

## **A Search for a More Loving, Kinder God: Response to Paul Miller's Article**

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### *Bio*

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### **A Search for a More Loving, Kinder God**

#### **Introduction**

I agree with John Stott<sup>1</sup> that the New Testament is quite silent about the fate of those who enter into eternity without having heard about Jesus - although Peter does say in 1 Peter 3:18-20, that Christ died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, and that in the Spirit he, Jesus, went and preached to the spirits who were in prison, those spirits who disobeyed long ago. Grace beyond the grave and an activity of the Spirit of God. There is no further comment. This is not something on which to build a doctrine or a mission strategy, but an indicator that God may have demonstrated grace, or could still do so.

Paul Miller's concern in "Saving Salvation," however, is clearly because there are, as he has indicated, those whose communication seems to pronounce that they know for sure, leading to the categorization of "inclusivists" and "pluralists."

Having read a considerable amount of Rob Bell's literature, I think he was definitely on a journey to find, as I have been, a *more loving, kinder God*, than the one who seems to be locked into a *propitiation, judgment settlement, sin-focused* priority for the purpose of the Incarnation. Are we missing something?

Some thirteen years ago I commenced a conversation enquiring into all that was happening with the life, death, resurrection, ascension and seating of Jesus at the right hand of authority, and the chat is still on-going.

#### **The Purpose of the Incarnation Beyond the Resurrection**

In the above conversation, one of the first questions to emerge was, "What was the purpose of the Incarnation beyond the resurrection?"

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<sup>1</sup> David Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 327.

A friend asked this question of his New Testament professor at a well-known evangelical college. The quick answer was, "I have never thought about it!"

In my personal journey of discovery, most of the literature I have read on the Atonement seems locked into the same system of thinking, a system increasingly closed to other ideas since the Reformation's great debates hailing a personal faith in Christ's finished work rather than the intervention of the institutional Church as a basis for justification and salvation. My point is that this debate centered the focus on the cross.

Centuries earlier Constantine had certainly established the cross as the center of his vision - for all the wrong reasons. "*In this sign, conquer.*" But the cross has become the un-adjustable center of Christian thought and human history and, therefore, the Incarnation has been reduced to one priority only - the cross.

Now, it must be said, this paper is not meant to suggest that the cross of Christ is unimportant. My contention in this brief response to Miller is simply that in our focus on the cross we have overlooked and under-emphasized a greater purpose behind the Incarnation, a purpose to which the cross in all the weight of its significance is a means, rather than an end in itself.

I do believe in Providence and, interestingly, I was handed two books in the same week that I was given Miller's article with the suggestion I write a response: Scot McKnight's *The King Jesus Gospel*<sup>2</sup>, and Gary Stephens' and Carmen Radley's *Waiting For A Father*<sup>3</sup>.

McKnight's book speaks to a concern I have with Miller's focus on salvation as a central motivation for mission. McKnight asks the question, "What is the Gospel?" and answers by proposing that the Gospel is nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. He talks of "Gospel culture" contrasted to "salvation culture"; that salvation culture reduces the Gospel to a methodology leading people through consecutive steps to acknowledge:

- a) they are sinners,
- b) Jesus died for their sin, and
- c) in accepting these truths they have escaped hell and have a pass to heaven.

I have used that method enough times to know that for some it can be a defining moment in their lives, evidencing a passage from death to life. The key ingredient however, is in that simplicity, there was a mystery provided by the Spirit of God that launched some into a relationship with Jesus.

Without specifically stating it, McKnight suggests in his book that "salvation is a relationship with Jesus." McKnight draws attention to George Barna's research<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Stephens and Carmen Radley, *Waiting for a Father: Hearing the Heart-Cry of the Orphans of the World* (Sisters, OR: Deep River Books, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> McKnight, 19-20.

showing that large numbers of young people embrace the three steps but eventually fall away from any acknowledgement of a connection to Jesus.

I agree with Miller that the world needs to know, and that every generation needs to know – but know what? The truth is, it is not a “*what*” they need to know, but a “*Who*,” in contrast to the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s unfortunate choice of words where in question number four it asks, “What is God?”<sup>5</sup> As a foundational document of theological enquiry that postures as biblical, it is a sad question. We would all be locked into theological darkness if Jesus had not come on the scene. John 1:18 clearly affirms that no one has seen God but the one and only who has come from God. It was essential for Jesus to come to lift us out of the centuries of influence of Greek philosophy with endless enquiry into “what is God.”

Sadly McKnight, after much effort to affirm the importance of encountering Jesus, seems to be limited in his proposal as to the *priority* of Jesus’ coming to this planet.

All over the planet I have asked the question of the purpose of the Incarnation beyond the resurrection, with the majority of people answering, “Plan B.” Plan B means that, because Adam sinned, Jesus had to come to earth to fix the problem and, after fixing the problem - primarily by dying on a cross - ended his responsibilities. The Father then raised him from the dead to demonstrate that the problem had indeed been fixed.

