9News

July/August 2007, Volume 4, Issue 5

Editor's Note

Seems like there's been quite a hullabaloo over the gospel lately.

A man named Chalke, echoing a McLaren, echoing a Green and a Baker, echoing a number of feminists, used the words "divine child abuse" to talk about the cross. In response, two major British evangelical institutions refused to let Chalke speak, thereby cutting ties with a third institution that has Chalke on its board.

A book called *Pierced For Our Transgressions* responded to Chalke, which in turn provoked a heavy-weight named Wright to enter the ring, pound the book, and defend Chalke.

The conservative blogosphering bleacher-sitters then jumped to their feet and started quarrelling with one another over whether or not Wright is one of them. Another heavy-weight named Piper now promises to leap in soon with a book that says "no" and argues that Wright is "harmful to the church and to the human soul." Meanwhile, the U.S. counterpart to the British publisher that printed *Pierced* decided not to touch this book, telling the enquiring yours truly that the book "doesn't add anything to the conversation."

Those evangelicals. Always squabbling with one another instead of doing the work of the ministry. Isn't that what this is?

Well, what does Jude mean when he says "to contend for the faith"? What does Peter mean when he says "be on your guard"? What does John mean when he warns a church not to "even greet" false teachers? What does Paul mean when he says to let anyone with an alternative gospel—my goodness—"be eternally condemned"?

Until this world is ended, the gospel will be challenged from places high and low. It will be tweaked and twisted, denounced and denied. And most fundamentally, Christ calls local churches—not seminaries, not presbyteries, not synods, not theologians, not publishers, and not even eJournals—to defend the gospel. It's the people in the pews and the pulpits whom these apostles address.

Insofar as God permits, this issue of the 9Marks eJournal aims to equip local churches and pastors to do just that—defend the gospel. The sweet news is, defending the gospel means meditating on it. Start with Powlison, and you'll see exactly what I mean.

--Jonathan Leeman

CHALLENGES TO THE GOSPEL

The Therapeutic Gospel *Page 5*
The therapeutic gospel limits itself to giving people what they want, instead of calling for a change of what they ultimately want.
By David Powlison

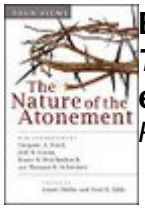
Brian McLaren and the Gospel of Here & Now *Page 9*
This emerging leader is alright on the "already," but neglects the "not yet."
By Greg Gilbert

Satanism, Starbucks, and Other Gospel Challenges *Page 15*
The medium is the message, and theologian David Wells says the gospel message is increasingly compromised by "relevant" methods.
A 9Marks Interview with David Wells

Leaving Home, Returning Home *Page 19*
This biblical theology of the Fall identifies precisely why a gospel is necessary.
By Michael Lawrence

The Devil's Favorite Domino—the Penal in Penal Substitution *Page 26*
Here's why the penal in penal substitution is all precious, and why the devil always topples it first.
By Jonathan Leeman

Gospel Coalition Travelogue *Page 28*
A report from the frontline of Carson and Keller's Gospel Coalition Conference.
By Michael McKinley

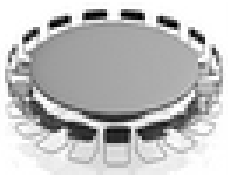


Book Review: *Page 31*
The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views
edited by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy
Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

EXPLAINING THE "GOSPEL" TO NON-CHRISTIANS?

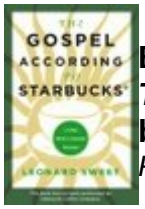
A Pastors' and Theologians' Forum *Page 34*

We asked a roundtable of pastors and theologians how they would explain the gospel universally and how they would explain it in their neighborhood.



Answers from Peter Adams, Greg Gilbert, Liam Goligher, Michael Horton, Michael Nazir-Ali, Frank Retief, "Ed Roberts," Mack Stiles, and Adrian Warnock

Book Review: *Page 38*
Simply Christian
by N.T. Wright
Reviewed by Andrew Davis



Book Review: *Page 46*
The Gospel According to Starbucks
by Leonard Sweet
Reviewed by Byron Straughn

Book Review: *Page 48*
Soul Cravings
by Erwin McManus
Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

GOSPEL MEDITATIONS

Third Mark of a Healthy Church MEMBER: Gospel Saturated *Page 51*
One pastor's six tips for church members on remaining gospel centered.
By Thabiti Anyabwile

Good Friday Meditation: A Fitting Crown *Page 54*
Stop and listen to the Bible's story of thorns and discover why such a crown was fit for the King of kings.
By Michael Lawrence

AUDIO—*LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS*

Evangelism and the Gospel with Will Metzger
posted: 6/1/2007 at http://resources.christianity.com/default/mrki.aspx

Author and evangelist Will Metzger, who helped shaped Mark Dever's understanding of evangelism, discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to evangelism today.

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The Therapeutic Gospel

By David Powlison

What may be the most famous chapter in all of western literature portrays the appeal of a "therapeutic gospel."

In his chapter entitled "The Grand Inquisitor," Fyodor Dostoevsky imagines Jesus returning to sixteenth century Spain (*The Brothers Karamazov*, II:5:v). But Jesus is not welcomed by church authorities. The cardinal of Seville, head of the Inquisition, arrests and imprisons Jesus, condemning him to die. Why? The church has shifted course. It has decided to meet instinctual human cravings, rather than calling men to repentance. It has decided to bend its message to felt needs, rather than calling forth the high, holy, and difficult freedom of faith working through love. Jesus' biblical example and message are deemed too hard for weak souls, and the church has decided to make it easy.

The Grand Inquisitor, representing the voice of this misguided church, interrogates Jesus in his prison cell. He sides with the tempter and the three questions the tempter put to Jesus in the wilderness centuries before. He says that the church will give earthly bread instead of the bread of heaven. It will offer religious magic and miracles instead of faith in the Word of God. It will exert temporal power and authority instead of serving the call to freedom. "We have corrected Your work," the inquisitor says to Jesus.

The inquisitor's gospel is a therapeutic gospel. It's structured to give people what they want, not to change what they want. It centers exclusively around the welfare of man and temporal happiness. It discards the glory of God in Christ. It forfeits the narrow, difficult road that brings deep human flourishing and eternal joy. This therapeutic gospel accepts and covers for human weaknesses, seeking to ameliorate the most obvious symptoms of distress. It makes people feel better. It takes human nature as a given, because human nature is too hard to change. It does not want the King of Heaven to come down. It does not attempt to change people into lovers of God, given the truth of who Jesus is, what he is like, what he does.

