



Regardless of what you may have heard, God is love!

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OK. You're being warned up front. This is a religious column.

I am a lifelong Christian. Yes, I went through the mandatory doubting stage in my early 20s. But I came back around in my 30s.

Full disclosure: I was raised in a small, rural church family in West Tennessee. I attended worship services every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night from birth until I graduated from high school and went off to college. It was not optional in my household.

You may be familiar with the kind of congregation I grew up in, i.e., the traditional, old-school variety: The Lord's Supper every Sunday. No musical instruments (we were the literal manifestation of a 'joyful noise'). Only men were allowed to speak. Women couldn't wear pants, although they did play a lead role when we had dinner-on-the-ground.

The God I was introduced to as a small child was terrifying. He was essentially an angry old man who wanted to send everyone to hell if they didn't do everything on the checklist. I remember being constantly scared to death that I'd end up in hell due to an inadvertent sin for which I hadn't asked forgiveness.

As I grew older, I began to think a lot about the God I had been introduced to. If He created us, why was He so disappointed in us? And if He indeed knows everything, He obviously knew in advance we would fall from grace and need to be redeemed.

Oh, in case you haven't noticed, I was taught you always capitalize any pronouns used in reference to God, so I was familiar with the whole pronoun thing long before most.

As you can probably imagine based on my previous columns, I could be a Sunday School teacher's worst nightmare. I recall asking – I believe it was the middle school class – exactly what "circumcision" was. I still remember the awkward talk I had with my dad that night.

What I had difficulty with, however, was the legalistic orientation that characterized our entire belief system. By-the-way, we never referred to ourselves as a "denomination" since we were the actual church - as opposed to all those imposters apparently masquerading as the church.

And when I say legalistic, I'm referring to the literal interpretation we had of all things Scriptural. Take baptism, for instance. If I heard it once, I heard it a million times, you must be baptized in order to be saved - like it says right there in Acts 2:38.

I believe I was in high school class when I approached the teacher with this scenario: Let's say I'm on an airplane flight and the passenger seated next to me convinces me to accept Jesus as my personal savior. But the plane unfortunately crashes before I can be baptized. Am I going to hell?

Without hesitation, the response was "Yes. You should have done it sooner."

What kind of God would be that unreasonable?

Honestly, the biggest challenge for me – then as well as now - involves Matthew 7:1, “Judge not.” Jesus seemed to be crystal clear about that. We human beings are not to judge other human beings. So why did the folks at my church seem to violate this commandment on a fairly regular basis?

On the numerous occasions I pointed this out, I was told that when we say someone is going to hell, it’s not us judging them, we’re merely passing along God’s judgment.

I didn’t buy that explanation then and I still don’t buy it today.

Only God can judge us; your ultimate fate is between you and God – and no one else. So if you tell someone they’re going to hell, you’re violating one of Jesus’ sacred decrees, making you no better than the person you’re condemning.

God called us to preach. That’s all. Not issue mandates or pass laws. If you don’t come to Jesus of your own free will, it really doesn’t mean anything.

Moreover, if you’re obeying His will because you don’t want to go to hell and not because you truly love Him, then you’re also wasting your time.

In conclusion, I’m happy to report that I’m back attending church regularly, although I abandoned that narrow-minded, myopic, self-serving view of God long ago.

If you want to understand the true nature of the Almighty, look no further than I John 4:16: God is love.

That’s pretty much all you need to know.



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