

The Good News

What is *The Good News*? Frequently used in Christian circles, this saying can be traced back to John the Baptist and Jesus. In Luke 4:17 it states that Jesus was sent in the world to spread the Good News. Hence, it can be seen as a summation of the Christian message. In this post I am going to examine the prevailing interpretation of what the Good News means for the world, and then offer an alternative which I believe is closer to what Jesus originally intended. First of all, the Good News that conservative/evangelical/protestant/Pentecostal Christianity speaks about is this:

All of us, by virtue of our humanity, have been born into a corrupt and sinful nature. There is nothing we could have done, we are necessarily sinful creatures. Because of this, we are incapable of having a good relationship with God. God is perfectly just and righteous, and can't deal with a being that is not as perfect. Because of our sin, we deserve to be separated from God for eternity, and sent to a lake of fire where we will be tortured and tormented without end. However, God is also a graceful and merciful being, and he sent his son (Jesus Christ) into the world to offer every individual an opportunity to avoid this innate curse and be reconciled with God. This offer does not last forever, though, because sometime in the future God will turn this earth into a hell in what is called the tribulation, which culminates in the second coming of Jesus. Not only does Jesus offer us a way to get into heaven (and thereby escape hell); believing in him will allow you to escape the tribulation by being raptured before-hand.

There is a multitude of statements in that summary that I would dispute, and indeed I have in other posts on the website. In today's post, I want to focus on four specific aspects of this interpretation of Christ's message that I find troubling, and is indeed rampant in modern Christianity.

It is preoccupied with the afterlife

If you listen to a preacher that is evangelising, he will be asking a similar question to this: "If you die tonight, are you sure you will be going to heaven?" It is very effective, as it forces the listener to consider what will happen to them when they will die. Most people like to think there is an afterlife, but also are not sure what it is and how to secure the best possible outcome post-death. These people hear the preachers, whether they be on the street corner, behind a pulpit, or through a book, and hear them claim that if you are not sure where you are going after you die, you are most probably going to hell.

Let us hypothesise that someone listens to this message, and then decides to get saved and become a Christian. Why did he do it? Two reasons: To avoid hell, and to get into heaven. This example is not a trick that some radical preachers use to lure in unsuspecting people; it is the most common form of evangelism and the reason that many people (including myself) became Christians. Christianity becomes a means to get into heaven, God becomes a security blanket, and Jesus becomes the scapegoat for a punishment that should have been ours. To focus on the afterlife means to subordinate the importance of the present. For a further discussion on Christianity's obsession with the afterlife, see the post "Afterlife and Egoism"

It is a message that arouses fear and anxiety

Once a person becomes a Christian, the question on the preachers changes from "are you going to heaven?" into "Are you ready for heaven (or the rapture)?" The idea is that the more we please God in this life, the more the rewards we will receive in the afterlife. Pleasing God often means evangelising, or praying, or participating in church activities, or becoming more doctrinally educated, singing worship songs loudly, or reading the bible daily. Trying to prepare for the rapture and pleasing God under this system can arouse fear and severe anxiety. This can be seen from how the God relationship began. They accepted God, and Jesus, to escape the hell-fires and be destined into heaven. Their first picture of God was a wrathful one, and they felt the need to avoid his wrath. God is for that Christian an object to appease; Christianity is now a religion of requirements that need to be fulfilled.

To borrow a concept from political science, this Good News message provides negative freedom. Negative freedom means freedom *from* something. It instils an acute sense of fear and anxiety of what will happen to you if you do not embrace Christianity, and once accepted it becomes the 'way out' of an eternal hell.

It is good news only in the sense of self-interest

Once the rhetoric of this interpretation of the Good News is stripped away, humanity's situation becomes clear. A just and wrathful God is going to send billions of people into unending torment and torture, and only a very tiny percentage of the world's population will be spared. The world is in impending doom, but you can save yourself! When you look at this Good News message in its raw form, you can be excused for wondering what is good about it. To see it as Good News, or a joyous worldview, is to be radically self-centred in that you can find your own salvation more inspiring than the hellish destiny of the billions of other people that inhabit this world.

There are two other examples of how Christian doctrine teaches self-centredness. Firstly, pre-tribulation theology claims that all Christians will be raptured before the tribulation (a period of 7 years when the earth is put through a number of freakish disasters and billions will perish). When you consider how a central aspect of Christ's teachings was a concern for the suffering of others, liking the idea that we will be raptured before the rest of the world goes through agony is *unChristian*. Indeed, it is extremely self-centred in that you care more about yourself than the rest of the world.

Secondly, pre-destination theology (a key aspect to Calvinism) states that before the world was created every Christian that has been saved since the beginning of history till the end of time was known. Hence, we are in a way destined to accept Jesus and go to heaven, whereas unbelievers were not destined and hence can't go to heaven. Casting aside the exclusivism that this worldview makes explicit, it implies not only self-centredness but self-importance. To believe yourself predestined by God to escape hell (with the vast majority of other people not as fortunate) is very egoistic. The basic point is that it lifts up the individual and subjugates the plight of the majority.