THE CONTEMPORARY THERAPEUTIC GOSPEL

The most obvious, instinctual felt needs of twenty-first century, middle-class Americans are different from the felt needs that Dostoevsky tapped into. We take food supply and political stability for granted. We find our miracle-substitute in the wonders of technology. Middle-class felt needs are less primal. They express a more luxurious, more refined sense of self-interest:

- I want to feel loved for who I am, to be pitied for what I've gone through, to feel intimately understood, to be accepted unconditionally;
- I want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness, to be successful in my career, to know my life matters, to have an impact;
- I want to gain self-esteem, to affirm that I am okay, to be able to assert my opinions and desires;
- I want to be entertained, to feel pleasure in the endless stream of performances that delight my eyes and tickle my ears;
- I want a sense of adventure, excitement, action, and passion so that I experience life as thrilling and moving.

The modern, middle-class version of therapeutic gospel takes its cues from this particular family of desires. We might say that the target audience consists of psychological felt needs, rather than the physical felt needs that typically arise in difficult social conditions. (The contemporary "health and wealth" gospel and obsession with "miracles" express something more like the Grand Inquisitor's older version of therapeutic gospel.)

In this new gospel, the great "evils" to be redressed do not call for any fundamental change of direction in the human heart. Instead, the problem lies in my sense of rejection from others; in my corrosive experience of life's vanity; in my nervous sense of self-condemnation and diffidence; in the imminent threat of boredom if my music is turned off; in my fussy complaints when a long, hard road lies ahead. These are today's significant felt needs that the gospel is bent to serve. Jesus and the church exist to make you feel loved, significant, validated, entertained, and charged up. This gospel ameliorates distressing symptoms. It makes you feel better. The logic of this therapeutic gospel is a jesus-for-Me who meets individual desires and assuages psychic aches.

The therapeutic outlook is not a bad thing in its proper place. By definition, a medical-therapeutic gaze holds in view problems of physical suffering and breakdown. In literal medical intervention, a therapy treats an illness, trauma, or deficiency. You don't call someone to repentance for their colon cancer, broken leg, or beriberi. You seek to heal. So far, so good.

But in today's therapeutic gospel the medical way of looking at the world is metaphorically extended to these psychological desires. These are defined just like a medical problem. You feel bad; the therapy makes you feel better. The definition of the disease bypasses the sinful human heart. You are not the agent of your deepest problems, but merely a sufferer and victim of unmet needs. The offer of a cure skips over the sin-bearing Savior. Repentance from unbelief, willfulness, and wickedness is not the issue. Sinners are not called to a U-turn and to a new life that is life indeed. Such a gospel massages self-love. There is nothing in its inner logic to make you love God and love any other person besides yourself. This therapeutic gospel may often mention the word "Jesus," but he has morphed into the meeter-of-your-needs, not the Savior from your sins. It corrects Jesus' work. The therapeutic gospel unhinges *the* gospel.

THE ONCE-FOR-ALL GOSPEL

The real gospel is good news of the Word made flesh, the sin-bearing Savior, the resurrected Lord of lords: "I am the living One, and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). This Christ turns the world upside down. The Holy Spirit rewires our sense of felt need as one prime effect of his inworking presence and power. Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we keenly feel a different set of needs when God comes into view and when we understand that we stand or fall in his gaze. My instinctual cravings are replaced (sometimes quickly, always gradually) by the growing awareness of true, life-and-death needs:

- I need mercy above all else: "Lord, have mercy upon me"; "For Your name's sake, pardon my iniquity for it is very great";
- I want to learn wisdom, and unlearn willful self-preoccupation: "Nothing you desire compares with her";
- I need to learn to love both God and neighbor: "The goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith";
- I long for God's name to be honored, for his kingdom to come, for his will to be done on earth;
- I want Christ's glory, lovingkindness, and goodness to be seen on earth, to fill the earth as obviously as water fills the ocean;
- I need God to change me from who I am by instinct, choice, and practice;
- I want him to deliver me from my obsessive self-righteousness, to slay my lust for self-vindication, so that I feel my need for the mercies of Christ, so that I learn to treat others gently;
- I need God's mighty and intimate help in order to will and to do those things that last unto eternal life, rather than squandering my life on vanities;
- I want to learn how to endure hardship and suffering in hope, having my faith simplified, deepened, and purified;
- I need to learn to worship, to delight, to trust, to give thanks, to cry out, to take refuge, to hope;
- I want the resurrection to eternal life: "We groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body";
- I need God himself: "Show me Your glory"; "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus."

Make it so, Father of mercies. Make it so, Redeemer of all that is dark and broken.

Prayer expresses desire. Prayer expresses your felt sense of need. Lord, have mercy upon us. Song expresses gladness and gratitude at desire fulfilled. Song expresses your felt sense of who God is and all that he gives. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. But there are no prayers and songs in the Bible that take their cues from the current therapeutic felt needs. Imagine, "Our Father in heaven, help me feel that I'm okay just the way I am. Protect me this day from having to do anything I find boring. Hallelujah, I'm indispensable, and what I'm doing is really having an impact on others, so I can feel good about my life." Have mercy upon us! Instead, in our Bible we hear a thousand cries of need and shouts of delight that orient us to our real needs and to our true Savior.

GOOD GOODS, BAD GODS

Properly understood, carefully interpreted, the felt needs make good gifts. But they make poor gods. Get first things first. Seek first the Father's kingdom and his righteousness, and every other good gift will be added to you.

This is easy to see in the case of the three particular gifts offered by the Grand Inquisitor's therapeutic gospel. It is a good thing to have a stable source of food, "bread for tomorrow" (Matt. 6:11, literally). All people everywhere seek food, water, and clothing (Matt. 6:32). Our Father knows what we need. But seek first his kingdom. You do not live by bread alone, but by every word out of his mouth. If you worship your physical needs, you will only die. But if you worship God the giver of every good gift,

you will be thankful for what he gives; you will still have hope when you suffer lack; and you will surely feast at the endless Banquet.

