

Of Heretics, Kings & Foxes

Brad Jersak



The heretics act just like someone who finds a beautiful image of a king that has been constructed by a skillful artist out of precious jewels, and then breaks down this statue of the king into pieces and rearranges the gems into the form of a dog or a fox, and even then, does a poor job of it.

And then they maintain that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist had constructed. They point to the jewels that had been beautifully assembled by the original artist in the image of the king, but have now tragically transposed the king into the shape of a dog. And exhibiting the jewels, they deceive the ignorant who had no conception of what a king's form is actually like. And they persuaded them to believe that their miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king.

In the same way, these teachers patch together old wives' tales—by violently drawing away the oracles of God from their proper context, words, expressions and parables, and they adapt them to their groundless fictions.

—Irenaeus of Lyons,
Against Heresies, 1.8
circa 180 AD

IRENÆUS OF LYONS, the prodigious grand-disciple of the Apostle John (2nd century) was concerned with a pressing problem. He laments the common and ancient problem of facing those who misconstrue and misrepresent God. He's confronting idolatry. And in his world, it was an idolatry that misused our own Scriptures to create a false image of Jesus Christ.

He illustrates this from the Christian world by observing how “the heretics” of his day had dismantled the Scriptures and rearranged them to contort the image of Christ from something so majestic and noble as a heavenly king into something akin to a dog or a fox.

To Irenaeus, this was a great tragedy, because for him, the image of Christ the King had not yet been despoiled by the ugliness of Christian empires ... and dogs and foxes were more like flea-ridden wild pests than cutesy Instagram portraits. He was alarmed at how the glory of God revealed in Christ could be made ugly through the crafty projections constructed by those who reduce God to their own image. To his horror, they even used the very words and parables and prophecies of the Bible to do so!

Of course, anyone could co-opt Irenaeus' illustration to justify one's personal notions of God and accuse their opponents of heresy. Instead, we should seat ourselves at the Lord's Table and ask, with the disciples, “*Lord, is it I? Am I the betrayer? And how would I know?*”

We can only know by looking to Christ, because “*no one has seen God at any time except God the only Son—he has made God known*” (John 1:18). To say that Jesus is the Word of God is to say that “*Jesus Christ is what God has to say about himself*” (Brian Zahnd). The apostolic testimony is that Jesus is the image of

the invisible God and the exact likeness of God's nature. His "arrangement of the gems" refracts the face of God into this world as Love incarnate—the Good manifest as beauty, truth and justice.

So for John's protégé, "heretic" is not merely an insult that gets weaponized to attack those who disagree with us. For Irenaeus, it refers to anyone who rearranges the "gems" of God's self-revelation into an image that looks like something other than Jesus Christ.

OF KINGS

"King" is, for many, a cringe-word these days. We typically recall kings who were patriarchal and hierarchical, the dominators and oppressors of history. America was founded on the rejection of royalty. *The Declaration of Independence* is a repudiation of that kind of king:

"The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States."

That's an apt description of a great host of history's human kings. It seems almost blasphemous to refer to God as King if those are the associations that come with kingship!

In fact, after writing a very popular song about Christ as our king, my friend Jason Upton was so alarmed by the way it was employed in the service of haughty triumphalism and Christian nationalism that he told me he wondered if it was high time the church took a 100-year fast from using the king metaphor.

And yet Christ did speak of a Kingdom. But he refused to be the type of warrior-king that the world demanded. His kingdom is not of this world—and when he appeared to us, our heavenly King rode a donkey's colt, wore a crown of thorns and was enthroned on a cross. For John and for Irenaeus, the glory of Christ's kingship was in his humility.

