

Objections to the Gospel

By Tim Brassell, © 2007

It only makes sense to see 3 primary objections come up against the 3 Persons Who make up the One and Only Triune God, so let's deal with them over the next three issues of The Adopted Life!!

After many years of preaching the Gospel that begins more faithfully with answering the question "Who is Jesus?" I have noticed that there are three objections that I can count on addressing with people who hear it for the first time. You are sure to have thought about these questions yourself and can anticipate them coming at you in your defense of God's Good News.

The three objections are:

1. Isn't this the heresy of Universalism?
2. Isn't this theology encouraging people to sin?
3. What happened to the hell we know and love?

With regard to answering these questions, you are headed for an abstract, long-winded, perhaps scriptural "fight" if you are not first settled on knowing what it means to answer who Jesus is! If we take John 1, Col 1, and Hebrews 1 as basic scriptures on Who Jesus is, we will see that Jesus is the Word. As the Word, Jesus IS God and Jesus is WITH God.

We also note that Jesus created everything AND Jesus sustains everything. It is also important to see that Jesus is at one and the same time 100% God and 100% Man. In other words, Jesus is actually the Son of God as Man. Though Jesus is not a number or equation, this would be the "basic math" of understanding Who Jesus is in relation to the Godhead and Creation.

Isn't this the heresy of Universalism?

When people ask about Universalism, their fear is that we are saying people have no free-will and are forced to embrace God, and that even people who oppose and reject God (including the Devil) will absolutely change their minds and fully embrace God.

Here are my basic thoughts and response to the objection of Universalism, being more faithful to Who Jesus is:

In our understanding of Jesus and His relationship with the Father in the Communion of the Spirit, Christians hold fast to the belief that God is One God in Union WITHOUT a loss of Distinction. Christians also do not believe that God creates in opposition to how God is as Father, Son and Spirit. In Jesus we see that the nature of God is union with distinction, and through our connection with Jesus, so are we and all things. Because we are created and sustained by God in Jesus, we are also in permanent union with God in Him. Colossians 1:19 tells us that Jesus is the fullness of God "housed permanently" in flesh.

The word "dwell" in Greek means "to house permanently" For the same reason, we are

also distinct, with a freedom to believe and embrace God or freedom to reject and oppose God. Whenever we uphold a theology that does not hold both of those thoughts together as one whole, we are not being faithful to the Truth revealed in Jesus.

So, we cannot possibly be preaching universalism or something that denies human distinction and our ability to participate in the life of God willingly! We believe and preach through this theology that we are distinct creatures in our union with God, which leaves open our ability to reject and oppose God, potentially forever!!

However, we must also preach, just as strongly, our objective inclusion in the life of God even though that union can be opposed, and this is where people get confused. Since our human life flows from and is included in the Life of God in Jesus, we can use some really easy and down-to-earth illustrations that will help us learn to hold both ideas together as one piece.

Which one of you ever asked your parents if you could be born BEFORE you were born? That's a silly question, isn't it? But it is a helpful question, because we see that the nature of life is to come into being, in a family of Persons, BEFORE we can do or say anything, let alone believe and have faith, right?! Grasping this simple idea can help us understand how being born is an act of grace that brings us into a relationship of persons with unity AND distinction.

The unity could be seen if we went and got a DNA test along with our parents (even though we might not look anything much like our parents and they wanted to deny us because of our "bad looks"☺) The distinction is proven by the fact that we are unique individuals who, in this case, don't even look much like our parents.

Notice that the child is in union with the family in distinction, and even though the family could deny the child in their distinction, and the child could deny the family in its distinction, a DNA test would prove their union as persons in and of the same family. Notice also that the only way that distinction can take place is right smack dab in the middle of union and inclusion in the family!

This is what is going on in the Gospel (Jesus!) We have no choice about being born and included in the Life of God in Jesus, just as we had no choice about being born as a human in our families. We are created and sustained by Jesus and there is no life apart from him! Whatever happens to him happens to everything he created and sustains.

However, our distinction is not violated because we can still oppose and reject or deny Him in our family membership, but it won't mean we are not family, it will only mean, and can only mean, a violation of relationship within the family!

One final thing: even though Christianity does not promote universalism, nor can it be dogmatic about it, it must be admitted that the possibility of universalism does exist as long as we believe that union with distinction is the nature of things, and that all things will exist forever in Christ who reconciled ALL things to God in his fleshly body (Col 1:19-22).

