

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	34		Gary L.W. Johnson
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TO JUDGE BOTH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

“The idea of divine judgment,” writes Paul Helm, “is integral to the gospel. Take it away and what Christ did is essentially changed; in fact, what he did no longer makes sense.”¹ You would think that professing evangelicals would be united in affirming this important truth. Think again. A growing number of people who proudly claim the label “Evangelical” have completely jettisoned the whole concept of divine judgment (and have redefined the gospel in the process).² The gospel (good news) proclaims salvation by Jesus Christ. What is salvation? It is rich in meaning and significance. It means a lot of things that imply blessing and joy. One of these is *deliverance*. Salvation does imply escape from danger. It does denote release or redemption. From what? Judgment. None of us relish being judged, and since we have an aversion to the thought of judgment, we tend to give it little or no thought – or worse yet, to dismiss the concept of divine judgment as a medieval concept that we need not concern ourselves with in our more enlightened age. Think again. The Scriptures speak loud and clear on this subject (and very frequently).³ Philip Cary, in his handling of this important theme points out, “The throne of God the Father, the Ancient of Days, is at the center of a court judgment (Daniel 7:9-10). Jesus as the Son of Man has received from the Father authority to execute judgment (John 5:27). He died and lived so that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living (Romans 14:9), and thereby become the man *appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead* (Acts 10:42). For *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:10). The concept of a last judgment is so familiar in Western Christian culture that we may miss how unique this is. Pagan mythology tells of judges in the underworld who were once human kings like Minos and Rhadamanthus. But it knows nothing of a judgment from heaven that concerns both the living and the dead. Much less does it imagine the whole world facing the judgment of a man enthroned at the right hand of divine power – a man who was once subjected to the shameful injustice and cruelty of a cross. This is the man who promised that those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be filled, those who mourn shall be comforted, the merciful shall receive mercy, and the gentle people in this cruel world are blessed, for they shall inherit the whole earth (Matthew 5:4-7). Now he is in a position to make good on that promise.”⁴

Judgment is said to be supremely the work of God (Matthew 18:35; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; Hebrews 11:6; James 4:12; 1 Peter 1:17, 2:23; Revelation 20:11, 12). This work is accomplished by Jesus Christ who has been appointed to this task (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42, 17:31; Romans 14:9). We are told that Christ will summon all before His judgment seat and judge them in strict justice according to their works (Matthew 25:32; Romans 14:9-13; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; 1 Peter 4:5; Revelation 19:11-21). This work is accomplished by Jesus Christ who has been appointed to this task (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42, 17:31; Romans 14:9). We are told that Christ will summon all before His judgment seat and judge them in strict justice according to their works (Matthew 25:32; Romans 14:9-13; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; 1 Peter 4:5; Revelation 19:11-21). These works are the expression and product of the heart and extend even to the very words (Matthew 12:36) and secret purposes of the heart (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5). Everything will be revealed (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18; 10:26; Ephesians 5:11-14; 1 Timothy 5:24, 25). The norm

for this judgment will be the entire Word of God in both the Law and the Gospel (Romans 2:12; Matthew 25:32; Acts 17:31; Revelation 20:12).

- I. ***THE APPEARANCE OF THE JUDGE.*** The contrast between Christ's first and second coming is stated in terms of "weakness" and "power." His first appearance was, in the words of William Bates: "to be the mediator between the righteous God and sinful man, by patiently suffering the most afflictive evils; to propitiate the incensed justice of heaven against us; to restore us by humility who fell by pride; to illustrate his signal love to us, to recommend by the efficacy of his example, the meek suffering all the transient evils of the world; but the second will be to perform the last act of his regal office, to determine the eternal states of angels and men, and suitably in the glory of his Deity. The divine oracles were never less obscure than in describing the first and second coming of the Messiah; the eclipse of the Sun of Righteousness, and his future glory; and the most clear accomplishment of them in his humiliation, is a convincing visible argument they shall be fulfilled in his exaltation."⁵