THE KING'S WAY ©Jason Upton

*There is a road
that leads to peace,
that leads to life,
but few will follow.
We're at the crossroad,
which way will we go?
There is not today
a more holy way
than the steps that lead me
to the cross
where my will
can't be the priority
and these crowns I've gained
I count as loss,
when I hear the Spirit say,
'That this is the true King's way.'*

The heavenly King is beautiful because rather than inflicting tyranny and injury on his subjects and citizens, he bore our tyranny and endured the injuries of his Passion for the life of the world. That's the humble Servant-King who, one day, will bring everyone to their knees in profound thanksgiving for their liberation.

OF FOXES

And yet heresy continues to do its treacherous work, pulling apart the epic saga of redemption and reassembling the pieces into an ostensibly biblical but entirely Christless religiosity.

I see the foxes surging among those who are doubling down on human shame and divine retribution. I said it was an ancient problem. As old as the story of Adam and Eve's first stumble. The moment they turned from glory into self-will, they felt shame. And what emerged from that shame was a false image of God—a God from whom they must hide.

Why? Had God ever given them reason to think he was retributive? What, by warning them of a tree that would be fatally poisonous? By setting a boundary that would ensure human flourishing? No! In their shame, they fabricated a God whose kind warning they misconstrued into threats. They constructed an idol of retribution that continues through the centuries and on into

Christian doctrine. Imagine the sacrilege of dismantling the Cross of divine love and rearranging its “gems” into an image of divine punishment. What’s the cliché in vogue today? *“I have no words.”*

Just when I thought we were beyond that... No, a new “skinny jeans fundamentalism” struts across the big stage. Some of the fastest-growing churches in North America are thriving on a market that wants to push back hard against the supposed liberalism of the beautiful gospel of God’s infinite love. They wave their fists at this gospel and condemn the so-called “God is love heresy.” The foxes have increased their emphasis on God’s wrath against sinners, wrath-appeasement and eternal hellfire.



I recently received this stinging rebuke via social media:

“The word needs to be preached from both sides. You can’t have a gracious God without a wrathful God. You can’t have a just God without a holy God. Ask yourself this question: what did God save us from?”

Apparently, in his model, we need Jesus to save us from God! Now there’s a heresy worthy of the label!

Oddly, the scolding and shaming miraculously find purchase in the ready soil of hearts weary of “50

shades of grey.” It seems there’s a fresh market for disciples who crave authoritarian despots, who demand worldly kings, spiritual or political. Yes, the world is in a crisis of spiraling chaos. But an unChristlike, controlling and vengeful God is not the solution!

GOOD NEWS!

The good news is that the tide is turning. The apostolic truth that God IS love would have been strange news to the Christless religions of the ancient world. But prophets like Abraham, Moses, David, and Hosea began to catch glimpses of the grace that would arrive in the person of Jesus Christ, Love incarnate.

Jesus showed us that God is about restoration, not retribution. The *Abba* Jesus revealed is nothing like the imaginary competitors who thrive on wrath. The great tragedy is that despite Irenaeus’ faithful warnings, even Christianity quickly reverted to pagan notions of an angry god who needs appeasement through violence. That image held sway for many centuries. But now it is fast fading in the light of the glory of the Father’s great love.

Even my agnostic friends now know that the God they can’t believe in is good, kind and merciful. On the night before I wrote this article, an addict friend said to me, *“I don’t believe in God. I just can’t... But if there is a God, that God is love. And I want my daughter to know it!”*

It’s high time that we see that the true King is divine Love, crucified and risen, whose purpose is to save (not to scorch) the world.

His intuitions of God are far more Christlike than what he’d heard from Christless religiosity.

I suspect the time has come for toxic theologies of divine retribution, eternal fiery torment and angry moralism to take their turn on the defensive. Those who slander the good news of God’s grace are now ensnared in their own perilous error. It’s time for them to repent of their foxy ways because that “gospel” has created generations of burnt-out Christians and fed-up atheists. It’s time they see that the true King is divine Love, crucified and risen, whose purpose is to save (not scorch) the world. □

Brad Jersak’s newest book, A More Christlike Word, is now available at www.ptm.com/books or on Amazon.