Who knows what can be pulled off with the Triune God who is at the center of all things in His Relationship with all things in Jesus?! Therefore, we do not, as Christians, have to

fight so harshly those people who believe in universalism! Sometimes it seems they are the only ones who actually have the Universalist hope! We must oppose the dogmatism of universalism but, on the other hand, we should possess the same Universalist hope that Universalists have, and be “hopeful Universalists” ourselves. After all, God is:

1 Timothy 2:3-4 “This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NRSV)

Notice that God’s desire is NOT that all “GET” saved but that all “BE” saved (be who they already are in Jesus), and come to the knowledge of the truth (come to know that which is already true, NOT make it come true!)

I don’t know about you, but I sure hope that we Christians will start participating more in this universalist hope that Jesus shares with us in grace and love in our adopted life, and hold up a God we can’t domesticate rather than a God we have “tamed”!!

Isn’t this theology encouraging people to sin?

When people ask this question, their fear is that we are actually promoting immorality and encouraging people to just go out and steal, fornicate, kill and get drunk.

After all, isn’t saying that “everyone is still included” saying that there is no real harm done in the end, and all will be well. They then point to the various and OBVIOUS sins mentioned and condemned in scripture, hence the fight they put up against a theology of Inclusion in Christ.

So, how do we respond to this very passionate and real objection in the Light of Christ? Here are my basic thoughts in that Light!

I am learning that the first thing to do is to recognize that there is no real light on a subject without the Light of the Person of Jesus Christ! If I truly want to understand what sin is, then I have to know Who Jesus is. If we begin defining things too soon, and without that Christ-centered foundation, we are destined for a very darkened take on the subject matter at hand. Regarding this subject, I also find a quote by Henry David Thoreau helpful. He said *“For every thousand backing at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root.”*

Our strong and sinful temptation is usually to begin arguing among the “leaves” on the subject of sin and start fighting about what is and is not a sin and, of course, fighting with scriptures. We’ve heard of people saying something like, “I may have murdered my brother but God knows that wasn’t really in my heart!”, or “that ‘sin’ is not even mentioned in the bible, so I don’t think it really is a sin, plus, God knows what is in my heart!” And off we go into abstract arguments and definitions of what REALLY constitutes a sin or not!

I am sure you can identify with some of this type of conversation. It seems that in our desire to get comfort from God “knowing our heart” we easily dismiss the other scriptures that state how wicked God knows our heart to be, and how little we do know of it! (Jer 17:9, John 2:23-25)

Let’s strike at the root of this issue, and get more practical and concrete! The Gospel is the Person of Jesus Himself. In His Person we Christians believe that Jesus is really the Son

of God as Man (John 1:49-51), and the One in, and through, and By, and For Whom all things are created and sustained (Colossians 1:15-18).

We believe that when He died, all of creation somehow mysteriously died (2 Cor 5:14), and that when He rose, creation rose and ascended into the very life and being of the Triune God in Him (2 Cor 5:15, Eph 2:4-7). As the One in Whom all things are created and sustained, this is the Reality and fundamental Truth regarding all things in creation! If we don't think this way, we are not thinking in a Christian way, nor are we thinking properly, biblically speaking.

Therefore, no matter how much we argue about what constitutes the various transgressions and sins we commit, there is a statement about all things that we must pay attention to in the Person of Jesus. In Him is the Truth about where and what all things REALLY and Truly are RIGHT NOW (John 14:6); reconciled and redeemed in Him, with our transgressions absolutely NOT being counted against us by God no matter how wrong they actually are (2 Cor 5: 18-19)!

This is not a Truth saying that harming our neighbor or ourselves is right, because it is wrong (the Godhead do not harm Themselves!) But it is a Truth that says that sin isn't so harmful that it could keep Jesus from reconciling us, redeeming us, and including us in His actual relationship with his Father in the Spirit! Encouragingly, it says that God loves and likes us so much, he came into darkness and sinful flesh to get us, and nothing, not even our sin was going to keep us from being adopted into His family relationship (2 Cor 5:21)!!

Wow! All of our talk about God not being able to get near sin is a lie! He actually used it as the means by which he would unite us to Himself in an even stronger way!

