

Insanity and the Gospel of Grace

We will always get the gospel distorted when we think it is only for the functional, the respectable

Written by Douglas Bond | Thursday, April 3, 2014

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William Cowper, born in 1731 one hundred years after the death of his ancestor and fellow poet John Donne, was one of those with great needs, special needs. He was one of the insane. Bouts of insanity, even attempted suicides, odd behavior, dark depression, at times feeling himself a castaway, “whelmed in deeper gulfs” than any other. And yet God raised him up by the grace of the gospel, ministered to him through the love and kindness of his neighbor and pastor, John Newton, to be one of the church’s greatest hymn writers.

Being with my students in Olney, John Newton and William Cowper’s village, reminded me again of the reach of the grace of the gospel. We can so easily slip into thinking that Christianity is for the morally upright, for people who have it together, for normal people, functional people, smart people, witty people. You know, people like we want others to think we are. But then that would be elder brother false religion, not the gospel.

We blush and divert our eyes when we see how the gospel really works (or grind our teeth like the religious leaders of his day). Jesus came for the sick, not for the well. For smelly fisherman, not well-perfumed religious leaders; for lepers, not people with all their fingers and toes; for prostitutes, not self-righteous moral purists; for swindlers, not for well-suited accountant types; for the illiterate, not for the strutting sophisticated academic; for the demon possessed, for the insane. For the dead.

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God truly does “move in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.” Behind a frowning providence, God truly does hide a smiling face. “Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain.” God truly does work “deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill.” He truly does “treasure up his bright designs and work his sovereign will.” God in his gospel truly “is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.”

There really is a sort of insanity about the gospel. It is completely counter-intuitive. It defies economic sense, *quid pro quo*, this for that, balance the scale of bad deeds with good deeds. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a *tertium quid*, something altogether outside of and above all other

religions. I want to get this, down deep in my soul. O for a closer walk with God! O to see more clearly the Light that rises with healing in his wings. O to be washed in the precious blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, there to lose all my guilty stain.

We will always get the gospel distorted when we think it is only for the functional, the respectable, people like us, right, and not for the insane, for the dead, who must be raised to life by the gracious, sovereign mercy of God. Cowper reminds me of that. When I am most honest about my heart, my desperate need for grace—justifying grace, and sanctifying grace, daily enabling grace—I can look past Cowper and just look in the mirror.

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