- II. ***THE MANNER OF HIS APPEARANCE.*** His personal appearance will be *glorious*. He will be attended with *holy angels*, and He will sit upon a visible throne of glory. The glory of His Father (Matthew 16:27). Note the emphasis on *seeing* God's glory. Anthony Burgess, a prominent member of the Westminster Assembly, wrote: "This is often called by divines *beatifical vision*, the sight of God which makes immediately happy. Now because God is an infinite and spiritual invisible object, it is disputed whether we shall behold God by our bodily eyes. That with our understanding, which are the spiritual eyes of the soul, we shall behold Him, is acknowledged by all, and clear by Scripture, for then we shall see Him face to face, that is, perfectly, not as in this world. And as for the beholding of God as a spirit with our bodily eyes, there are divines that affirm it, for although, say they, it be naturally impossible for a bodily eye to see a spirit, yet then God will in a wonderful manner lift up the eye of the body above that which naturally it can do, even as then God will make it a body without passion or heaviness, and, as they say, the torments in hell, and the flames of fire there do by God's power work upon the devils and the souls of men, though spirits, in hell. But it may be a curiosity to determine this, therefore though it may be doubted whether our bodily eyes shall directly behold the glory and majesty of God, yet consequentially we shall, for we shall with our bodily eyes behold Christ in respect of His human nature and body which He has now in heaven, so that the glory which Christ as Mediator has in heaven is externally visibly, and to be beheld by the bodily eyes of a glorified saint. Although God be a light that no man can approach to, yet in and through Christ we may draw nigh to this Light. Now this happiness of the soul's knowing and the body's seeing of God and Christ in heaven must be unspeakable, for there is an excellent consonance and convenience between the faculties and the objects; how far do men go to see objects of worldly glory? It was Augustine's wish that he might have seen Rome in her temporal glory, but what is all this to see Christ sitting on the right hand of God on the throne of glory?"⁶

- III. ***THE PURPOSE OF HIS APPEARANCE.*** He will bring salvation (Hebrews 9:28) and execute judgment (Matthew 16:27; 2 Timothy 4:1). This day of God's judgment is described as majestic (2 Thessalonians 1:9; Jude 14). "It is clear," says Leon Morris, "that the Judge is understood as a regal personage, and One whose appearance is awe-ful beyond description, as dispensing final justice with a royal hand. This great day is everywhere assumed throughout the New Testament. There are preliminary judgments of God throughout history. But at the end there will be the climax, that which proceeds out of the preliminary and partial judgments, and which perfectly fulfills all that they foreshadow."⁷

CONCLUSION: The First Helvetic Confession (1536) in Chapter XI declares, "The Lord Christ, who has overcome and conquered death, sin and the whole power of hell, is our Forerunner, our Leader and our

Head. He is the true High Priest who sits at God's right hand and always defends and promotes our cause, until He brings us back and restores us to the image in which we were created, and leads us into the fellowship of his divine nature. We await this Lord Jesus to come at the end of the world as the true, righteous Judge, who will pass a true judgment upon flesh which he has raised to judgment. He will lead the godly and believing into heaven and will condemn and thrust unbelievers into eternal damnation."⁸ This echoes what the Bible declares, that those outside of Christ (in unbelief) are the *enemies* of Christ (Romans 5:10; 11:28; Philippians 3:18; Colossians 1:21; Hebrews 10:13). In Psalm 2 we read of the Son's anger and wrath, and in Revelation 6:16 we read of "the wrath of the Lamb." Some people have a difficult time reconciling this startling image with that of the sweet and lovely Jesus they have grown so accustomed to hearing about. Jesus did come to seek and to save sinners (those deserving wrath). He came in the form of a servant and in humiliation to accomplish redemption (Philippians 2:5-11). Listen to John Calvin: "He appeared thus, then, to be made obedient in our name, as was necessary to satisfy for our sins. But now He will come to be Judge. He has been judged and condemned so that we might be delivered before the judgment seat of God, and that we might be absolved of all our sins. It will no longer be a matter of coming in such humility. He will come then with the Angels of His glory. That is what St. Paul meant by saying that the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be dreadful."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Helm, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 59.

² This attitude was blatantly demonstrated by one of the leading spokesmen for "New-model" Evangelicals. Robert Brow, in his article "Evangelical Megashift: Why You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin and Hell Recently," *Christianity Today* (Feb. 19, 1990), pp. 12-14. He concludes by saying that "no one would deny that it is easier to relate to a God perceived as kindly and loving." In other words, since the concept of divine judgment is unpleasant, we need to adjust our view of God and make Him more likeable. Despite the fact that distinctively Christian terms are used to describe this kinder, gentler, user-friendly gospel, it is not the true Gospel. Many years ago, C. H. Spurgeon warned the church about such false claims. "It is mere cant to cry, *We are evangelical; we are all evangelical*, and yet decline to say what evangelical means . . . You may believe anything, everything, or nothing and yet be enrolled in the *Evangelical* army – so they say. Cf. John MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Crossway, 1993), p. 194.

³ Noted New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias wrote: "The message of Jesus is not only the proclamation of salvation, but also the announcement of judgment, a cry of warning, and a call to repentance in view of the terrible urgency of the crisis. The number of parables in this category is nothing less than awe-inspiring." *The Parables of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1972), p. 120.

⁴ Philip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2023), p. 159.

⁵ *The Complete Works of William Bates IV* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 395.

⁶ Anthony Burgess, *Christ's Prayer Before His Passion: Expository Sermons on John 17* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), p. 479.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 60.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes III* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1969), p. 215.

⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ* (Baker, 1950), p. 298.