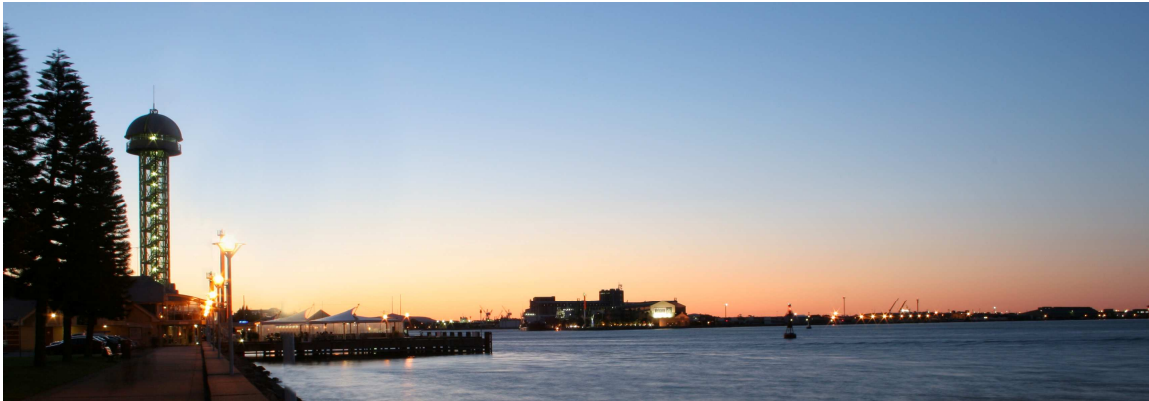


Matthew Johns and the Code of Silence



Totally disgusting! Or, media bias, unfair editing and even deception! Or, sex romps will always be part of ARL boys being boys! Whatever the conclusion, and there are a surprisingly wide range of conclusions, Monday's Four Corners report of 2009, 'The Code Of Silence', into the seedy ARL culture of aggressive, alcohol-fuelled behaviour has got everybody talking. The original focus issue was apparently supposed to be what one ARL club was doing to combat the culture of alcohol abuse, but in reality it has become a debate about sexual morality, albeit in the context of alcohol and alleged sexual abuse and assault, and focused largely on one particular incident. It would appear that every commentator has labeled 'the incident' in New Zealand as immoral.

But it is also very interesting to note that different commentators apply the word 'immorality' at different stages of the overall incident. That is, everybody wants to insist at some point on an absolute morality - "What happened was wrong or immoral", but disagree significantly about when this player's actions became "wrong or immoral". Was it immoral because five players had group sex with a drunken 19 year old girl, with other team members watching on? Or was it also immoral that a married man (allegedly together with another team mate) had taken this girl back to their motel room in the first place (suggesting a pre-meditated notion of a 'threesome'? Or is the only immorality that of this man's infidelity to his wife, everything else being okay because the girl apparently consented?

This sliding morality is the real heart of the issue - and the problem that makes a definitive response impossible. Once God's absolute morality (sex is a wonderful gift to be expressed only in the context of a marriage relationship - committed, exclusive life-long relationship of one man and one woman) is abandoned then we are left with each individual's view of appropriate sexual behaviour in contest with what other individuals or society says is appropriate. And, in practice this may always be disputed with the result that, any sort of sexual behaviour can be, and has been, rationalised.

This has been clearly illustrated in comments surrounding the incident exposed on Four Corners. On the one hand, it was stated without any protest, that group sex had

been considered by some ARL coaching staff as a legitimate team-building exercise! And again it was stated that sex romps will always be part of ARL boys being boys. But on the other hand ARL executives were demanding that their young players show proper restraint in their off-field encounters with young women! So, is this a situational morality - what is okay in one situation is not in another? Or is it a morality based in 'the ends justify the means' thinking? Or again, who determines what 'proper restraint in off-field encounters with women' actually is, given statements made by leading officials and coaches at other points?

And surely the Four Corners debate has itself been too narrow? Can the morality of ARL players be disputed or condemned without also considering the general morality blatantly portrayed and pushed in TV programmes, the media, advertising and especially the sexualisation of young girls in advertising? Surely if our society, as a whole, sanctions people having a succession of sexual Partners, multiple sexual partners, or same sex partners, then it is hard to argue against five blokes having sex with one girl at any given time, since this is simply another possible configuration?

Surely if as a society we tolerate girls in their early teens being sexually active and facilitate this as their right by prescribing contraceptives, when it is hard to argue there is an issue with a 19 year old girl engaging in whatever sexual activity she wishes? Surely if the crucial concept in defining appropriate sexual behaviour or assault is simply 'consent' and being 'a willing sexual partner', then anything consented to is okay regardless of the degree of maturity, understanding or personal well-being lies behind the consent!