A sense of wonder and mystery is also a very good thing. But the same caveat, the same framework, applies. God is no wizard of Oz, creating experiences of wonder for the sake of the experience. Jesus said "no" to making a spectacle of himself in the midst of temple crowds. His daily faithfulness to God is a wonder upon wonder. Get first things first. Then you'll appreciate glory in small ways and large. In the end you will know all things as wonders, both what is (Rev. 4) and what has happened (Rev. 5). You will know the incomprehensible God, creator and redeemer, whose name is Wonderful.

Similarly, political order is a good gift. We are to pray for the authorities to rule well, so that we may live peacefully (1 Tim. 2:2). But if you *live for* a just society, you will always be disappointed. Again, seek first God's kingdom. You'll work toward a just social order, enjoy it to the degree it's attainable, have reason to endure injustice. In the end, you will know unutterable joy on the day when all persons bow to the reign of the true King.

Of course, God gives good gifts. But he also gives the best gift, the inexpressible Gift of gifts. The Grand Inquisitor burned Jesus at the stake in order to erase the Gift and the Giver. He chose to give people good things, but discarded first things.

The things offered by the contemporary therapeutic gospel are a bit trickier to interpret. The odor of self-interest and self-obsession clings closely to that wish list of "I want_____." But even these, carefully reframed and reinterpreted, do gesture in the direction of a good gift. The overall package of "felt needs" is systematically misaligned, but the pieces can be properly understood. Any "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6) makes itself plausible by offering Lego-pieces of reality assembled into a structure that contradicts revealed truth. Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve was plausible only because it incorporated many elements of reality, continually gesturing in the direction of truth, even while steadily guiding away from the truth: "Look, a beautiful and desirable tree. and God has said that the test will reveal both good and evil, with the possibility of life not death arising from your choice. Just as God is wise, so you the chooser can become like God in wisdom. Come now and eat." So close, yet so far away. Almost so, but the exact opposite.

Consider the five elements we have identified with the therapeutic gospel:

1. "Need for love"? It is surely a good thing to know that you are both known and loved. God who searches the thoughts and intentions of our hearts also sets his steadfast love upon us. However all this is radically different from the instinctual craving to be accepted *for* who I am. Christ's love comes pointedly and personally *despite* who I am. You are accepted for who Christ is, because of what he did, does, and will do. God truly accepts you, and if God is for you, who can be against you? But in doing this, he does not affirm and endorse what you are like. Rather, he sets about changing you into a fundamentally different kind of person. In the real gospel you feel deeply known and loved, but your relentless "need for love" has been overthrown.

2. "Need for significance"? It is surely a good thing for the works of your hands to be established forever: gold, silver, and precious stones, not wood, hay, and straw. It is good when what you do with your life truly counts, and when your works follow you into eternity. Vanity, futility, and ultimate insignificance register the curse upon our work life – even midcourse, not just when we retire, or when we die, or on the Day of Judgment. But the real gospel inverts the order of things presupposed by the therapeutic gospel. The craving for impact and significance – one of the typical "youthful lusts" that boil up within us – is merely idolatrous when it acts as Director of Operations in the human heart. God does not meet your need for significance; he meets your need for mercy and deliverance from your obsession with personal significance. When you turn from your enslavement and turn to God, then your works do start to count for good. The gospel of Jesus and the fruit of faith are not tailored to "meet your needs." He frees from the tyranny of felt needs, remakes you to fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl. 12:13). In the divine irony of grace, that alone makes what you do with your life of lasting value.

3. "Need for self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion"? To gain a confident sense of your identity is a great good. Ephesians is strewn with several dozen "identity statements," because by this the Spirit motivates a life of courageous faith and love. You are *God's* – among the saints, chosen ones, adopted sons, beloved children, citizens, slaves, soldiers; part of the workmanship, wife and dwelling place – every one of these *in Christ*. No aspect of your identity is self-referential, feeding your "self-esteem." Your opinion of yourself is far less important than God's opinion of you, and accurate self-assessment is derivative of God's assessment. True identity is God-referential. True awareness of yourself connects to high esteem for Christ. Great confidence in Christ correlates to a vote of fundamental no confidence in and about yourself. God nowhere replaces diffidence and people-pleasing by self-assertiveness. In fact, to assert your opinions and desires, as is, marks you as a fool. Only as you are freed from the tyranny of your opinions and desires are you free to assess them accurately, and then to express them appropriately.

4. "Need for pleasure"? In fact, the true gospel promises endlessly joyous experience, drinking from the river of delights (Ps. 36). This describes God's presence. But as we have seen in each case, this is keyed to the reversal of our instinctive cravings, not to their direct satisfaction. The way of joy is the way of suffering, endurance, small obediences, willingness to identify with

human misery, willingness to overthrow your most persuasive desires and instincts. I don't need to be entertained. But I absolutely NEED to learn to worship with all my heart.

5. "Need for excitement and adventure"? To participate in Christ's kingdom is to play a part within the Greatest Action-Adventure Story Ever Told. But the paradox of redemption again turns the whole world upside down. The real adventure takes the path of weakness, struggle, endurance, patience, small kindnesses done well. The road to excellence in wisdom is unglamorous. Other people might take better vacations and have a more thrilling marriage than yours. The path of Jesus calls forth more grit than thrill. He needed endurance far more than he needed excitement. His kingdom might not cater to our cravings for derring-do and thrill-seeking, but "solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion's children know."

We say "yes" and "amen" to all good gifts. But get first things first. The contemporary therapeutic gospel in its many forms takes our 'gimmes' at face value. It grabs for the goodies. It erases worship of the Giver, whose greatest gift is mercy towards us for what we want by instinct, choice, enculturation, and habit. He calls us to radical repentance. Bob Dylan described the therapeutic's alternative in a remarkable phrase: "You think He's just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires" (from When You Gonna Wake Up?). Second things are exalted as servants of Number One.

Get first things first. Get the gospel of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and glory. Live the gospel of repentance, faith, and transformation into the image of the Son. Proclaim the gospel of the coming Day when eternal life and eternal death are revealed, the coming Day of Christ.

WHICH GOSPEL?

Which gospel will you live? Which gospel will you preach? Which needs will you awaken and address in others? Which Christ will be your people's Christ? Will it be the christette who massages felt need? Or the Christ who turns the world upside down and makes all things new?

The Grand Inquisitor was very tender-hearted towards human felt need—very sympathetic to the things that all people everywhere seek with all their heart, very sensitive to the difficulty of changing anyone. But he proved to be a monster in the end. There is a saying in mercy ministries that runs like this, "If you don't seek to meet people's physical needs, it's heartless. But if you don't give people the crucified, risen and returning Christ, it's hopeless." Jesus fed hungry people bread, and Jesus offered his broken body as the bread of eternal life. It is ultimately cruel to leave people in their sins, captive to their instinctive desires, in despair, under curse. The current therapeutic gospel sounds tender-hearted at first. It is so sensitive to pressure points of ache and disappointment. But in the end it is cruel and Christ-less. It does not foster true self-knowledge. It does not rewrite the script of the world. It creates no prayers or songs.

We must be no less sensitive but far more discerning. Jesus Christ turns human need upside down, creating prayer. He is the inexpressible Gift of gifts, creating song. And he gives all good gifts, both now and forever. Let every knee bow, and let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

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July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology, Counseling

Brian McLaren and the Gospel of Here & Now

By Greg Gilbert

In Brian McLaren's book *New Kind of Christian*, the wise, penetrating, and affably Jamaican "Neo" say to his younger, less enlightened protégé: "OK, you asked for it. Dan, I don't think that most Christians have any idea what the gospel really is" (105)

If ever a gauntlet has been thrown down, McLaren has done it here. This is an astonishing claim—"most Christians have no idea what the gospel really is." At first glance, McLaren does not seem like the kind of guy given to throwing down gauntlets. He writes in a smooth and engaging style, and the smiling avuncular face on the back cover-flaps of his books sticks with you as you read. His style and manner is hypnotizing in a way. Perusing his books, you almost forget that you're reading, and you begin to think you're sitting with McLaren over lattes on a sunny day, talking, conversing, questioning, and thinking. For all his off-the-cuff casualness, however, McLaren's corpus of writing is nothing if not deliberate. He has an agenda, and it's to reset altogether the church's understanding of the gospel.

Essentially, McLaren believes that the church, considered as a whole, has misunderstood and misapplied the gospel of Jesus. It has traded Jesus' "gospel of the kingdom" for a gospel of "getting into heaven after you die." Instead of being concerned with matters of justice and injustice, good and evil around the globe, the church has been hamstrung by the idea of "getting your butt into heaven," as one of McLaren's characters puts it. McLaren wants to replace that gospel with a gospel that calls Christians to join Christ's mission of working for "God's dream" for the world. In other words, he wants Christians to be less concerned about heaven and hell, and more concerned about working in this life toward what God intends the world to be.

Frankly, much of what McLaren presents is compelling. As I read the story of Millie, a Latina woman in New Jersey who invaded a rundown neighborhood in Camden, planted a church, and stuck out the disappointments to minister to her neighbors, my heart jumped. I know it's fiction. There may not even be such a place. But who will argue that the vision is not good? A gospel that gets its hands dirty in the process of loving the unlovable is good and right, and McLaren is right to point out that very real side of the kingdom of God as Jesus and the apostles preached it.

For all that, McLaren's explanation of the kingdom of God is only half right—or at least he has paid miserably insufficient attention to the other half. If he has gotten the social and political aspect of the kingdom right, he has vastly understated its spiritual dimension. And if he has gotten right the here-and-now side of the kingdom, he has woefully understated its eschatological "there-and-then" element.

Those are not insignificant deficiencies. They finally leave McLaren with a gospel so nearly emptied of eternity, so tethered to the here-and-now, that it really has no ability at all to offer a full and lasting hope. Indeed, his gospel has no obvious place even for the cross.

MCLAREN'S VIEW OF THE KINGDOM

According to McLaren, the gospel of the kingdom is not primarily a message about salvation from God's wrath against sin and future blessedness with Christ. Rather, the gospel is the good news that God has invaded this dark world and, in the face of its exclusionary systems and cruel powers, has called out a people who will lead lives marked by love, compassion, and acceptance. Most Christians, he says, have missed Jesus' point entirely. They have made the gospel into a religion, when Jesus meant it to be a revolution. "What if Jesus' secret message reveals a secret plan?" he writes. "What if he didn't come to start a new religion—but rather came to start a political, social, religious, artistic, economic, intellectual, and spiritual revolution that would give birth to a new world?" (*Secret Message*, 4).

McLaren believes that where the church has gone wrong is in abstracting Jesus' gospel from its first-century context. The "secret message of the Kingdom," he argues, only makes sense when it is seen in the political and social situation into which Jesus proclaimed it.

At the time of Jesus' life and ministry, the nation of Israel was under the foot of Roman oppression. It was Caesar's rule, not God's, which dominated the daily consciousness of the people. The prophets' hope of God establishing his lordship in a renewed Israelite kingdom with a new Davidic king seemed remote. To make matters worse, the Roman Caesars regularly

referred to themselves as divine, and the peoples under their domination were expected in most cases to revere them as gods.

Several different responses to this Roman oppression eventually arose among the Jews. First, the Zealots believed that God's people were being dominated because they were weak and spineless. They proposed rising up, fighting and killing the Romans, and establishing the promised and hoped-for kingdom of God by force. The Herodians (including a group of religious leaders known as the Sadducees) thought this was madness. In the face of imperial strength, they argued, the only safe course was for Israel to keep its head down, cooperate with the Romans, and survive. Another group, the Essenes, thought the best course was to seek spiritual enlightenment by stealing off into the wilderness and establishing spiritual communities. Finally, the Pharisees believed that Israel had fallen under oppression because of sin. "If we could only make our lives pure and sinless," they thought. "If we would only obey the Law of Moses more fully, God would deliver us from the domination of Rome. Our oppression is the fault of the sinners—the drunkards, gluttons, prostitutes, and Sabbath-breakers."

It was into this cultural and political milieu that Jesus came preaching, "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Against the Roman imperial claims, this was not a non-confrontational message. It was a declaration of revolt. "This kingdom throws down a direct challenge to the supremacy of the empire of Caesar centered in Rome, for in the kingdom of God, the ultimate authority is not Caesar but rather the Creator" (*Secret Message*, 17). But it was not the kind of revolution the Zealots would have wanted. This was a revolution of peace, love, and compassion. Those who joined this kingdom would not fight the Romans, but walk an extra mile with them when forced to carry the legionnaires' packs. They wouldn't resist when the Romans struck them, but would turn the other cheek. And they would make it their mission to care for the poor, the outcast, and the afflicted in kindness, mercy, and grace (*Generous Orthodoxy,* 91). In short, they would launch a cultural, social, and political revolution that would confront the oppressive, dominating structures of the day and seek to replace them with a kingdom more in line with what God intended in the first place.

