

The Paradox of Christianity: The Eternal in Time

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This paper was originally presented in 1969

Since then it is by faith that we are justified, let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have confidently entered into this new relationship of Grace and here we take our stand, in happy certainty of the things he has for us in the future.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we have only a hope of future joys – we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit these very things will give us patience endurance; this in turn will develop a mature character, and a character of this sort produces a steady hope, a hope that will never disappoint us.

Already we have some experience of the love of God flooding through our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us. And we see that it was while we were powerless to help ourselves that Christ died for sinful men (Romans 5:1-6 J B Phillips translation).

Paul's words here to the Roman Christians comprise a very powerful piece of scripture. This was something exciting for Paul, and it could be something exciting for us. This translation by Phillips is moving and expressive. This version brings alive what Paul is trying to say in the language we speak today.

We can see Paul is excited, and perhaps we could be excited about it, too. The letter to the Ephesians likewise focuses on the practical reality of the Good News in our lives.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:8-10 RSV).

We don't get excited like the New Testament Christians because we don't really know what it means – the eternal in time!

Impossible

That's impossible – the eternal coming into time. Because in our boxed-in philosophical categories, eternity is almost the opposite of time! The eternal could not exist in time. And yet this is what we find in Jesus Christ! This is why Paul was so excited! This paradox, the problem of that which is eternal coming into the realm of time, has been dealt with by philosophers in the West ever since that time.

Søren Kierkegaard says this paradox is the very basis of faith. Because of the proposition that God – the eternal – has come into time in the form of a human – the idea that in Jesus Christ we see both God and humanity – is impossible to accept rationally. It is unreasonable, and we despair, because it is rationally impossible. Yet the claim requires a response. We respond in faith in this God-man. It is rationally impossible and yet we must accept it to have faith.

Philosophical Categories

This is why Paul says we are justified by faith, because only in faith can we accept the fact that in Jesus Christ we find both the eternal and the temporal. This is the paradox of Christianity – that the eternal should be present in the temporal.

John deals with this same question in the first chapter of his interpretive Gospel. He says, “In the beginning was the Word” – the expression, the eternal structure of God, the nature, the *logos*, the meaning of God – “and the Word was with God, and the Word” – the eternal *logos* – “was God. He was in the beginning with God; and all things were made through Him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:1-2 RSV).

John uses the term *Word* or *logos*, which had come to be used similarly by both Greeks and Greek-speaking Jews. This word *Word* meant to the Greeks something static and eternal, seen in a philosophical background as the structural and analytical expression of a thing.

Living

However, to the Hebrews (Jews) this word implied something moving, the actual power of life of a thing, the real quality of a thing. But the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses this term to get across to both cultures the idea that what was eternal took the form of a human being. He continues in verse fourteen: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (RSV).

John says that eternal structure of God took on the form of a human body (“flesh”). When the *logos* of God took on the form of flesh, this was when Jesus came to be. Jesus is not eternal; the Bible tells us of his birth. “The word became a human being” and that human is Jesus. The way this Gospel expresses it, Jesus is the bodily form, the person, through which the Word of God came into human society when the Holy Spirit caused the Virgin Mary to conceive.

Fullness

And then Jesus Christ, being the bodily form of the eternal Word of God, was made the Lord and Saviour of the world, because the Word of God had become Jesus the Messiah. So Jesus was the fullness of the eternal in the temporal.

The Gospel writer continues, “And from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (vv 16, 17). We receive grace upon grace because the eternal has come into time. Paul says in the initial passage from Romans that “we have confidently entered into this new relationship of

Grace, and here we take our stand.” We are justified by faith in this one who is God in a human person.

In fact this idea is threaded all through the New Testament writings. Paul talks about this in the letter the Colossians. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, whether in heaven, or on earth, making peace by the blood of his cross” Col 1:19-20 (RSV).

God was in Jesus Christ, Paul says, seeking to reconcile us, and everything to himself through the blood of Jesus’ cross. This then gives us peace with God and through faith we are justified, because the logically impossible took place – that which was eternal came into time.

Experiencing Truth

The truth given to us in Jesus is the kind of truth to be experienced – not just new knowledge to know, as the Gnostics taught. Here is how it is said in 1 John 1:1-3:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life that was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (RSV).

They had seen what to us is impossible.

