

And Then Comes the End. Is Everybody Saved?

A sermon based on John 14:6.

Well Christ did it. He did it just the way he told us.

But what has happened in the meantime? It says in Genesis 3:1 that the Evil One is more subtle than all creatures. The Evil One loves to entangle us in speculating about the end. The main thing about all such thinking and talking is that it diverts us, side-tracks us from the gospel. We get all involved in that. How clever the Evil One is. We get invested in figuring things out and not the gospel.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has led to existential crises. One way of finding meaning in this time is through apocalyptic narratives. We cope by speculating about final outcomes. Whenever we are involved in speculating, the Evil One is close at hand, diverting us, keeping us away from what it is really about.

You perhaps have heard of Rob Bell. He is a Southern Baptist preacher whom Time magazine once called, “a singular rock star in the church world.” He has a congregation in Southern Michigan of about 10,000. He is an attractive, electrifying speaker. In his best-selling book, “Love Wins,” Bell puts hell on trial, claiming that in the end everybody is saved. A Southern Baptist preacher saying that!

What does Bell say? That salvation is really up to you and me, but finally everyone is an “anonymous” Christian. What has happened is that he has struck a chord in our society about our real religion, the operative religion of our day, what people really think, which is summed up by various phrases: Universalism, relativism, tolerance, multiculturalism. They are all summed up by saying everyone is saved, and isn’t that nice.

What does one say to that? It can be called: Zombie religion. You don’t need to know much. Most people don’t have a clue about other religions. They think everybody believes in the same God. Many think that the Bible, the Koran, and other such religious books are all about the same God. That is not the case. But people don’t want to bother to learn or even think about it because their religion is relativism and universalism. A Barna Research survey has shown that more than half of the people think this way.

There are, however, three huge holes in that way of thinking.

The first big hole is: If everything is true, nothing is true. If you say but this is true, or that is true, the question is: How do you say that is true, because you are no longer saying everything is true, which means you are holding on to some kind of principle.

The second huge hole in that way of thinking is meaning: If everybody is saved, then there is no meaning because all the world’s a stage and good or bad beautiful, individual or plural, God rings down the curtain and says: “Wasn’t that interesting.” As Shakespeare writes in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage. All the men and women are merely players.” If this is the case, then everything that happens is merely theater, meaningless.

The third big hole has to do with justice: If everybody is saved, that means the monsters in history – Mao 120 million murders, Stalin 80 million murders, Hitler 40 million murders, Genghis Khan, at a time when the population was much smaller, 40 million – and then there are all the child murderers, and

serial killers. At the end it is all equal, it doesn't matter. Then what happened to justice? What do we have to say to that?

We have something specific, and it is in John 14, but before we get there, we acknowledge that we cannot argue by throwing around Bible verses. For example, at the end of the great parable of the Last Judgment in Matt 25:46 it reads: "Some will go to eternal punishment and some will go to eternal reward." On the other hand, Paul writes in Romans 5:18: "Then as one man's sin led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men."

What do we Christians do? How do we sort this out? The way to sort this it out is to see again the basic human problem.

As someone has said: "I used to be an atheist until I realized I am God." That's funny. It's also insane. But that's the problem. The problem is that we think we are so smart. We are modern educated people. We think we know how things must be. We think: This is the way God has to be. Then **we** define how God has to be. Like Frank Sinatra, we say: I'll do it my way! I'll define God my way!

Then we come up against the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. But, we rationalize: I'm going to define it. And it's just got to be my way because in my heart I just know.

Over against which the Lord says: I define who I am. And it is put in a neat way by Luther who said: Anything said about God outside of Jesus Christ is of the devil (Smalcald III/8:10, Tappert 313; Kolb/Wengert 323). That is: The Lord defines himself his way. That's how he wants to be defined. That's how he allows himself to be defined. And he also defines us. That is because he is Lord.

This is terribly offensive to us. As in 1 Peter 2:8: "a stumbling block." A scandal. Offensive. Counter-cultural, counter-intuitive. It says in Acts 4:12: "There is no other name by which we may be saved." And in John 14:6: "I am the truth. No one comes to the Father except by me."

That means: Truth is a person. Truth is this particular person. Truth is what this person has done, not something we create about truth. What he has done, which is to die and rise again. That is who God is. That is how God has allowed himself and wants himself to be defined and known.

This is a scandal, offensive, counter-cultural, counter-intuitive. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:17-25:

"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and **the cleverness of the clever** I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

That is who God is. Jesus Christ who died and rose again. And anything else is of the devil. What then do we say about universal salvation, tolerance, and all such?

It comes down to Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

We have **certainty** in the cross and resurrection. Our hope is in Christ and life with him forever. For the rest we live by letting him run the universe. The danger is: But God, you have to do it this way!

No, we live by faith. That's what it means to let him run the universe. On all these speculations about the end times and who is saved, the answer is in Jesus Christ.

As Paul writes in 2 Cor 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him." That then sorts it all out. We live through the cross and resurrection and the promises based on that. And that is all that matters.

Our only task is to let other people know and rejoice in letting him run the universe. Amen