Of course, this message of a new world, a new kingdom based on love instead of dominance, was actually foretold by the prophets centuries before Jesus. So what's so radical about the message of Jesus? It is that Jesus was not merely proclaiming a kingdom that is coming, he was proclaiming a kingdom that has come! "The kingdom is *at hand*, available to be grasped, knocking at the door—not just someday in the future, but *here and now*. Here and now!" (*Secret Message*, 24)

Here is where this secret message of the kingdom confronts our own understanding of the gospel today. As the character Neo puts it to Dan,

We hear "kingdom of heaven" and we think "kingdom of life after death." But that's the very opposite of what Jesus is talking about. Remember—he says repeatedly, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, has arrived! It's near, here, at hand, among you! It's not just about after you die; it's about here, now, in this life! (*New Kind of Christian*, 107)

Rather than focusing on salvation in the afterlife, McLaren says, Jesus calls us to live a radical new life in sync with this radical new kingdom.

In the same way, too, most of us have misunderstood the phrase "eternal life," McLaren says. It does not mean "life after you die," but rather something like "life of the ages" in contrast to "life as people are living it these days." Thus when Jesus tells the rich young ruler what he must do to inherit eternal life, he tells him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. All those locutions—"eternal life," "life to the full," even just "life"—give us another picture of what it means to live in a way that is radically different from the way the world lives: "a life that is full and overflowing, a higher life that is centered in an interactive relationship with God and with Jesus." Eternal life is kingdom life, and kingdom life, in turn, is the good news of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed (*Secret Message,* 37).

PROBLEMS WITH MCLAREN'S VIEW OF THE KINGDOM

As I said before, much in McLaren's telling of this story is commendable and exciting. Surely Jesus' message did explode into a social and political context, and surely the message of Jesus will have social, political, cultural, artistic, economic, and intellectual ramifications in our own context. On top of that, what Christian's heart does not long to invade a world of darkness and hopelessness with Jesus' message of love and compassion and salvation?

But McLaren's view of the kingdom of God is not sufficient. He has sold it short. And in doing so he has missed out on a good part of what makes the gospel of the kingdom so glorious. A determined critic could literally write a book compiling all the errors and misfires that run through McLaren's books. In the interest of brevity, however, let me offer what I think are the two overarching problems (one might say *meta*-problems) that beset McLaren's understanding of the kingdom:

(i) McLaren's emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as present, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as eschatological.

(ii) McLaren's emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as social and political, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as spiritual.

Before proceeding to consider these two problems, however, let me first point to two factors that make the attempt to critique McLaren's views unendingly frustrating, both of which make it necessary to word any criticism with exceeding care, for fear that a sentence or two could be produced from one of six or seven books to challenge the critique. First, a good deal of McLaren's writing is fictional, and his theological views are placed in the mouths of characters with whom McLaren himself sometimes agrees and sometimes disagrees. In fact, he carefully warns that the total viewpoint of any one character should not be taken as his own. Sometimes he even has a character say something with much assurance, and then only in the notes at the back of the book McLaren says something like, "Things are actually a bit more complex than Neo realizes" (see for example *The Last Word*, 189)

Second, McLaren occasionally drops into his text a sentence or two that will cut the feet out from under his critics. I'm not *denying* this or that, he says, and then he spends an entire book talking about how the thing he's supposedly not denying is in fact a horrible and ungodly misunderstanding of the gospel. Yet right there, at the bottom of page 142 or whatever, is that one sentence, plain as day, denying that he's denying it. The stone upon which critics stumble.

This is true of the two statements I make above about McLaren's view, and it's only right that I point that out. In terms of the first statement, for example, McLaren includes a chapter in *The Secret Message of Jesus* about the Christian's final hope being the resurrection of the dead and the full establishment of God's kingdom. "The ultimate hope beyond death," he writes, "is the hope of resurrection, which is the hope of sharing in the 'renewal of all things.' All we have been desiring all our lives, all we have been reaching for . . . will finally and fully come to us" (*Secret Message,* 193). In terms of the second, he has a wise character say at one point, "It's not just personal and eternal, as the conservatives say, and it's not only social and historic, as the liberals tend to say. The Kingdom of God integrates both sides—personal and social, private and public, secret and visible, spiritual and political, historic and eternal, earth and beyond" (*The Last Word*, 149). And in another place, he has Neo explain that "More conservative Christians tend to focus on the eternal dimension—saving one's soul from hell. More liberal Christians tend to focus on the historic dimension—saving the human race and the planet from destruction. The biblical view of salvation was comprehensive of both, and we need to keep both alive—not only the 'getting of individual butts into heaven' but also 'saving the world'" (*New Kind of Christian*, 83). In another place, Neo assures Dan, "And don't worry, Dan, at some point I'm sure we'll talk about justification by grace through faith too, along with the atoning death of Christ and all the other doctrines our good evangelical brothers and sisters think constitute the whole gospel. Because obviously they are important parts of the story" (*New Kind of Christian*, 108).

All this is why I put my critique in terms of "emphasis" and not outright denial. To be sure, that blunts the force of the critique somewhat, but it is also more honest and leaves the critique less vulnerable to collapse at the hands of a single sentence pulled out of a single book. Nevertheless, I believe that in the context of McLaren's corpus of writing, these statements remain relatively isolated and insignificant. His emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as social, political, and present, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as spiritual and eschatological. That this is so will become clear, I think, as we take a closer look.

MORE ALREADY THAN NOT YET

First, McLaren's emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as present, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as eschatological. Certainly McLaren is not wrong to point out that the kingdom of God has a present, here-and-now dimension. Part of the shock of Jesus' message was that the kingdom of God was *at hand*. This was not something that the Jews expected. Based on their reading of the prophets, they expected that the kingdom of God would come in one explosive cataclysm at the end of time, when God himself would descend from heaven, establish his rule in the person of a restored Davidic king in Jerusalem, and subdue all nations of the world under his dominion. Yet here was Jesus preaching that all those prophecies and expectations of the coming kingdom were fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16-21; Matthew 11:2-6). No cataclysm; no explosive descent from heaven; no end of the world. And yet the kingdom was here—now!

This is where McLaren plants his flag. This is his agenda—to convince Christians to turn their eyes to this world, and to realize that the kingdom is already here and that its purpose is to confront the evil, injustice, hate, and oppression in the world. It would take a book to catalogue all the places in McLaren's work where this focus on the here-and-now is obvious. But such a catalogue is not really necessary if one reads his books honestly. The storyline and tenor of every one of them is that the church has messed up by focusing on the future, and it ought to realign its gaze to the present. Nor is he subtle in making that charge. The present, here-and-now dimension of the kingdom, he says at one point, is "more significant" than the eschatological, and he even goes so far as to say that as good as Jesus' work of atonement and redemption is, it is "not terribly important" in terms of this present world and the status quo (*The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 116; *Secret Message*, 33). Even if we acknowledge Neo's jibe as good-natured ribbing, how else but pejoratively are we to take his characterization of the evangelical gospel as "getting your butt into heaven?"

In all of this, McLaren seldom engages and never truly integrates in his program the other major dimension of the kingdom—the "not yet." Even with Jesus' declaration that the "age to come" had broken into the present age, the expectation of an eschatological consummation of the kingdom remained. Both Jesus and the apostles preached this constantly. Even leaving aside the debate over whether Jesus' words in Matthew 24-25 refer to the eschaton or to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the fact remains that Jesus told of a final, consummative judgment that would take place sometime in the future. In John 5:28-29, for example, he says, "for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." In Matthew 25 he tells of the separation of the sheep and the goats. This separation is based on their works in this life to be sure, but it's still a picture of a final, eschatological judgment. And how else but eschatologically can his words to the Pharisees be understood? "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

The apostles also look forward to a future resurrection and judgment. When Paul reminds the Corinthians of "the gospel I preached to you," he talks about the death and resurrection of Christ and then turns immediately to the resurrection of the dead in eternity (1 Cor. 15). After singing a hymn of praise to God for the gospel, he tells the Ephesians they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit "who is the guarantee of our inheritance *until we acquire possession of it*" (Eph. 1:14). A chapter later, he says God has saved us "so that *in the coming ages* he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7). Peter speaks of a "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" and hopes that the genuineness of his readers' faith will be "found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:5-7). The author of Hebrews tells his readers that they are "strangers and exiles on the earth," and that they should look forward to "the city that has foundations" (Heb 11:10). And then there is the Revelation given to John that, despite McLaren's attempts to pull it into the present, remains a testimony to Christ's final coming in power, the final judgment before the White Throne of God, and the consummation of the kingdom at the end of time.

Now again, I don't expect McLaren would deny anything in those last two paragraphs. He does look forward to a final judgment, to a resurrection, and to a final consummation. But this eschatological dimension of the kingdom is vastly underemphasized in his books. McLaren's attention, energy, and focus is all but exclusively on the kingdom as present, and the result is that he ends up with a gospel of the kingdom that is at least as emaciated as he would charge other Christians' eschaton-focused gospel of being.

MORE POLITICAL THAN SPIRITUAL

Second, McLaren's emphasis is overwhelmingly on the kingdom as social and political, to the relative neglect of the kingdom as spiritual. Any fair reading of McLaren's books will confirm that he sees the gospel of the kingdom primarily in political and social terms. Over and over again, Neo puts it like this: "I think what Jesus was about, and really, what all the apostles were about at their best moments . . . was a global, *public* movement or *revolution* to bring holistic reconciliation, a reconnection with God, with others, with ourselves, with our environment. *True* religion, *revolutionary* religion. That's what got them in such trouble" (*New Kind of Christian*, 73). In other words, McLaren's gospel is a "historically rooted, politically engaged approach" in contrast to the "timeless truths approach" that dominates most of evangelicalism today (*Secret Message*, 236).

Again, McLaren is right to say that the gospel has social, political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and artistic dimension. But it seems to me that he has actually downplayed what is truly astonishing and revolutionary about the kingdom. What the Jews *expected* was a social and political kingdom. Had they gotten that, there would have been nothing much astonishing about it at all. What they got instead was a Messiah who went out of his way to make it clear that his kingdom was *not* of this world (John 8:23; 18:36)! He avoided language that would reinforce this-worldly thinking among the Jews, seldom for instance using the term "Messiah" because it held so many this-worldly associations. He knew that if the people started thinking in terms of Messiah, they would try to make him king by force (John 6:15). So he used a term with less political baggage—"Son of Man." Whatever else it might be, Jesus' kingdom was a spiritual one.

This is made even clearer when we consider that both the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself preached that the kingdom confers certain benefits on its members. I appreciate McLaren's emphasis (learned apparently from Lesslie Newbigin) that Christians are elected to service, not privilege (*The Last Word*, 103). But the fact remains that both the prophets and Jesus taught about several benefits that are given to the people of the kingdom. The gift of eschatological salvation is one major benefit (see Ezek. 34:16, 22; Matt. 5:8; 25:21, 23, for example). Forgiveness of sin is another (see Isa. 33:24, Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 18:31; 36:22-28; Mark 1:4; 2:10; Luke 7:48, for example) and righteousness another (see Matt. 5:6; Luke 18:14, for example).

Beyond all this, McLaren misses what is perhaps the most astonishing surprise of the New Testament story: that Jesus filled the roles of the Davidic Messiah, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and Daniel's Son of Man, all at the same time! That McLaren does not see this, or at least does not hint at it in his books, is all the more surprising because he is so careful otherwise to situate the story of Jesus in the narrative of the nation of Israel. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah and the Son of Man of Daniel 7 are not insignificant themes in the Old Testament, and neither were they insignificant ideas in the Jewish mind of Jesus' day.

How McLaren could ignore them so completely—not to mention the startling role they play in Jesus' own self-understanding—is nothing short of a mystery.

At least twice, McLaren accuses the church of imposing on Jesus a message of eternal, spiritual salvation. In his telling, Christians have misinterpreted Paul and John and then used those misreadings to silence the true message of the kingdom found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "Basically, it's a conspiracy theory about Paul and John ganging up against Matthew, Mark, and Luke—well, not really them, but people who interpret them" (*The Last Word,* 149; see also *Secret Message*, 91). But it was no misinterpretation of Paul and John that injected eternal and soteriological meaning into the story of the kingdom. It was Jesus. It was Jesus who declared himself to be the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes (that is, the head of the kingdom), and it was this same Jesus who constantly referred to himself as the divine "Son of Man" from Daniel 7. Further, it was Jesus who said of the Son of Man that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45)—an allusion to the Servant's being made an offering for sin in Isaiah 53:10. With that, Jesus "took over a term that appears in Daniel but that was not widely used in contemporary Jewish hopes, but radically reinterpreted it. . . . Jesus poured the content of the Suffering Servant into the Son of Man concept."