Adultery or sexual impropriety rarely happens 'as a moment's stupidity' in spite of this being the standard defence. Adultery is always the end point of a thinking process that is formed well before the actual immoral activity is entered into. Alcohol is never the problem, though it is often the 'trigger' that finally frees a person to act out their already formed notions of what 'great sex' is! So, once again the debate about this 'incident' is akin to treating the symptoms without addressing the underlying causes. The real problem is that we want to be free to set our own morality according to our own thinking. But in practice this doesn't work for individuals or in society.

However as individuals and as a society, we would rather ignore the hard evidence that society's current morality actually destroys lives while promoting sexual freedom, and live with incredible inconsistencies and deep feelings of personal outrage (as are being expressed in 'the incident' at hand) than submit to God's standard which does work and which gives individuals true sexual freedom and truly enjoyable and fulfilling relationships.

We can't have it both ways!

What does God say are the consequences of living by our own code of behaviour?

Turn with me to Paul's letter to the Romans 3:21-26 in the Bible.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

One writer suggested that this paragraph is probably the most important paragraph ever written because it spells out how a person can get back into relationship with God.

The first point to note is God's dilemma and that of the sinner. Look at verse 21.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

The issue at hand is sin and righteousness or a standard of behaviour that is acceptable to God. The context to this verse is really important and lies in Paul's argument, which begins back in 1:18 – Listen to his words:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Paul's argument is very simple. Wherever there is sin, then there is God's wrath or anger and judgment on that sin. And that means every person is under God's wrath or anger and judgment because nobody treats God as he deserves.

Nobody lives in the light of what they know about God. Listen to Romans 1:21-32,

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though

they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Romans 1:21-32,

Not the uncivilised tribesman, who has some basic knowledge of God in creation; not the highly civilised Romans, 2:1-16, who had a God-given conscience of what is right and wrong; and not the highly religious Jews either, 2:17-3:8.

All people everywhere deliberately reject what they know about God; set up their own idea of God in his place; reject God's truth and God's standard of behaviour to do their own thing.

The consequence of all this is spelled out by Paul in 3:9-20. Every person who has ever lived or breathed in this world is rightly judged by God to be a sinner, and rightly under his wrath or anger and judgement. There is nobody who achieves God's standard of behaviour, and therefore nobody who is acceptable to God.

And here lies God's dilemma. From the beginning of the world he had stated his intention to build a great community of people loved by him and intimately related to him. But how can God do that when at the same time he cannot, and will not have anything to do with sin and rebellion because he is the Holy God? God's dilemma is how to accept sinners as though they were not sinners?

But people are also in a real dilemma because all instinctively sin or reject God and do their own thing, which will never be acceptable to God. They are caught going the wrong way in a one way street, unwilling and unable to honour and serve God as he demands. In fact, 3:20, the more we know of God's law or God's standard, the guiltier we appear.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. And that leads to the second point to note in these verses, which is also what we call the good news gospel - God's initiative to put us into right relationship with him. Look at verse 21 again. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

God has acted to give us the righteousness we could never have achieved on our own. It is a righteousness or an acceptance before him that is not dependent on sinful people getting it right by their own efforts. And it was something that was in the pipeline since the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments and the prophets. In verse 22-23 Paul tells us how we are to think about this initiative.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

First: This righteousness or acceptance before God is something that comes to sinners from God. It is not something that is sourced in a person

Second: It is only available to you if you despair of your own efforts to please God and simply trust Jesus to sort out your relationship with God for you.

Third: It is available to anyone, and everyone, who is willing to put out their hand and take this gift of salvation and acceptance that comes from God through Jesus.

Friend, God's initiative resolves his dilemma. It is God's way of creating relationship and fellowship with those who are sinful and rightly deserve nothing but his condemnation and judgment. That is why it is such a good news gospel! And this leads to the third point to note.

How God's initiative in the death of Jesus works? Look at verse 24.

And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

This new relationship with God, this new acceptance of us by God is achieved through the death of Jesus and is a totally free gift to us, even though it costs God heaps. But HOW, precisely, does the death Of Jesus put us back into right relationship with God? The three key words in verses 24-25 explain the process.

And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Look at the little salvation triangle. Justification is something God the father does as a direct consequence of two things that Jesus' death achieves – redemption and propitiation, the word the NIV wrongly translates as a sacrifice of atonement. Let me use the illustration I often use to help us understand exactly what Jesus' death achieves. And girls and boys, this might help you understand some difficult ideas. Suppose a child is caught stealing money from his dad. Obviously the relationship between parent and child is broken. What is needed to restore the relationship? Most obviously the crime of stealing has to be addressed and punished if justice is to be done. And then Dad's wrath or anger and condemnation because of the way he has been treated and at the breach of trust needs to be dealt with. Finally dad will demand a change of heart and attitude, and new obedience in the child in the future. All three things must be fixed up if the relationship is to be restored between Father and child.

Jesus death is just like this.

First, Jesus' death pays the penalty his people's crime deserves. God said repeatedly and clearly in his word that any and every act of rebellion or sin deserves and would receive punishment of death. Justice demands it. Look at verse 24.

