

The Truth About "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee"

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"Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," also called "The Hymn of Joy," was written by Henry van Dyke (1852-1933) in 1907. He intended that the poem be set to the music of the famous "Ode to Joy" in Beethoven's ninth and final symphony. It is found in most hymnals and is almost universally loved in Bible-believing churches.

The next time you sing this "hymn," be aware that you are singing the praises of a theology that categorically denies the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Theology of this Poem

For a number of years before looking up the background of this author, I found some of the lines suspicious:

Thou art giving and forgiving,
ever blessing, ever blest...

Thou the Father, Christ our Brother,
all who live in love are Thine...

Father-love is reigning o'er us,
brother love binds man to man...

When most of us reflect on this hymn, the only words we can recall as evidence of it being a great hymn of the faith are "we adore Thee." How many times have we sung all the stanzas and not even once concentrated on the words to discover what they truly mean? To sing a hymn--any hymn--merely by rote memory indicates an utter failure on our part to sing God's praises.

With liberal theologians, many times it is not what they say, but what they do not say. Consider the lines quoted above. Is there any mention anywhere in the song of how this "forgiving" is obtained? Is there any mention of how "Christ our brother" paid the penalty for our sins? Do all those who simply "live in love" belong to the Father? Is it simply "love" that "binds man to man" under the "reigning" and "ever blessing" Father?

What the Bible Teaches

The Bible is unambiguous about the nature of atonement and how salvation is obtained: it is through the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross, where he bore our sins and shed his blood to pay the penalty for them in our place. In turn his righteousness is imputed to us when we place our faith in him.

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him...By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of

the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. (Isa. 53:6, 8, 10)

Our "iniquity" was placed on Jesus; he was "cut off out of the land of the living" and suffered the "stroke" instead of his people, to whom it "was due." This is substitutionary atonement: our sins placed upon Jesus and him paying the penalty for them. Also, It "pleased" the Lord to "crush" him as he was offered as a "guilt offering" to atone for the sins of his people. The Hebrew word for "guilt offering" here is the same word used in Leviticus 5:14-19.

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-3)

"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." Paul likely had Isaiah 53 in mind when he wrote this.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. (Eph. 1:7)

The "forgiveness of our trespasses" is the result of a redemption gained through the shedding of blood, the blood of Christ on the cross. This is sacrificial language: our sins were placed upon him, and the shedding of his blood was the price paid for our sins. Note carefully the following verse, Hebrews 9:22.

Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Heb. 9:22).

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor. 5:21)

This is explicit imputation. Jesus was without sin, but he was "made" sin "on our behalf" (to save us): our sins were imputed or transferred to him. So again, in his sacrificial death he paid the penalty for our sins so that we can be forgiven. But our salvation does not end here: we in turn become "the righteousness of God IN HIM." When we are "in Christ," his righteousness is imputed to us. Therefore, we stand before God both without sin and with perfect righteousness.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:23-26)

When reading the next section, recall that the Greek word for *propitiation* means *appeasement of wrath*. The death of Christ was a blood sacrifice that appeased the wrath of

God that had been upon us because of our sins. That wrath fell upon Jesus because he took our sins upon him.

What Henry van Dyke Teaches

Virtually every statement made in the previous section is vehemently denied by Henry van Dyke in his writings.

This "Joyful, Joyful" poem by van Dyke reflects what he believed about the nature of the atonement, though as pointed out, many things were left unsaid. However, in his book, *The Gospel for a World of Sin* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1869), he develops his view of the atonement quite explicitly and unambiguously. It absolutely astonishes me that the publishers of hymn books which include this "hymn" failed to notice the red flags raised by some of the lines and make an investigation of his other writings. It is also a sad commentary on pastors who allow it to be sung in their churches.

Consider now the following citations from van Dyke's book and notice how he calls the historic Christian doctrine of the atonement a "legal fiction."

The attempt to interpret any of the terms which are associated with the experience of atonement as if they described legal transactions or artificial adjustments destroys their real significance as utterances of conscious life.

Take, for example, Paul's famous phrase, "justified by faith." Suppose we attempt to define that by making it mean that the guilt of the sinner has been legally transferred to Christ, and the merits of Christ have been legally transferred to the sinner; so that Christ on the cross is declared guilty and is punished for sin, while the sinner, believing, is pronounced righteous and escapes from punishment. What effect would such an idea of the atonement have upon the inner life? Apart from the frightful confusion which it must introduce into the moral sense to think of God as the author of such an arrangement, what conceivable influence of a real and permanent nature could such a thought have upon the soul? Does it bring inward happiness to a man's heart to be pronounced righteous when he knows that he is still unrighteous? Does it give a man inward peace to be set free from punishment when he is conscious that the evils which deserved it are still within him? Does it reconcile a man's inner life with God to have the righteousness of another person attributed to him by a legal fiction, while his own soul is still out of harmony with God?

Merely to put these questions is to see the answer to them. No; if Christ's mission is to the inner life, then His work in the inner life must be real and vital. In this region there is no room for anything that is merely formal and artificial. There is no room for what Phillips Brooks calls "the fantastic conception of the imputation to Christ of a sinfulness which was not His, of God's counting Him guilty of wickedness which He had never done."

There is no legal fiction in the real atonement.

God is not a maker of fiction, nor can the inner life of man be satisfied with formalities. The human heart revolts at the idea of the punishment of the innocent in

the place of the guilty. Those instincts which lie deeper than all reasoning, are insulted and wounded by the thought of the arbitrary transfer of the merits of one person to the credit of another person. The moral sense could never find peace in the contemplation of such a purely forensic transaction." (pp. 119-121)

Again he states,

There is not a single passage in the New Testament where the merits of one person are transferred, or reckoned, or counted to another. (p. 122)

And finally:

There is not a word in all the New Testament which implies that Christ offered a sacrifice to the anger of God. It is morally inconceivable that the Redeemer coming from the bosom of the Father to do His work should ever have been, in any sense, an object of the divine wrath. For that wrath, as we have already seen, is not a vindictive anger against sinners; it is a pure and holy indignation against sin. How, then, could it have rested for a single moment upon Christ?

Nor is there anything in the Bible to imply that Christ has taken that wrath against sin away. It still exists. It still hates and condemns sin as much as ever.

Christ delivers us from the fear of it, not by subjecting Himself to it, but by separating us from the sin against which it is directed.

How, then, shall we interpret Christ's sufferings?

There was no infliction of punishment upon the innocent instead of the guilty. There was no transference of the demerits of the sinful to the sinless. Christ remained guiltless; man remained guilty. (pp. 161-162)

This is the man whose words many think are so wonderful and bring so much praise to God the Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ.