations, not in what I did. You accuse me of being bad, simply because I was good to someone else (see verse 15).

How would you react to this? What would you think if your boss gave a bonus to the newest employees, but not to the old faithful workers? It would not be very good for morale, would it? But Jesus was not giving us payroll advice here—he was telling a parable about the kingdom of God (verse 1).

The parable reflected something that was happening in Jesus' ministry. God was giving salvation to people who hadn't worked very hard, and the religious leaders said: "That's not fair. You can't be generous to them. We've been working hard, and they have hardly been working." And Jesus replied, "I am bringing good news to sinners, not to the righteous." His teaching threatened to undermine the normal motive for doing good.

Where do we fit in?

We might like to think that we have worked all day long, bearing the burdens and the heat of the day, deserving a good reward. But we have not.

It doesn't matter how long you've been in the church or how many sacrifices you have made; those are nothing in comparison to what God is giving us. Paul worked harder than any of us; he made more sacrifices for the gospel than we realize, but he counted it all as a loss for Christ. It was nothing.

The time we've spent in the church is nothing to God. The work we've done is nothing compared to what he can do. Even at our best, as another parable says, we are unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). Jesus has bought our entire lives; he has fair claim on every thought and every action. We cannot possibly give him anything on top of that—even if we do everything he commands.

We are really like the workers who worked only one hour and got a whole day's wage. We just barely got started, and we were paid like we actually did something useful. Is that fair? Maybe we shouldn't even ask the question. If the judgment is in our favour, we shouldn't ask for another opinion!

Do we think of ourselves as people who have worked long and hard? Do we think we deserve more than we are getting? Or do we see ourselves as people who are getting an undeserved gift, regardless of how long we've worked? That is something worth thinking about.

Joseph Tkach

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Your strange dead God'



By John

Halford

The older I get the more tolerant I become of other people's religious beliefs. I don't mean that I accept them - or even understand them - but I have learnt that what, to me, may seem foolish or confusing has deep meaning to someone from a different culture.

For example, I have met many Hindus who are at least as intelligent and educated as I am. What do the devotees of this ancient and sophisticated religion see in what to me are rather odd symbols of faith? Like, for instance, the multi-limbed goddesses or brightly coloured statues of monkeys and elephants you see in their Temples?

A few years ago, while riding in a taxi in a large Asian city, I had the tables neatly turned on me. As we passed a Christian Church decorated with a large crucifix on its wall, the driver asked me, 'What do you Christians see in that strange dead God?'

I had never thought of the symbol of the cross like that. To me, Jesus is very much alive, but to someone who does not know the whole story, it must seem odd to choose for the symbol of your faith a tortured, bleeding corpse hanging on an instrument of execution.

When you do know the story, the cross becomes a powerful reminder of how Jesus suffered when he became the sacrifice for sin. Today it is the universally recognised emblem of Christianity. It wasn't always. Apparently, for the first centuries of the church, the cross was not widely used. It began to be more common once Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. Interestingly, it did not really catch on until crucifixion was abandoned as a punishment in the days of Constantine. Perhaps the reality of this dreadful method of execution was too awful for the symbol of the cross to be acceptable.

Even when the cross became popular, the Christ-figure was usually portrayed fully clothed and very much alive, focusing on his triumphant resurrection

Study Supplement No. 13

rather than his ignominious death. That is something to think about.

You see, that Hindu taxi driver was not the only one who did not understand 'our strange dead God'. There are millions of people in the Western world who don't really know what the cross is all about. Is it therefore the best symbol of what the Christian faith stands for today?

Please don't misunderstand. I have a great respect for what the cross represents. It belongs as a centrepiece in our places of worship. By all means let it adorn our Bibles, prayer books and hymnals. Wear one if you will, although we devalue it when it becomes just another piece of trendy jewellery. A cross represents forgiveness of sin and reminds us of what Jesus suffered to become our Saviour. In fact, the more you understand sin the more you appreciate what Jesus did.

But if you don't think of yourself as a sinner - and most people today don't - you will not feel that way. People who have no sense of guilt have no need for a Saviour. Why seek forgiveness if you don't think you have done anything wrong?

Many a church notice board reminds passers-by that 'the wages of sin is death'. Does it ever occur to us that focusing on avoiding the punishment for sin can give the impression that that is what our faith is all about?

Christianity is not all about death. It is not really all about forgiveness of sin either. It is about life. God so loved the world that he gave his only beloved son so that humanity could have - not just their sins forgiven - but eternal life. Forgiveness is an essential part of the process, but perhaps, for people callused to sin, it is not the most effective bait. But everyone wants to live.

As I write it is not yet clear whether or not we will be going to war over Iraq. It looks ominous. Perhaps by the time you read this war will have started, or have been avoided. It may even be over. But whatever happens, what is certain is that the world has never been so filled with fear, suffering and death. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus said 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'.¹ So, war or no war, we have decided to devote much of this issue to life: not just a better life now, but life as God intends it to be, a life that will last forever.

The cross will always be a universal symbol of the death of Our Lord. But is there an equally recognisable way to represent his resurrection and eternal life? I can only think of one.

Jesus said he would live his life in - and through - those who accepted him as their Saviour. They

would then spend the rest of their physical lives following him - transformed, striving to show in thought, word and deed what the Christian faith is all about. 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'² said Jesus.

If you really try to do that you will undoubtedly be thought of as a bit strange. It is to be expected - people thought Jesus was strange too. But Christianity is best represented when those who believe it become living symbols of our 'strange live God'.

1. John 10:10

2. John 13:35

John Halford

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Learning to Be Like Christ,

Part 3

By Michael Morrison

Learning by Living

We were made to be like Jesus—but how is that different than trying to be like Buddha or Confucius? How is Christianity different from other religions that tell people to imitate a highly respected role model? It is different in several ways.

First, most religions teach some form of works as the path of salvation—saying the right prayers, doing the right things, hoping it will be enough. They imply that people can be good enough if they try hard enough.

But Christianity teaches that we all need grace because we cannot be good enough no matter how hard we try. The point of grace, and of Jesus' sacrifice, is that no amount of good works or religious deeds can ever save anyone. If such a path could have been designed, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21). The Christian gospel teaches that no one can earn salvation, and yet it is available to all, because Jesus gives it to us.

Second, most religions tell us to change our behaviour, and they expect us to supply all the effort. Christianity says that God himself will supply the power we need to change our lives. We humans have gotten ourselves into this mess, and we can't rescue ourselves. The power of salvation must come from God.

We are not trying to transform ourselves into the image of Christ—we want to let God do it in us. The Bible describes this as the Holy Spirit living in us, God living in us, or Jesus Christ living in us. The power to change our behaviour comes from

Study Supplement No. 13

him, not from within ourselves. It is his work, not anything we can take credit for.

Third, most religions motivate people through threats and desire for reward. Christianity motivates us through grace and love. We obey God not out of fear, but out of love and thankfulness for what he has done. And we are confident that he has given us the best instructions possible on how to live.

Christianity says that we were created for a purpose, and that purpose is eternal happiness living with a supremely loving God (Psalm 16:11). Jesus is not just an example of how we ought to live—he is also an example of what salvation means. He lives in eternal glory, and says that we can join him in that glory, if we trust him.

Spiritual growth

Over the centuries, Christians have found several ways to let God do his work in our lives. God does not force us to love him—love by definition has to be willingly given; it cannot be programmed into us or forced out of us. We have to choose it. God works in us as we submit to him. “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

How do we invite God to do his work in our lives? How do we become more like Jesus Christ? In several ways:

In worship, we are reminded of God’s greatness, his mercy and his desire to do good in our lives. We are reminded that we can trust him and that we depend on him, just as Jesus did.



In prayer, we acknowledge that we depend on God, and we ask him for the help we need—needs such as food, intervention, and spiritual change. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

In Bible study, we read and think about the works and words of God. Jesus studied Scripture and used its words to help him resist temptations (Matthew 4:1-11). He said that humans do “not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (verse 4). Spiritual life needs spiritual nourishment.



In the church, we interact with other people in the same Christ-focused training program. We learn from our interactions about how to express love, and we grow in appreciation for people who have talents and abilities different from our own. Jesus created the church not just to preach the gospel, but to help us grow, because that is also part of his work and purpose.

In service, in helping others, we act the way Jesus would. We learn by experience that service gives us more life satisfaction than selfishness does. Being involved in the work of God is the most satisfying feeling of all, for it will be of eternal value. When we die, we can’t take physical things with us, but we can take relationships.

Toil and trouble

In the day-to-day experiences of life, we have opportunities to learn to be like Jesus, to choose to be patient, to be considerate, to help others, to pray. On the job and in our homes, Jesus has something to say about what we do.