And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

The death of Jesus redeems or ransoms or buys back God's people by paying, on their behalf, what they owe to God. God's law says the proper penalty for sin is death. Jesus volunteers to die in the place of God's people, paying the full penalty of their rebellion and disobedience towards God, with the result they are set free from guilt

and the demand of the law.

Let me illustrate. When I get an invoice it lists the things for which I owe money. I am indebted to them until such times as the account is paid. They have a legal claim on me while the account is outstanding. The invoice reminds me of all this.

In his death for me, Jesus takes the account I have run up because of sin and stamps it paid in full through my death on the cross. There is no more payment to be made to God, no more liability before God or before his law. My debt due to my sin and rebellion is paid and I am totally free from guilt and also from any further demands of the law.

Second, Jesus' death soaks up or averts God's wrath towards his people. Back to the illustration. You have just discovered your child has been stealing from you. What do you say? "How dare you treat me like that?" The breach of trust and betrayal from one who should honour and respect you causes a deep anger and offence that is not easily dealt with, but must be dealt with if the relationship is to be repaired.

Well how much more the wrath of God, the deep anger and offence God feels when people treat him like dirt? God's anger must be dealt with before relationship can be restored. That is the idea of propitiation in verse 25, and we need to go back to Old Testament sacrifice to understand it properly.

Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Every time a person offered an animal sacrifice it symbolised two things. First it recognised the person deserves death because of God's anger at my failure to treat him as he deserved. Second it recognises God has provided a substitute so that God's anger is taken out on the substitute not the person who deserves it.

As the person poured the animal's blood on the altar, God was propitiated or placated. That is his wrath was covered or soaked up or quenched. The amazing thing about the gospel is that God presented his own son as the substitute whose death covers or soaks up his wrath.

That is why the death of Jesus was so violent. Jesus himself described his death as the cup of God's wrath. All of God's anger and offence at sin past present and future was poured out on Jesus until not a single drop is left towards God's special people. But the wonderful result is that sinners like you and me do not have to, and never will experience it if we are Christians.

Third, as a consequence God actually changes the way he views his sinful people. Jesus died as a substitute for his people. We are responsible for mess created by our horrible treatment of God and our rebellion; Jesus died to clean up our mess. Jesus paid a very high price. Did he get what he paid for? The answer is a very clear **"YES"**. Look at verse 24 again. Paul says sinners like you and me are *justified through or because of the propitiation and redemption of Jesus*. What does it mean to be justified?

The word was commonly used in law courts. It was a legal term meaning a person was declared to be in the right by another. As a result of the death of Jesus, God declares

his sinful people to be in right relationship with him again. It is God's legally binding declaration and promise that I will be treated just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned. How can God treat his sinful people like that? Let's go back to the illustration one more time. We said that if the relationship was to be restored, the anger and the penalty for stealing had to be addressed. Jesus death has removed both these problems.

But we also said that the parent would look for changed attitudes and behaviour and obedience in the future. God's law also demands perfect obedience. God cannot relate to any person unless they are perfectly obedient.

The death of Christ achieves this as well. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:21.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus has swapped me. He took all God's wrath and all my sin while giving me his perfect obedience and righteousness. This is what Luther called the great exchange. This is what we call imputed righteousness. It is something I am given rather than something I deserve. Not only did Jesus pay out all the debt I owed God for my sin, he also put my account a trillion dollars in the red by depositing to my name his righteousness – his perfect obedience to God's law.

So, when God looks at me now he sees Christ's attitudes and desires and perfect obedience or righteousness. It's not that I am a different person. I am still a sinful person, but the way God treats me and sees me because he sees all the good things of Christ credited into my account and so can easily accept me before him.

But why did God go to such extreme lengths to deal with my crimes, my sin and disobedience? Why didn't he just turn a blind eye to it all and forget about it all or say it doesn't matter? Because he is just.

So, **fourth**, Jesus death publicly demonstrates God's justice. Look at verses 25-26.

Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing for God. He cannot allow any sin to go unpunished because he is completely holy. If even one sin was left unpunished or ignored then he could no longer claim to be just and holy. On the other hand his love for his special people meant he wanted to find a way to restore the relationship fully and without cutting corners.

In the death of Christ God was able to forgive the sins of his people while at the same time doing the right thing and even more importantly being seen to do the right thing. God, our father, has paid the demands of justice very publicly but still found a way to set me free.

When God kills Jesus, justice is totally satisfied, verse 25. All the sins of God's people,

committed over the centuries had been piled up in a big stack to be paid for by Jesus, demonstrating his justice. At the same time rescuing us from sin and put us into right relationship with him, thus satisfying the demands of love as well.

If you are not a Christian, then you really only have one big question to consider, how can I get rid of my sin and be acceptable to God.

That is the question of all religions. And the answer is before you now – not by seeing what I can do for myself, not matter how good a person I am, but by putting my trust in Jesus and in what he did for me thus allowing God to treat me just-as-if-I'd-never sinned.

You will never read a more important paragraph of literature. You will never hear of a more amazing rescue. In the lord Jesus God has found a way of accepting you into his heaven even as you continue to be a sinner.

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