To make this Good News even more absurd, Jesus taught to his followers a message of selflessness. He taught people to love their enemies, forgive those no matter how often they harm you, and to care more about the predicament and suffering of other people than your own discomfort. He called for a life of radical selflessness, and this philosophy has no room for self-interested Good News that is about saving yourself as an individual.

It is unliveable

In this worldview of impending doom for the world and the souls of billions, I am certain that there are many Christians who feel concern for the unbelievers who they believe are going to hell. Indeed, they will most likely reply to my third criticism by saying "I am not self-interested, I care deeply for the souls of those who are going to hell, I want to bring them to Christ." I will respond to this counterargument with my experience of growing up in a number of independent Baptist Churches, and listening to a lot of different preachers and evangelists.

First, consider the magnitude of what is occurring. *Billions of people*. Suppose the world's population was evenly distributed; if you stop in the middle of a town centre and look around, 99% of the people you see are not "saved." These billions of people are going to be sent, for eternity, into hell where they will be tortured (supposedly far worse than something like waterboarding) and burned by Satan and his angels. If you believed this, how is it possible that someone would spend a spend moment not trying to stop this from happening to anyone they come across? Yes, a lot of evangelical Christians do spread this

Good News, but for the majority it would be a minor part of their life. Those that do it more regularly are often, in my experience, pressured (especially among youth) or interested in spiritual rewards.

Again, how can someone who believes this sit and watch a TV show when every minute someone is being sent to an eternal hell. Is it severe indifference? I do not believe so. Like myself, when I earnestly believed in this version of the Good News, I'd argue that deep down they do not actually believe this is happening. As Kierkegaard quipped, the existential shows what you truly believe. When you say you believe something, but in your lifestyle act in a way that does not reflect this, you do not actually believe in its truth. It is entirely possible to believe in something theoretically when you think about it, but in your day-to-day life, when you are interacting with the people around you, not be conscious of this truth, and hence not act in a way that would echo its importance. Can a Christian truly believe in 99% of the world going to a lake of fire, and not spend every waking moment doing their best to make a difference? Considering the utter extremity of the world's horrible destiny, I doubt it.

The Alternative

After all of this, we are back at where we started. What is The Good News? I could spend a long time speaking on the message of Jesus Christ and what it means to us 2000 years later. At this present time, I merely want to speak on a few aspects of this alternative Good News and how it compares with the modern way of seeing it. Hence, do not see this as a summary of existential Christianity (you can find that on the rest of this website), but a fleshing out of certain points.

If you were to summarise the modern Good News into one line, it would be something like "salvation from eternal damnation and separation from God." In comparison, the alternative's one line summary would be "a path to follow." From the outset the distinction becomes clear; the former states that to be eternally secure you must say the sinner's prayer, accept the central tenets of Christianity, ask Jesus into your heart, and so on. With the alternative, a person's redemption with God is a journey, a continual process that changes a person from a self-centred way of being into a new man or woman. This journey is not becoming a 'better Christian' and all the responsibilities that entails, but rather a striving to intimate Christ and his way of being.

Some might say "if it is a journey, how do you know if you're saved or not? Or if you're into the journey enough to get into heaven?" Indeed, anything that is not a one-time thing for most Christians is seen as a works-based theology, where you continually work to gain favour from God. Instead, this alternative abandons both positions. It espouses a

Christianity that does not speak on the future destiny of our soul, but rather its present condition. Its first characterising feature is that it does not deny the afterlife, but rather remove its priority position it currently has in the relation between God and man.

The second characterising feature is that it also ascribes a sickness in humanity that needs to be healed, but it is wholly related to the present. The sickness is a combination of personal sin that needs to be forgiven, meaninglessness that needs to be cleansed, and the development of selfishness (through our socialization into culture) that needs to be annulled. Christ's message to humanity is that our sin can be forgiven, the meaninglessness can be cleansed, and we are capable of becoming compassionate human beings that forgive and love unconditionally. If we have the ears to hear, and strive to follow his teaching, we are part of the family of God. Very simply, if we forgive others, God will forgive us.¹ If we clothe, feed, and care for the least in our society, God will clothe, feed, and take care of us in this life and the next.²

The third characterising feature is that it is good news indeed! Christ's salvation message is a positive freedom, meaning that it gives us freedom *to do* something. It allows us to live a meaningful life of existential authenticity. It allows us to change our way of being-in-the-world, and to ultimately strive towards total selflessness, where we show Christ-like love to all people. It allows us to free our hearts from the captivity of greed, lust, anger, anxiety, and servitude to the petty machinations of every day existence.

By Timothy Neal

¹ Matthew 6:14

² Matthew 25:31-46