Yes, this kind of talk, humanly, ticks us all off Matt 20:1-16 (we would be liars to say otherwise!) Somehow in our minds we actually convince ourselves that we really "know" our heart and actions to be better than someone else's, and "by God, those others are worse than me and don't deserve to be where I am at or go where I am going!!" (I want to preach Jesus' grace strong right now, but must restrain myself and stay on the subject at hand ☺)

In the grace of God I say, "go ahead, be ticked!", but don't believe for one second that God puts a thermometer in your mouth to check his own temperature, because he doesn't!! ☺ Enough said "You 'sinner/saint' you" (and me too!) ☺

Let's clarify all of this as it pertains to the question of our 2nd objection. If we truly believe and preach that Jesus is God's Good News and that we are included in God's relationship in Him (and we do), then the first thing we must say about sin is that it has something more to do with that Truth than about our moral actions against ourselves and one another. **Do you see that?!**

If our inclusion is good (and it is!), and sins are bad (and they are!), then bad is defined in the Light of Jesus as something opposite or contrary to the Truth (Jesus!). This means that, fundamentally, sin is first and foremost our opposing the truth of our inclusion in God's Relationship, in Jesus!!!

ARE YOU OPPOSING THIS TRUTH OF CREATION'S INCLUSION?! Jesus

actually said that the Holy Spirit was coming to prove us wrong about sin because we don't believe in Him (John 16:7-9!) If we have ears to hear, Jesus is saying that part of sin's devastating problem is that it gives us a sinful view about sin!!!

So, the next question becomes, since we are included in God's family in Jesus, then why do we still do harm to one another, and why does scripture encourage us to avoid moral sins and transgressions like the plague (see 1 Thess. 5)? Well, first, let's be real honest! None of us actually does avoid sin like the plague, no matter how "Christian" we are, now do we? Just the opposite, in fact (Rom 7:7-12)!

Most Christians believe in the sins of commission and omission, and we aren't always sure what those are, are we? Well, rather than heading in an abstract manner to try to sort it all out, God has given us the simplicity of Christ in the Gospel. The basic reason we all commit transgressions and sins, even though we are saved in Jesus is because we really and truly do not believe the Gospel!! Soberly, but seriously, this is true!! (Mark 9:24)

If you really believed that God has fully included you in His Provision, would you try to find your life in stealing? If you really believed you were included in God's life and blessed with all spiritual blessings in Jesus, would you try to find life in fornication or adultery? If you were fully assured about your inclusion in Christ, would you try to find life by killing others in jealousy and envy? I think you see the point! These acts we call sin and transgressions actually point to a deeper problem and root of life.

When we do not believe the Good News of our inclusion, we are sinning and we begin to transgress in a variety of ways to try and find the Life that we already have in Jesus! Sin is about blindness and not seeing Jesus and ourselves properly. When we transgress there, we start trying to find life in our own way and begin "hiding in the bushes" (of drugs and alcohol perhaps) in order to dull the inevitable pain that follows unbelief and believing improperly that God's mind about us has changed (Gen 3:1-13!!)

This is why Paul always begins with the Gospel in his epistles (Eph 1) and then discusses the practical outworking of it (Eph 4). When Paul speaks for or against good works, he is describing (not prescribing), the natural result of believing God's Good News, or the disaster of not believing it. When we believe the truth of who we are in Jesus (included), sins begin to fall off our backs like water off a duck's back (how can they not – we are trusting Jesus with our lives and do not have to try to get or sustain life for ourselves!)

When we don't believe who we are in Jesus, sins begin to creep up faster than we can keep up, and before you know it our tongues are hanging out in despair! We then start running on the hamster's wheel of futility trying to overtake our increasing poor performance (Gal 3:10-12), OR, we climb off the wheel admitting defeat and try to numb the inevitable pain with whatever little pleasures we can temporarily scrape up (Heb 11:24-25)! **Do you see that?!**

So, are we encouraging people to sin when we unhesitatingly proclaim their inclusion in Christ? Absolutely not! Just the opposite! We are encouraging them to TRULY stop sinning and to trust Jesus for their hidden life in God, in Him (Col 3:1-4!) They are INCLUDED! If we reverse this, and put more emphasis on their need to be holy and overcome their sins and

immorality in order to be included, we are actually encouraging them to trust in themselves and they will engage in bad practices even more trying to “get and stay right” (Romans 7:5-6)! They will inevitably get on the hamsters wheel of hopelessness or get off and “hide in the bushes”, either way, their trust will not be in Jesus and their already inclusion!

I believe we are encouraged to toil and struggle in mainly one area of life: “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the Living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe!” – I Tim 4:10b NRSV

What happened to the Hell we know and love?