What about the trials and difficulties of life? We wish they’d go away, but Jesus never promised that. Instead, he promised us problems: “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

God uses our difficulties as opportunities for us to learn. Even Jesus had to experience troubles. “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). If even Jesus had to learn through suffering, we can expect it to be part of our training program, too.

We will experience problems in life whether or not we follow Jesus. Our choice is not whether to have problems, but whether we learn from those problems. Do we react to them the way Jesus would, or do we become bitter and seek revenge? We learn more about love when we love people who are hard to love; we learn more about forgiveness when people sin against us. Our character is shaped more like Jesus not so much in good times, but in difficult times.

We do not always understand why God allows people to suffer. We may not see any good in it, or any lesson to learn. But God assures us that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). We may not know how—we just have to trust him.

Whatever the trial, we can at least be assured of this: “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (verse 18). We can be confident, even in our

Study Supplement No. 13

trials, that God has something wonderful planned for us. Our trials are only temporary, but the glory will last forever!

Enemies of spiritual growth

The Bible warns us that several things can stifle the work God is doing in our lives. We can resist those enemies, but it will take some effort.

In Luke 8, Jesus told a story about seeds in different types of soil. In his story, the seed represented the word of God (verse 11). Some people receive the gospel message with joy. "They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away" (verse 13). They expected Christianity to be smooth sailing, but that is not what Jesus promises. "When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:21).

Another group of people are like seeds that fell among weeds. Although the message of Jesus began to grow in their lives, weeds eventually choked it out. "As they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature" (Luke 8:14).

Some people are so distracted by the things of this world that they fail to think about eternal life. The gospel has no results in their lives because they ignore it—they are too "busy" to give eternity any time. Either they are amusing themselves with wealth, or they are frustrating themselves trying to get wealth (see also 1 John 2:16-17). Either way, they don't give God any time. They are choosing mortal life instead of eternal life.

However, some people respond well to the message: "The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by perseverance produce a crop" (Luke 8:15). Perseverance helps us grow and produce fruit. Our choices make a difference in what the gospel does in our lives.

We need to value the eternal life that Jesus offers us—and we need to act like it is more valuable than the temporary rewards of this mortal life. We should love God more than we love money, physical pleasures, or the success that this world offers. Those things are temporary, so we need to keep our eyes on the goal of eternal life, with eternal pleasures and eternal significance.

We have a choice. If we want a meaningful life, a satisfying life, an enjoyable life, then we need to look to Jesus as our model, and as the power that can change our life.

God wants us to live forever in love and joy, and we need to trust him to do the work that he has already begun. He's the one who created us to be

"in his own image"; he's the one who sent Jesus to guarantee it for us; we can be sure that he will finish his work in our lives. Trust him, and open your life to let him work more powerfully!

Michael Morrison

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4 Views of Revelation

Plain Truth Editors (England)

Ask most people — Christian or non-Christian — what they think the book of Revelation is about, and chances are they will tell you it is a book about the "end of the world."

Chances are, they have never heard any other way to understand this book filled with strange beasts, symbolism and ominous signs of doom. Most people are unaware that there is any other way to understand this mysterious last book of the Bible.

But the futurist view (that Revelation is predicting events yet to be fulfilled) is only one of four traditional Christian ways of looking at the Bible's most enigmatic book.

These four views are carefully and even-handedly analysed and then applied to each verse and passage in *Revelation: Four Views -- A Parallel Commentary*, edited by Steve Gregg and published by Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Here is a brief summary of the four approaches Gregg presents.

Preterist.

Most prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled during the time of the Roman Empire.

A word of caution here, not all preterists are created equal. The term preterism can describe two very different approaches: 1) A belief that the text is not inspired prophecy, but is rather a description of certain historical events amidst fanciful apocalyptic imagery. 2) A belief that the prophecies of the book are divinely inspired and were fulfilled mostly in the first centuries after Christ.

The first type of preterist, theologically liberal, advocates a later writing of the book (A.D. 95), and while accepting the historical reality of certain events in the text, believes John's apocalyptic visions were never, and will never be, fulfilled.

Study Supplement No. 13

The second type of preterist, theologically conservative, believes in an early writing of the book (before A.D. 70). Those who advocate this view point out the correspondence between Revelation and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. They point to Revelation 1:1, 19, which says that the predicted events must "shortly come to pass." They also point to Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) as primarily being fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70.

Most conservative preterists allow, however, that the last chapters of Revelation describe the Second Coming of Christ.

