

Misconceptions of Moral Government*

by Alan Snyder

Our task is made more difficult due to common misconceptions of the message we bring. Sometimes we may even introduce those misconceptions ourselves through faulty explanations or an overzealous attempt to change someone's mind. Have you heard any of these?

Misconception #1: Man Is Born Morally Virtuous

I know I am not saying this. There is a world of difference between being born positively virtuous and being born innocent. Innocence implies that no moral choices have yet occurred. A child grows into moral accountability when he develops the capacity to understand good and evil. We need to emphasize that in moral government theology, sin is truly sinful. There are no people within God's kingdom who stress the utter sinfulness of man more than we do, precisely because we know that all sin is voluntary, and, therefore, without excuse.

Misconception #2: It Is Just as Easy to Obey God as to Sin

On the contrary, outside of a submitted life, this is not the case. Romans 7 deals directly with the chains forged by sin. These chains lead us to say: "For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." (Rom. 7:19) Sinful habits enslave. Even after we submit our lives to the Lord, we must work on renewing our minds and training ourselves in righteousness. It is very easy to slip back into "the sin which so easily entangles us." (Heb. 12:1) We do have the promise, however, that we can be victorious over sin: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." (Rom. 8:2)

Misconception #3: God Doesn't Know Everything

We must emphasize that God knows everything that can possibly be known, and that there is no deficiency in God just because He created man in His own image, including the ability to choose. We must emphasize instead the greatness of a God who knows all the possible choices we could make, as well as all the potential consequences of each choice, and who has a response ready for each of those possibilities.

Misconception #4: Jesus' Death Is Not Substitutionary

When we rightly say that Jesus did not pay the debt of sin, but instead canceled, or forgave, that debt, we do not diminish the substitutionary nature of the atonement. All we are saying is that the atonement was a governmental necessity, not an exact payment for all sins past, present, and future. This in no way changes the fact that Jesus died for me, that I might not pay the penalty for my sins. If that is not a substitution, what is?

Misconception #5: Man Is Saved by Works

Stressing obedience is not the same as preaching salvation by works, We stand firmly on the doctrine that we are saved by grace. All grounds for our forgiveness are in the atonement. We can do nothing by our works to make up for our former sins. We are guilty before God and only by His mercy are we saved. We are misunderstood because we emphasize the necessity of a life lived in obedience to God. We need to make clear that this obedience is a response to God's love and forgiveness, and that if we do not obey, we are showing that we really do not love God. Holiness is essential to a continued relationship with Him, but if we sin, He maintains a willingness to forgive, provided we return to Him on the same basis on which we were first cleansed--repentance from sin and faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

** This is taken from a larger article published in the September/October edition of Notes & Quotes, the Newsletter of the Evangelical Education Ministries concerning Christian unity. Much of the opening remarks have been left out, but the points made here should be of great benefit to those who support, or are considering the Moral Government position.)*