The Jews had hopes for a kingly Messiah and also for a Servant of the Lord; they even had a vague expectation of a divine "son of man" who would appear at the end of the age. But no one ever pulled the three together, at least not until Jesus. Jesus took the divine nature of the Son of Man, joined to it the substitutionary and vicarious suffering of the Servant, and finally incorporated it all with his Messianic role. By the time Jesus finished gathering together all the threads of Jewish hope, the Head of the kingdom was infinitely more than an earthly revolutionary; he was a divine Messiah-King who would suffer and die for his people to win them spiritual salvation, not least so that they would be *able* to live the life of the kingdom on earth. In that light, it is no wonder that Jesus made one's response to his person and message the single determining factor in whether one would be included in the kingdom. The only way into the kingdom was through the blood of the king.

When we begin to grasp that part of the New Testament narrative, we realize that McLaren is simply missing a huge part of the plot. His gospel of the kingdom is so focused on the kingdom's political and social ramifications that he seems blind to this entire astounding storyline.

Indeed, McLaren also seems blind to, or at least relatively uninterested in, the most central moment of the entire Christian faith—the cross. One of the most consistently puzzling things about McLaren's books is how little space or time he has for Christ's work of atonement. McLaren asks for the benefit of the doubt in one of his books, saying, "I know you will find weaknesses to point out. For example, you may wish I had said more on particular dimensions of Jesus' message or life that are of special importance to you" (*Secret Message,* xiii). He gets more specific in a footnote: "For example, the theological meaning of Jesus' death is central to all streams of Christian thought and life, but since this is a book about Jesus' message, I limit my reflections on his death here to how it relates to his primary teaching theme. Emphasizing one theme is not meant to minimize the other" (*Secret Message,* 226).

The reassurance is appreciated, but the lack of attention McLaren gives to the cross across the whole of his corpus cannot be explained away so easily. As always, there are the one-off sentences, as when Neo assures Dan, "And don't worry, Dan, at some point I'm sure we'll talk about justification by grace through faith too, along with the atoning death of Christ and all the other doctrines our good evangelical brothers and sisters think constitute the whole gospel. Because obviously they are important parts of the story" (*New Kind of Christian*, 108). But when the moment finally arrives to talk about the cross, it amounts to a conversation between several characters about six different theories of the atonement, each of which, someone observes, has its own serious problems. When penal substitution is mentioned, for example, one likeable character named Kerry says, "I know that's supposed to mean something to me, and I suppose I can see it, but it raises so many questions. . . . For starters, if God wants to forgive us, why doesn't he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse" (*The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 102). That objection—commonly wielded by feminist theologians—is never answered. It's allowed to hang in the air of the story, as if it were valid or even unanswerable.

Having raised all the historic understandings of the atonement and found them wanting—except perhaps the moral influence theory, about which Kerry says, "I think I like that one best"—McLaren offers his two theories of the atonement. Though he separates them from moral influence, they certainly bear a lot of resemblance. The first he calls the "powerful weakness" theory of the atonement: by becoming vulnerable on the cross and dying at the hands of the Romans, Jesus shows the world that violence is not the answer, that God wants not retaliation and revenge, but kindness and forgiveness (*The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 105). The second theory he offers is based in Neo's experience of being betrayed by his wife and subsequently forgiving her. This theory might appropriately (if awkwardly) be called the "pain-of-forgiveness-made-visible" theory (similar to Jürgen Moltmann's crucified God explanation, perhaps?). "When I think of the cross," Neo says, "I think it's all about God's agony being made visible—you know, the pain of forgiving, the pain of absorbing the betrayal . . . It's not just words; it has to be embodied, and nails and thorns and sweat and tears and blood strike me as the only true language of betrayal and forgiveness" (*The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 107; also, *Secret Message,* 69-71). With these words, predictably, Neo's conversation partners fall into a stunned, contemplative silence.

Reverent silence notwithstanding, it's worth pointing out that both of these theories of the atonement make the cross an audio-visual spectacle and not much else. In the first case, the cross is merely a picture of weakness. In the second, it's merely a picture of God's pain. But in neither case does the cross actually *accomplish* or *do* anything. How does a mere display of weakness or of God's pain do justice to Paul's statement that we are "justified by his blood" and "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:9-10)? The cross was not just a means for God to show the world something, whether weakness or pain or love. It was a saving act. It accomplished something. As the apostle John puts it, "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

The explanation for this weakness in McLaren's thought must lie finally in his deficient view of the kingdom. McLaren's gospel is so socially and politically oriented, so focused on the present, and so unwilling to address the reality of eternity, that it has no obvious place for concepts like substitution, justification, atonement, sacrifice, or propitiation. Yet those are the concepts and themes that come together in the Bible's narrative to give meaning to the cross. The fact is that the kind of kingdom McLaren wants Jesus to have preached—one where each person simply decides to live a life of compassion and love in an effort to redeem the world in the here-and-now and bring about "God's dream" for it—doesn't have any real use for a cross. The fact is, McLaren's two favored theories of the atonement, the only ones not riddled with objections by his characters, are simply not integral to his story. At best, they both make the cross a superfluous illustration of the kind of life the kingdom would call us to live.

CONCLUSION

The irony of all this is that McLaren seems to think that, by reducing Jesus' message of the kingdom to its present, social, and political dimensions, he has thereby discovered a better gospel. Several times in his fictional books, he writes his characters into wide-eyed amazement at Neo's words. "Astonishing!" they say. Or "Neo, that's stunning." And Neo for his part is always quick to point out that this new gospel is better than the old one. I believe Neo is wrong.

As I read and think carefully about McLaren's books, I do not find his understanding of the kingdom to be astonishing or stunning at all, except perhaps in its smallness. In fact, I find it a rather pedestrian imitation of the kingdom Jesus actually declared. What Jesus brought to the world is more than "Follow my example and live better, more tolerant, less oppressive lives." It is rather that, having been reconciled to God by Jesus' blood, we will live in joy with him forever; and therefore we live by his Spirit to his glory in the here-and-now.

