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The Art of Spiritual Conversation, Part 3

In my spiritual conversations with non-Christians, I find there are certain questions that arise almost every time. Among those who have interacted with Christianity in some way, I see three issues in particular that have left a bad taste in their mouths.

And I often find that things taste bad because they've been made with rotten ingredients. As we rediscover together the ancient (and deliciously aged) ingredients of the gospel of adoption, I find they make for a much better-tasting answer to these perennial questions.

What about homosexuality?

I'll tell you what I think about homosexuality, but first I want to tell you about what matters a million times more: What I know about homosexual people. My friend Frank is gay, and he's been so beat up in religious circles, he's pretty much dropped the 'God' thing. But here's what I know about Frank: He is the Father's beloved son. The Father's soul delights in him. God absolutely adores Frank, always has, always will. And in Jesus, God has taken hold of Frank and will never let him go; Frank lives everyday (and forever) within the embrace of the God who is absolutely crazy about him.

Also, Frank values honesty and integrity so much that he has refused to be dishonest about his homosexuality. Coming out of the closet is a tremendously courageous thing to do. And courage and integrity both come from God. To me, they are proof that God is already sharing his life with Frank. Frank pursues his homosexual relationships because he is passionately interested in becoming an authentic, whole human being in relation to other human beings. And that just happens to be God's great desire for Frank as well. This is wonderful news.

So that's what I know about my homosexual friend Frank and every other gay person on the planet. And now for what I think, which matters much, much less than what I know. As I try to let my Father teach me the art of living well, I hear him saying that the ideal way for human sexuality to work is within a lifelong committed relationship between one man and one woman. Of course, things aren't always ideal in life. For a variety of reasons, our sexuality can get distorted in various ways, some more destructive than others. Rape, pedophilia, prostitution, adultery, divorce, promiscuity, pornography, etc.

These are behaviors that, to varying degrees, do damage to the human soul, regardless of the sexual orientation of the ones doing them. And our Father takes these behaviors very seriously because he is fiercely opposed to everything that damages his children.

So, does homosexual sex damage God's children? While I personally cannot see damage being done, I do believe God places it on that continuum of distorted sexuality. And I'm willing to believe Him, even if I don't totally understand. Homosexuality is a way of receiving God's gift of sex, but receiving it less than fully. With that said, homosexuality seems to damage human life *far* less than more 'acceptable' distortions like divorce, adultery, and pornography. Which damages society more—the heterosexual adulterer or the faithful homosexual couple?

The truth is that we all experience distortions in our sexuality, just as in all areas of life. But these distortions do not change God's orientation towards us. And it makes no sense for us to treat one another any differently based on a distortedness which we all share. Jesus' message to me (and all the other sexually broken people in the world) is that our Father adores us and has sent his Spirit to guide each of us into authentic and fulfilling lives (including our sex lives), and that we really can trust him to do that job with each of us.

What about Hell?

Hell is actually a much less sinister and complicated thing than people think. It is *not* about how God is really mad about people breaking his rules, so he has to hurt them. That's not it at all. Hell just means that God gives us space to do what we want to do, even if it makes us miserable.

Jesus has forever made us part of his life with his Dad in the Spirit.

It's really good news, but he's not going to force anybody to like it.

We can continue thinking all kinds of crazy stuff about God—that he doesn't exist, that he's a bully, that he only likes people who obey the rules, whatever. And to live with that kind of belief about God is sheer hell (Believe me, I've experienced it firsthand). If we don't believe we're loved, we can't love ourselves or others. We can't trust others enough to have real relationships. If we don't believe the truth, all we can do is twist in the anxiety and pain of our own darkness. It's hell.

Heaven and hell are not about who qualifies for residence in the pleasant place versus the unpleasant place. It's about spending today and all eternity in the presence of Jesus, his Dad, and their Spirit—who just *happen* to be the 3 most pleasant people you could ever hope to meet. You are the Father's beloved child in whom he is well pleased. Hell is the decision to be displeased with that situation, and to go through life (both before and after death) as a displeased and unpleasant person.

So where you go after you die is already a settled issue. You're in the Father's loving arms right now, and you always will be. Your death doesn't change God's presence with you. And for that matter, death doesn't change US either. It doesn't change how we perceive life; it doesn't change how we behave and relate to others. It doesn't change our beliefs and actions that make our lives joyful or miserable. That part really is up to you and me, now and forever. Our decisions matter immensely, but they don't change God or his presence with us, or his actions towards us.

What about other religions?

The kneeling Muslim and the cross-legged Buddhist, the chanting Wiccan and the syllogizing Atheist, the tongue-speaking Pentecostal and the hymnal-holding Episcopalian—we are all “in” the Divine embrace. To not be there is to not exist. None of our beliefs or actions are strong enough to wrench us free from Reality, the Real One who is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

So do all paths lead to the same place? Well, yes and no, depending on what you mean. All paths begin and end in the presence of the omnipresent Trinity. King David understood this: “If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there” (Ps 139.8). Whatever Hell is, it is something we experience “in the presence of the Lamb” (Rev 14.10). So even if a religious path leads me to Hell, it is incapable of leading me away from the infinitely-present God.

It is eternally true that I can follow whatever religion I want. I am graciously given space to believe whatever I want to believe about God and about myself. But my beliefs (and the actions that flow from them) may result in love, joy and peace; or they can result in hate, bitterness and fear. Our beliefs matter. The more I believe in karma, the less I can believe in love I have not earned. The more I believe in the small-minded Zeus-god of popular Christianity, the less I can believe in the Trinity's all-encompassing embrace. The more I believe in the illusory nature of everything, the less I can believe in the Real One who is right before my eyes.

So yes, our beliefs matter. But they change US, not God. Yes, our choices matter. But our Father's choice matters even more. He has chosen (or 'predestined' to use Paul's term) you and me for adoption.

The heart of the issue is not whether I pick the right path that will take me to God, but rather that God has picked me and has entered every path in order to meet me there. Whatever path I might walk (Hinduism, Satanism, Protestantism, Atheism, Confucianism), Jesus will walk every step of it with me, and his Spirit will forever whisper into my ear the truth about the One who is walking with me. Our hope is that, eventually, everyone (myself included) might be willing to open our eyes, to taste and see Reality, and that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

~ John Stonecypber