This may be a simplistic explanation of Plan B; a more complete explanation can be gained by reading Arius’ thesis presented to the Council gathered at Nicea in 325 AD.<sup>6</sup> Arius proposed that Jesus was not God and was created by God for the specific purpose of being the substituted Lamb of God for all people, his reason for being created fulfilled by his death on the cross. Athanasius’ defense of the deity of Christ won acceptance at the time but was not fully embraced, without some adjustment, until 381 AD, at the Council of Constantinople.

Simply reducing the Good News to “Jesus died for my sins” is in my opinion akin to Arianism. Even if one acknowledges that Jesus is God – reducing his purpose for coming to earth to one activity (even though very significant and profoundly important), it fails to adequately represent the Good News of “how good it is!” Yet, this commitment to be a sacrificial lamb was fully embraced before Adam was created (1 Pet 1:18-20; Rev 13:8).

The Apostle Paul, however, reveals in Ephesians 1 (especially 5-9), that the eternal purpose of God in creating human beings was that we would be able to live “face to face” with Them. I say *Them* this once, rather than *Him*, as I believe that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living in an eternal relationship of mutual love and respect in which exist tender love and affection from eternity past. This was all

<sup>5</sup> See for example <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php> 1/ShorterCatechismwithScriptureProofs.pdf.

<sup>6</sup> The doctrine of Arius and the controversy surrounding it, addressed at the Council of Nicea, comes to us principally through the writing of Eusebius. An online version of Eusebius’ famous Church History is available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.toc.html>.

that was before creation, and everything now existing has come forth from that relationship.

Human beings were designed and created to be real participants and genuine players in this eternally existing relationship that is deeply empowered through an inner-penetrational mutual sharing of life energized by love.

For human beings to participate, they would have to be designed to be lovers. Jesus obviously thought this possible from his statement in Matthew 22:40 that all of Scripture was summarized in loving God and loving one's neighbour. Now, love is not possible except in an environment of freedom and volunteerism. It is possible to be made to submit to any request given enough pain and disempowerment – but love can never exist unless it is free and voluntary.

God either planned for us to sin or he designed us to be lovers. To be lovers has the reality of risk. As the Apostle Paul exhorts in Galatians, "Do not use your freedom for an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (Gal 5:13, RSV). God understood the risk and the consequences thereof should humans prefer to sever relationship with him. This is the *great problem*. Thus, there is a need to *problem solve*: a commitment made before creating the risk.

But solving the problem was not the main purpose for the Incarnation. Athanasius proposes that Adam, even though our progenitor and who had some interface with God, was not capable even in his unfallen state of being able to *divinize* us. *Divinize* is an interesting term meaning "able to empower us to become sons of God."<sup>7</sup> born not of the will of man, but from above from God (John 1:13). Before he created human beings, God had already chosen that in Christ we would be brought face to face with him, having been made holy and blameless (Eph 1).

### **Katenopion – Before Him – Face-To-Face**

In the South Pacific, the Maori people of New Zealand have a ceremony called the *powhiri* that is a process of welcoming people.<sup>8</sup> An important element of the ceremony is when, after the initial protocol is completed, the act of receiving and welcome is settled through the *hongiri* – a face-to-face encounter involving the sharing of breath. This tradition is related in some tribal groupings within the Maori to the creating of the first woman, *Hineahuone*, by the god, *Tane* - a life transfer through the breathing of breath.<sup>9</sup> It is reflected in the Maori Scripture in Genesis 2:7 in the account of the creation of Adam. If the translators of the Maori Bible had really wanted to convey the importance of Ephesians 1:3-4, they could appropriately have done so as well by saying, "God has *hongiri-ed* you in Christ Jesus." God has brought you and received you face-to-face in Christ Jesus. Paul's phrase *en Kristus* is an often-used paradigm to explain the amazing mystery of how God has accomplished this for the whole of the human race. The question is, "How do we encounter this amazing privilege?"

<sup>7</sup> This concept of divinizing, or deification, was significantly developed by the Eastern Church Fathers but largely ignored in Western theological development.

<sup>8</sup> The overview of the *powhiri* (Maori welcome ceremony) is accessible on-line at <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/maori-manners-and-social-behaviour-nga-mahi-tika/page-1>

<sup>9</sup> T.R. Hiroa, *The Coming of the Maori* (Wellington, NZ: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1970).

## The Spirit of Adoption

In *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer talks about two provisions highlighted in the New Testament: “The Great Blessing” and “The Great Privilege”.<sup>10</sup> The Great Blessing is summed up in the work of God to solve the problem, all of which is done through the cross. The second (and by no means least) is in fact the real purpose of the Incarnation: adoption.