When people ask this question their fear is that we are completely doing away with and ignoring the “clear” and obvious biblical teaching of the suffering for those who reject and do not accept, trust or believe in Jesus. In their minds someone is definitely going to hell if they have to send them there themselves!

Pardon my humor and sarcasm, but I have to honestly admit as a Gospel preacher that, to date, when I preach, unhedgingly, the Gospel of Creation’s Inclusion in the Life of God in Jesus MANY Christians cry aloud about the subject of “Hell”. But whenever I emphasized the teaching of hell in the past, not one Christian (in my experience) cried out for more of Jesus and grace! You have to admit that sometimes we Christians do sound a little more enthusiastic and certain about the subject of hell than we do about Jesus and heaven, and that is truly SAD!! What does that reveal about our “Good News”?

But, in keeping with the intent of this article, how do we respond to this very passionate and real objection in the Light of Christ? Here are my basic thoughts in that Light!

If you have been reading these issues of *The Adopted Life*, and paying much attention, you probably know what I am going to do, and what I am NOT going to do in approaching this subject. Negatively, I am not going to gather all the scriptures I can find on hell with a word study bible and try to build a doctrine from that. Positively, and again, I am learning that the first thing to do is to recognize that there is only real light on a subject in the Light of the Person of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World! (John 8:12) If I truly want to understand what hell is, then I have to know Who Jesus is. If we begin defining hell too soon, and without that Christ-centered foundation, we are destined for another shady take on this important biblical subject. Please NOTICE that I consider this to be a biblical subject AND important to understand, so hopefully that answers the question as to whether I or anyone else affiliated with this newsletter actually believes in the experience of hell! We definitely DO!!

Let’s get to the root of this subject, and get very practical and concrete! Starting with Jesus, we understand that The Good News is actually the Person of Jesus Christ Himself (Mark 1:1, Matt 1:21-23). In His Person we Christians believe that Jesus is really the Son of God as Man (John 1:49-51), and the One in, and through, and by, and for Whom all things are created and sustained (Colossians 1:15-18). We believe that when He died, all of creation somehow mysteriously died (2 Cor 5:14), and that when He rose, creation rose and ascended into the very life and being of the Triune God in Him (2 Cor 5:15, Eph 2:4-7). As the One in

Whom all things are created AND sustained, this is the Reality and fundamental Truth regarding all things in creation! If we don't think this way, we are not thinking in a Christian way, nor are we thinking properly, biblically speaking. It is in failing to understand and hold on to this permanent connection that creation has with God in Jesus that usually leads to our misunderstandings and misinterpretations about the Gospel and other doctrines. Because Jesus SUSTAINS and not only created everything, we should NOT, as Christians, be able to picture something happening to Him that does not in fact happen to everything that is connected with Him - which is simply, EVERYTHING!

As an aside, in theological language, this is what is known as "ontology" or the subject of "being" and how we "know" who we are. In simpler language, Creation and Humanity IS what it is in Jesus Christ because we are forever and ontologically connected to Him in the creation and sustenance of our beings!!! This is why Paul makes statements about our being blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:3, 20-21, 2:4-7.) At this point, most Christians are tempted to run headlong into the exclusivity of believers when they read these kinds of scriptures rather than holding on firmly to the fundamental Truth of Christianity that Jesus actually created and maintains EVERYTHING (John 1:1-5, Acts 17:28, Col 1, Heb 1:1-3 etc!!!)

Therefore, in plain language, no matter how much we argue about what hell is, and how separated it supposedly is from God, there is a statement about hell and all things that we must pay attention to in the Person of Jesus!! In Jesus is the Truth about where and what hell and all things REALLY are – something IN and NEAR the Triune God (Psalm 139, Heb 13:6!!) Triune God dwells with us IN our darkness and blindness, and there truly is no getting away from Him!! More encouragingly, the Gospel says that God loves and likes us so much, he not only came into darkness and sinful flesh to get us, but that nothing, not even hell and sin was/is going to keep us from being adopted into His intimate family relationship (2 Cor 5:21)!! Wow! All of our talk about God being only in Heaven and the Devil and evil people only in hell needs to be challenged and re-examined to say the least!! These negatives have NOT prevented God from being near us! In fact, God has actually used our rejection and opposition to Him as the means by which he has united Himself to us in an even stronger way in Jesus Christ! Good Gravy – I want to shout about now (and just let out an audible Woo-Hoo!!!)