The nature of God is such that He must reveal himself to us. We can’t know God unless He reveals himself to us. The form of this revelation may vary, and we may have different ideas about just what constitutes revelation – about just what is or is not to be considered revelation from God. But God must reveal himself to us – and we see him revealed most completely in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Figure of Jesus

In the Gospels, we see what Jesus was like. Each writer speaks of him differently and gives us a different view of him. Yet, in the words of Georgia Harkness in her book *Understanding the Christian Faith*, “after due allowances are made for their interpretations written into the story, the outlines still are unmistakable, and a clear, luminous figure shines through the dust upon a portrait to show us God.”

Paul said it this way: “For God, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!” (2 Cor 4:6)

We then can see God when we look at Jesus. As the prophets always were, Jesus also was concerned for the poor and unjustly treated. He cared for the needs of people. We can have

peace with God because we know he cares for us. Now we know what he's like, for we know what Jesus was like. We turn to God knowing that he will receive us.

Inclusive

Harkness says of Jesus, "When a Roman centurion's son or a Syrophenician woman's daughter needed help, he broke across racial lines to give it; and one of his greatest parables is of the neighbourly act of a despised Samaritan. Wherever he went, he healed the sick, encouraged the fearful, gave new life to the weak and the sinful whose faith reached out to him for deliverance. He did for them, in outgoing, inclusive love for all, what in all our best insights we know God is doing for us. In such acts of Jesus, we see the glory of the Father, 'full of grace and truth'" (p 68).

Jesus literally gave his life for others while was alive. His life was lived for the sake of others; this was God's will – this was God's nature.

Restoration of a human being and reconciliation of that person to God is possible because God cared – because of his grace. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to his grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom 5:1-2 RSV).

Divine Initiative

If it were not for God's activity in history to reveal himself to humans, we could not know God. Salvation and restoration remain in the hand of God, with the entire process of peacemaking between man and God performed by God's mercy and love (Eph 2:4-10).

In Galatians and Romans Paul is propounding the idea that human performance cannot bring salvation, but rather it is totally the operation of God's grace in a person. This should be seen, however, in the context of legalism and ritualism – human efforts of religious observance cannot effect salvation or bring reconciliation to God. But *in the context of grace*, works may be instrumental to a person's salvation.

Effort

A person's own efforts in themselves cannot in any way bring him reconciliation with God, but God may use all kinds of means to administer his grace – including a person's good works. People are encouraged to repent, turn from their lives of unbelief, accept the truth that they are separated from God and seek God with all their hearts. And yet in the language of both the Old Testament and the New, it seems that a person can do this only through God's grace.

God reveals himself to humans and lets them know he is concerned for them. God loves his human creation. His love and care are revealed in Jesus Christ. Georgia Harkness says,

"When suffering is voluntarily assumed by the innocent for the guilty, this is the way of the cross. It lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But the cross would be meaningless for us if God did not suffer too. 'He that spared not his only son, but delivered him up for us all' –

have not these words taken on deeper meaning as parents have been called to give sons in our time? Whatever happens to me, God suffers most” (p 64).

Faith

In God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we can have peace with God and with ourselves. The source of power for our salvation is faith in God – through no merit of our own, our broken lives can be made whole.

Christ died for sinners (Romans 5:7-11). Harkness points out that Jesus’ teachings about humanity show that as humans we are, at best, weak and sinful, “ever prone to sin against God and our neighbour, but nevertheless create supreme worth and dignity in God’s sight” (Harkness, p 69). Christ’s sufferings and death brings us reconciliation with God because God was in Christ – the eternal had come into time. God was in Christ, as Paul says.

A Faith Event

The impossible happened, and only in faith can the truth of the *Christ-Event* be understood. It must be *experienced* to be understood, and *only in faith* can it be experienced. The eternal-in-time defies reason. But in this event God has revealed himself. We can respond to God’s love as we respond to Jesus, whom we can know through faith.

Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves – he opened a way to God. He *was* the way to God. Jesus said, “I am the Truth.” The Good News (Gospel) is a truth of *experience*. Not a truth of information, but a truth of *relationship*.

Humans can be reunited with God because God and humanity are *united in Jesus*, because the eternal has stepped into time to bridge the gap.

First developed for and delivered on the radio program *Baptist Bible Broadcast* August 1969 (I was 21 years old at the time)

This version updated for form, clarity and current style and posted on Orville Jenkins Thoughts and Resources 20 November 2008

filename: paradoxofxty.pdf