Paul continues in Ephesians 1:4-5 to say *en agape*, in love, God predestined that we should receive the Spirit of adoption through which we cry, “Abba Father” (Rom 8:15). Packer finishes his comment on adoption by saying that, “the Spirit of God comes to us first as a Spirit of adoption.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus came to the planet to reveal to us what God is like. He enters into our darkness through the cross, overcoming death, sin and the devil, and undoing all that Adam brought upon us. The Father raised him from the dead to settle the victory and preserve his humanity.

As the first eternally resurrected human being, the Son of Adam and the Eternal Word, Jesus ascends to be face-to-face with the Father and the Spirit. The first human being to enter into that reality and, as such, he sits down on the throne of all authority. Now, from that position, having obtained all blessing through his obedience in life, death, resurrection, ascension and sitting, he now sends forth the Spirit filled with all that life, provision and power, to be poured out as the Spirit of adoption on all flesh.

Now Paul cries out, “You have been accepted in the Beloved.”<sup>12</sup> It may have taken 14 years before he could first assimilate this truth into his own belief system. Before his missionary journeys, however, as the Osama bin Laden of the First Century AD, he considered himself the worst of sinners. Now he is embraced, an amazing truth demonstrated by Ananias who comes greeting him as “Brother Saul” in Acts 9:17.

Jesus, the Human Being, on the throne of God, has now opened the door to the whole of humanity to be co-heirs with him (Rom 8:17). This was always the driving passion behind the Incarnation - which took place in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4).

As Paul says, not only did the Godhead long for this moment, but, “all creation is still groaning” for the full manifestation of this divine desire (Rom 8:19-22, CEV).

Why is that adoption rarely spoken of as the great motivating passion for mission? Packer called the dilemma, *The Great Secret*. At the time of his first publishing *Knowing God* in the 1970s, Packer lamented that “apart from two Nineteenth-Century books now scarcely known . . . there is no evangelical writing on

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<sup>10</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> My paraphrase of Ephesians 1:6.

it, nor has there been at any time since the Reformation any more than there was before.”<sup>13</sup>

Other views of the purpose for the Incarnation have overshadowed the priority of adoption. It took me 32 years as a missionary in Youth With A Mission to come face to face with the *High Privilege of Adoption*. I had spoken on the Father Heart of God on every continent but, as I see now, I did not have an adequate theological foundation for that message because of a limited view of Jesus.

He is the Good News – he was always coming to open the door as a human being for all of us. It was the driving passion of the Father to include us in the eternal relationship. They have done all that is necessary to make it happen. We are embraced without reservation to be real participants, however the embrace does not destroy our human sovereignty. We must participate to be participants.

The Trinity long for us to embrace their embrace wherein salvation begins for us. The world is filled with beings who are incapable of embracing and that is where we come in as ambassadors of the One who was in Christ on the cross reconciling the world to Themselves and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

A friend has a lovely daughter who, as a child, resisted his demonstrated affection. Following discussion, he and his wife decided to teach the daughter how to respond to affection by having “cuddling” sessions. Now, years later, she is very affectionate. It occurred to me that this was a picture of the world when it comes to responding to the invitation of the Father’s embrace of us in Christ. We have Good News – Father has embraced us in His Son.

Our role is to go into all the world and help them who do not know that firstly the Spirit of adoption surrounds them and, secondly, how to respond.

The tragedy of the human condition and the grace that comes from committed ambassadors is beautifully illustrated in the second book I received: *Waiting For A Father*.<sup>14</sup> The book is testimony to the devastating reality of the abandonment complex in the lives of institutionalized children and the amazing grace required to overcome their deeply-infused sense of rejection. It highlights the fact that Jesus is not just to be told but demonstrated - if necessary, every hour of every day for years and sometimes without even a flicker of encouragement from the recipient.

I honour the concern expressed in Miller’s article that the world should know that salvation is available in Jesus Christ. My intention in this brief response to Miller is to encourage us to look beyond what we normally think of as salvation, the release

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<sup>13</sup> Packer refers to R.S. Candlish, *The Fatherhood of God* and R.A. Webb, *The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947). Robert S. Candlish’s lecture on this subject in Edinburgh in 1864 has been preserved as a book, and is accessible online at <http://www.eswordlibrary.com/category/systematic-theology/theology-proper/god-the-father/>. In response to Candlish, a book by the same name was written by A. Lincoln Shute and is available at [https://archive.org/details/MN40272ucmf\\_9](https://archive.org/details/MN40272ucmf_9).

<sup>14</sup> Gary Stephens and Carmen Radley, *Waiting for a Father: Hearing the Heart-Cry of the Orphans of the World* (Sisters, OR: Deep River Books, 2013).

from hell and a ticket to heaven. God's purpose beyond the Incarnation and the cross is to embrace us in adoption. Jesus is to be encountered in the fullness of his Person and embraced with the full intention to enter in to all that God provides and purposes for his ambassadors.

*He is the whole Good News.*

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