Let's now clarify and summarize our thoughts as they pertain to the question of our 3rd objection.

Let's start with a vivid mental picture. What would you call being forced to live in marriage with the person you hated most – forever??? You are exactly right – Hell!!!! What would you call being "tortured" by your "worst enemy", and being unable to get away or die??? Right again – Hell!! I think I see the lights coming on!

Because the Gospel shows us that creation and humanity are so permanently united in and with Triune God in Jesus Christ, there HAS to be a way of describing our DISTINCT ability to reject and oppose our union!! Remember, we are not "robots", but made in the image of God and distinct in our union with Him. Our union with God in Christ creates the necessity of speaking about the experience and absolute pain and "gnashing of teeth" that

follows our violation of that Reality!! The union is good and real and, therefore, so MUST be the negative and unreal experience of trying to poison the union!!!

Many of you have experienced this kind of thing with your teenage or adopted children, or in your teenage years and adoption! You are truly, relationally, and even legally a member of the family, but when mom and dad tick you off, the last thing you want to do is be near and intimate with them! And when they try to talk, hug and love on you while you are angry at them, it makes you want to run into your room (usually inside the house) and slam the door in their face, while you “gnash your teeth” behind the door!!

Nothing has REALLY changed in your DNA or legal papers, but something sure has changed in the quality of the relationship, hasn't it?! Something sure has changed in the closeness you once experienced, and there is a growing “distance” in this violation of union and relationship, right?! But it also must be admitted that all the distance in the world, even your running all the way ‘round the world doesn't change your being your parents child! In fact, the ONLY reason you would both be able to experience the wrath, anger, pain, loneliness, darkness and distance to follow is because you are so in union that you are always on each others minds!! You would have to work endlessly hard to push the inevitable pain of this violation of family out of your mind (and you could get callous and adapt) but think of the type of personhood you would have to experience to try and hide that much relational poison INSIDE your gut!!! Yikes! You can begin to see the horrors of hell and the biblical warning to “Repent, and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15!!!)

This is NOT hard to understand, is it? Of course it isn't! We all see it played out all of the time, and it is as tragic and frightening now, as ever it will be, if we keep choosing to engage in the “impossible possibility” as theologian Karl Barth calls it! The violent and unnatural twisting of my arm creates pain because it IS in union with my body, not because it isn't!! If I didn't have any arms attached to my person, it wouldn't hurt me if you twisted them! If you weren't in union with God in Jesus, there wouldn't be a chance in hell of your experiencing it!!!

As I conclude, let me make one final point. A lot of our questions on the subject of hell boil down to “where is hell going to be?”, “are you saying I will be living face-to face with people who oppose God and have to deal with their negativity all the time?”, etc. I am purposefully NOT answering such questions because they are left unanswerable in the Person of Jesus and the bible to a great degree. The bible seems to affirm a “distance” as it were between people who live in harmony with their union and people who do not live in harmony with their union with God in Jesus, but this is easy to relate to as noted in the story of the angry teenager above. The teenager (and self-righteous brother in the story of The Sprinting Father – Luke 15:11-32) simply don't want to be at the “family party” when they are angry, and they lock themselves in their room or run away, or stay out in the yard. The bible indicates that, regardless, God won't let the violators ruin the party (Matt 22:1-14!), just as you won't let the angry son or daughter IN YOUR FAMILY go kill your other children in their angst if you can at all help it (though your love and DNA remain the same and your aim isn't to now kill the violating child and see them permanently dead!!!)

Finally, the truth of the Gospel is NOT that we are all outside of God trying to get in.

The staggering Truth of the Gospel is that we are all inside of the Triune God in Jesus and, insanely (at the provocation and urging of the Evil one), trying to get out!!! This, impossible, “trying to get out” of our union, wittingly and unwittingly, creates the most profound kind of pain, and terms like “endless burning trash”, “darkness”, “gnashing of teeth”, “worms that don’t die” and being “bound” are sobering and not too exaggerant ways of describing the horrible experience we call in one word – “Hell”!!!

You can avoid the experience of hell like the plague, right now, by trusting that in Jesus you have already been delivered from it and, in Him, been raised up into the Life He shares with the Father in the Spirit - BECAUSE IN HIM YOU ALREADY AND TRULY HAVE!!! It is impossible for you to be where Jesus is not, so repent (have a radical mind change) and believe the Good News!!!