

# Who's Afraid of the Schizophrenic God?

By Neil Earle

Imagine a courtroom scene. It's you who are convicted, facing charges. Problem is, you know you are guilty. But as you walk in, you notice the judge gives you a reassuring nod of recognition, as if he had known you all your life.

He summons you to the bench. "Don't worry about a thing," he tells you with a warm fatherly smile. "I know all about this case. In fact, I'm going to be your defense attorney." The late theologian Shirley C. Guthrie would explain that this is the way we should picture what the Bible calls the Judgment. "Must we talk about the wrath of God?" Guthrie asked. "Yes," he answers. "But God's wrath is not like that of the gods. It is the wrath of the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self" (*Christian Doctrine*, pages 261-262).

Through Jesus Christ, the disconnect between the world and God has been removed once and for all.



## Theological strait-jackets

Unfortunately, instead of allowing Jesus' love, compassion and kindness to shape their understanding of God, many Christians gravitate toward what we might call a "forensic" model of salvation. The word "forensic" seems like a penal or legal term, which it is. This forensic model sees God the Father as stern and vengeful, a frightening God from whom we need Jesus to save us. It assumes that the starting place for

understanding God is not Jesus Christ, but "the law," by which is meant the Old Testament legal system. This model sees the law as so important that even God is subject to it. Since God is concerned first about the penalty demands of his law and only secondly about the well-being of humans, he will punish them for lawbreaking in the same way that the State and human courts and legal systems do—through a straightforward proving of guilt followed by a guilty verdict.

Front and center in the forensic model is God's anger against sinning humanity. God is offended, and someone must pay. Jesus steps forward and takes the full force of God's wrath against human sin. That means we have had our penalty paid for us, but it does nothing for a restored relationship of love and trust. This "offended deity" picture forgets that first and foremost, God is love (1 John 4:16), that God is joyously working to bring "many sons to glory," and that our salvation was in his mind "before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8, King James Version).

This forensic model also forgets something even more basic—that Jesus Christ and the Father along with the Holy Spirit are the three Persons of the one God, and that the Son or Word made Incarnate in Jesus was the perfect revelation of the Father in human form. The Father is not some angry, vengeful deity that we need protection from; he is just like Jesus. Jesus, remember, is "the exact representation" of the being of God (Hebrews 1:3). The Father is full of compassion and mercy, a God who "desires mercy and not sacrifice," just like Jesus. Jesus is the starting place for understanding God; the law is not.

God is not schizophrenic. He does not have a split personality. There is not one "good God," Jesus, and one "bad God," the Father. There is one God—Father, Son and Spirit—who loves us unconditionally and has in Jesus made full provision not only for our sins to be forgiven and removed, but also for our full inclusion in the love relationship that the Son has shared with the Father from eternity.

## Adoption

God is not in the business of training obedient

## The Sword

By Joyce Catherwood

**Luke 2:25-39; 4:16-30; 8:19**

**Mark 3:20-21; 31-35; 15:42-47**

valets, but in building a family. The apostle Paul used the word “adoption” in describing the kind of relationship that God has created for humanity in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5). Through the Incarnation of the Son—by Jesus becoming one of us and taking up our cause as his own—God has drawn us into and made us part of the intimate relationship that Jesus has with the Father.

We see the power of this intimate love that God has for humanity in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The repentant son is welcomed home by the Father and restored to full rights of sonship (Luke 15:11-24). This depicts the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). The death of Christ was not a vindictive act of divine child abuse, as some hostile critics of Christianity have charged. It was a divine rescue springing from God’s love for us (John 3:16), an intervention designed to restore a purpose of which we were oblivious in our ignorance and darkness (verses 19-20).

Set against this majestic purpose, God’s wrath can be seen for what it is—his anger—not at the humanity he sent Jesus to save, but at sin, that which destroys the relationship he has always intended for us in Christ. God is not some resentful, selfish parent in an emotional stew because we have not played by his rules. God is Father, Son and Spirit, loving, faithful and unconditionally committed to bringing humanity into the joy of knowing him for who he really is.

### Mercy vs. judgment

God, however, will never be at peace with sin. The great human tragedy is that we have been totally unaware of the pardon and reconciliation the Father has brought about through Jesus Christ. We have loved darkness rather than light and have chosen to ignore what the Father offers us through the Son.

Through Christ, the disconnect between the world and God has been removed once and for all. The great majority of unbelievers are simply those who through weakness or ignorance are resisting the influence of the life-giving Holy Spirit of Christ, the Person of the Godhead who beckons to us to abandon our addiction to darkness and sin—who testifies in our hearts to God’s saving, atoning and reconciling work in Jesus on our behalf (John 14:25-27; 15:26).

Jesus did not just *bring* good news, he *was* good news. The overwhelming emphasis of his teaching was mercy, not vengeance. His hallmark sayings reflect the God who is love, in whose mind mercy rejoices against judgment (James 2:13). Thus, what was hinted at in parts of the Old Testament becomes the major theme in the Gospels—“I will have mercy and not sacrifice.” Jesus’ word pictures show us a forgiving father, a Good Samaritan, seeking shepherds and splendidly generous employers, healings, exorcisms, a Great Physician who pleaded “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). ☪

Tears of relief flooded my eyes when Joseph of Arimathea was allowed to remove my son, Jesus, from his execution cross. How gently Joseph and a friend, Nicodemus, handled his torn and tortured body—such a contrast to the violent and cruel treatment he had just suffered. I had ached to comfort him in his agony, and when I was finally able to touch his lifeless form, I didn’t know what to do. He was unrecognizable, his entire body bruised, covered with blood and dirt, his wounds deep and swollen. The grief and pain that welled up inside me exploded in groans of mourning I did not know were possible. This was the dreaded sword that was to pierce my soul that had been prophesied by old Simeon when Jesus was a newborn. Never, ever, had I imagined it could be so devastating, so cruel, so unjustified.

Kneeling beside Jesus’ body, I caressed his wounded hands, remembering how I had kissed those tiny fingers when he was a child. I remembered his laughter as he played with his younger brothers and sisters, his sunny disposition and bright inquisitive mind. Everyone loved him and wanted to be around him, even when he was an adult. He was a generous, engaging young man, destined to become the Messiah, the salvation of all people, the light to the Gentiles, a glory to Israel.

Jesus’ ministry reflected him. It was filled with hope, forgiveness and healing. But at times, my heart pounded with fear for him. His merciful approach was unorthodox, and it angered some. In our own hometown, people were initially amazed at his gracious words. But in the end he was run out of the synagogue and a mob tried to kill him.

Bewildered by these malicious outbursts against him, we, his human family, became protective of him. It made me wish he had never left home. Once, when he was overwhelmed by the needs of the multitude and had no time to eat, we tried to rescue him and take charge of things. We thought he might have gone off the deep end from hunger and exhaustion. Another time his brothers and I found him, wanting to talk to him, but he was again surrounded by a great crowd. We were worried sick and didn’t understand why he would not take refuge more often with his family he loved so much.

When it all ended so brutally, it did indeed feel as though a sword had pierced my very being. Only later, when Jesus was raised in glory, was my wounded soul healed. And you can imagine, what a jubilant family reunion we had with our beloved Jesus, the risen Son of God! Humbled and grateful to be able to express how deeply sorry we were that we had not been more supportive of his earthly mission, we very quickly became his ardent and faithful servants. ☪