Historicist.

The prophecies have been fulfilled throughout history and are still being fulfilled today.

While this interpretation is not widely in use today, those who have been steeped in popular futurist views are often surprised to learn that most of the classic commentaries from a century or more ago are written from a historicist viewpoint. Many of the great leaders of the Reformation and later also held to this view: Wycliffe, Knox, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Newton, Huss, Foxe, Wesley, Edwards, Whitfield and Finney. According to historicists, Revelation is a kind of survey of church history, with historical events symbolically portrayed. Historicists believe that exact time periods are specified, assuming that each day specified in the text equals a year in real time.

The challenge for historicists has been to align actual events with the details in the text (an approach shared by preterists and futurists). This requires large amounts of conjecture, and the flexibility to revise interpretations in light of ongoing world events.

Another prominent feature of Protestant historicism is its belief that the Antichrist of Revelation refers to the Papacy. For this reason, some die-hard historicists assert that all other interpretations of Revelation are Satanically inspired attempts to obscure the Antichrist's true identity.

In any case, historicism has fallen out of vogue. Critics point out that it has not kept up with history much past the 14th century and that it is Eurocentric -- not recognizing more recent and significant developments in the church in other parts of the world.

Futurist.

Most prophecies beyond Revelation 3 are yet to be fulfilled.

This is the view held by most contemporary North American evangelical writers and teachers. Somewhat ironically, Francisco Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit priest, for the purpose of refuting the historicist views of the Protestant reformers, originated futurism in 1585.

The most popular version of futurism today is dispensationalism, which has only been around since 1830, when J.N. Darby began teaching his ideas of a secret Rapture of the church (Revelation 4:1) followed by a tribulation period, and a 1,000-year rule of Christ.

Futurists tend to take a literal view of the book of Revelation. Since futurists believe that few, if any, of the events from chapters 4-22 of Revelation have taken place, it is easy for them to assert that most of these prophecies are to be taken literally (whereas preterists, historicists and spiritualists must wrestle with symbolic interpretations of passages about the two witnesses and the four horsemen, for example).

This literal interpretation of the highly symbolic book of Revelation ignores the style of writing God inspired John to use. The first key in understanding literature of any type is to determine the kind (genre) of literature it is.

Revelation is prophecy, letter and apocalyptic -- with the apocalyptic style predominating. Apocalyptic style was well known at the time John wrote, using cryptic meanings and symbolic images. Above all, apocalyptic literature is born of immediate persecution and oppression and anticipates the final triumph of good over evil.

Disregarding the language God inspires to convey his message, futurists conveniently avoid having their "this is going to happen in the near future" approach tested by historical events.

Dispensationalists, in particular, can prognosticate freely with the confidence that they will be raptured before the bulk of Revelation is fulfilled and will not be around on earth to be embarrassed by any inaccuracies in their predictions.

On further thought, this approach renders the book irrelevant and of little practical use for most Christians, as they either will have died or will have been raptured before its fulfillment.

Study Supplement No. 13

Spiritual (or Symbolic or Idealist) **Most prophecies portray the ongoing cosmic conflict of spiritual realities and may have many fulfilments throughout history.**

This actually represents a variety of approaches that look for lessons or principles -- often recurrent in history -- symbolically depicted in Revelation. Noting the apocalyptic style in which the book is written, this interpretation sees the central theme as the triumph of good over evil, of Christ over Satan. Passages that other approaches regard as depicting chronological events (such as the seals, trumpets and emergence of the beast) are regarded allegorically by spiritualists as recurring realities in history as part of God's sovereign plan for humankind.

The obvious advantage of this view is that there is no need to match events described in the book to real events. The disadvantage is that the book of Revelation itself claims to predict certain specific events (1:1).

Editor Gregg points out that, although scholars and teachers may label themselves with one of these distinct methods for interpreting the book of Revelation, in practice, they often use various combinations of the four.

Revelation is a complex book. Because it is part of Holy Scripture, we can trust that it has value for all Christians. Those who seek to understand it would do well to learn from a variety of sources and to familiarise themselves with the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches.

It is disturbing to hear someone claim that theirs is the only approach, or worse yet, to label others as non-Christian merely because they interpret the book of Revelation differently.

Gregg's work is therefore of great value in bringing Christians together and promoting mutual understanding and cooperation, as well as in saving students of the Bible from extreme and destructive interpretations.

The Editors

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