The bottom line is that McLaren's gospel is *too* focused on the here-and-now. He charges evangelical Christians with putting too little emphasis on the world, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he himself winds up putting too little emphasis on God. The fact is, McLaren does not sufficiently call human beings to grapple with and exult in what God did for us in Christ. Put another way, he does not place concern for the here-and-now in the context of the eternal. That is a grievous error, for it is only when we have a deep understanding of our eternal relationship with God, won by Jesus Christ, that concern for the present world is placed in its proper perspective. The Bible could not be clearer about this. Good works apart from Christ's saving work are nothing. But good works springing from a heart that has been changed by God's regenerating power are the sweetest of fruit. To be sure, McLaren's gospel calls us to action, and that's good. But it does not well enough call us to worship. The true gospel, on the other hand, does both. It calls us to action, but only after it has called us to adore the One who acted on our behalf.

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July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Satanism, Starbucks, and Other Gospel Challengers

A 9Marks Interview with David Wells

9M: ***Apostles of church growth tell us that pop culture is our friend and the best vehicle for advancing the gospel. Why do you think that pop culture poses a threat to the church's ability to hold onto and articulate the gospel?***

DW: Let me start by saying there isn't a lot of difference between popular and elite culture at some points. The main difference is in the number who participate. So the real question, I think, is what does our culture, in its different layers, have in its life that is contrary to the truth of God and the gospel? That's the question we've got to be asking. The people that you mentioned are asking the question, "What is it in our culture"—and the more popular the better—"that we can utilize for our own success?" These are the folks who get their surfboards out and wait for any wave that they can ride to the shore. They look at the culture as a means to their own success.

What we should be doing, however, is looking at the culture—whether high or low—and asking the question, "At what points is this antithetical to the Word of God?" Now that's a question not often asked—I don't really see it.

What's been lost in all of this is a serious working doctrine of sin. If Barna's numbers are correct, the majority—54 percent—of those who claim to be born again in America do not believe that we are born with a bent human nature. In theological terms, these are Pelagians. If you start with this sort of naïve, innocent view of human life, you will have a naïve and innocent view of human culture. The one carries over into the other. We today in the evangelical church don't preach as if—and we don't think as if—we had enemies. And that is a huge mistake.

9M: ***Then what specific elements of culture today, whether pop or elite, does the church wrongly treat as "neutral" and take for granted? Are there certain things that we should be more careful about?***

DW: In every culture, you've always got to ask what any given practice, fad, fashion, or way of thinking does to Christian faith. That's your fundamental question. Some things may be neutral. How long men grow their hair, I don't think, is particularly important. Nor is what musical instruments contribute to the popularity of music styles. But those are not really the things that the church marketers have their eye on. They're trying to find ways of being hip. That's the bottom line.

9M: ***Many churches and ministries today boast of using new methods, while proclaiming the same message. Is this the right way to go about it, or not? Isn't there at least some truth in the phrase "the medium is the message"?***

DW: I think there is a lot of truth in that phrase ["the medium is the message"]. This argument that the message is preserved while the means of delivery is changed is a misleading proposition, because the message being delivered almost invariably is stripped of its theological content. That is the whole point about it. In many of these churches, they disguise their identity. You see it visually because they don't want to be thought of as a church. So religious symbols go. Pews go. The pulpit is replaced by a Plexiglas stand. And then the Plexiglas stand disappears and you have people on barstools.

Now you could say that perhaps nothing has changed—and I certainly wouldn't die on a hill for a pulpit. But subtle messages are being sent by all of this. In an earlier generation, the pulpit was at the center of the church. It was visually central. You saw it. Oftentimes it was elevated. And this was a way of saying to the congregation, "The Word of God that we are about to hear is above normal human discussions. We've got to pay attention to it, because it is authoritative."

Now we have replaced the pulpit not even by a barstool, but by a cup of Starbucks coffee, which speaks of "human connecting." And human connecting has become more important to us than our hearing from God. Now when we make these kinds of changes to our method, we are really making changes in the message that is delivered.

9M: ***So would you encourage pastors to put down the Starbucks cup and to stand behind a pulpit?***

DW: I absolutely would. I'm not saying that the Word of God absolutely cannot be preached from a barstool or with a cup of coffee in hand. But as a former architect, I think I understand how environments—that is, architectural environments—affect people. There are ways of confirming what is being said by what you see. Now what you see is not a substitute for what is said. So some of the beautiful gothic cathedrals are lifeless and dead spiritually, and all the beauty of those cathedrals can never substitute for the truth of God. But the other side of that also plays out. If we have nothing but Starbucks and light conversation around the Word of God, we will find that the Word of God disappears.

9M: ***How do we cultivate a culture in a church that is able to maintain the idea of the gospel as a truth proposition? In your previous answer, you referred to the significance of architecture for where the church gathers. Are there other things on a practical level that help us to cultivate a culture where we believe in truth and the gospel as truth?***

DW: Well, one of the really interesting things about so much "outreach"—and I want to acknowledge the genuineness of many of the motives in evangelism; I'm not questioning those—is based on several very important miscalculations. And one of the miscalculations concerns what people actually want to hear. Many churches assume that people cannot hear the Word of God or a gospel message that has any theological words in it. So they downplay it. But the results of some important research among formerly unchurched people who then came to church are shocking. When these individuals were asked what they liked about the church, ninety-odd percent said that what was preached was important to them. And almost 90 percent said that they wanted to know what the church believed. They wanted to hear its doctrine. Now that is just the reverse of what the common outreach approach assumes. It assumes people don't want to know. In actual fact, those who want to come into the church do want to know.

So demonstrating and practicing the centrality of God's truth is important. But also, that has to be discovered and practiced within a context of Christian believing. People sense this when they come into a body of believers. It's not only having good preaching, but it's having good people too.

9M: ***And by that you mean…***

DW: By that I mean people around this preached Word who have bowed before Christ, who accept his lordship, who love one another in consequence, who've placed his righteousness first, who seek these things above all else, who strengthen each other, who pray for each other, who care for the world, who are concerned about injustices outside the church door. When outsiders walk into a church or have been there for very long, they sense whether all of these things are there or not.

9M: ***The verse that I hear far and away most often from members of the church growth movement comes from Paul when he says, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law…so as to win those under the law" (1 Cor. 9:20). Is this verse being used rightly?***

DW: I would say that this verse is talking about behavioral adaptations and not adaptations in belief and truth content.

9M: ***So this would mean something like, dressing more like the community that you're trying to reach?***

DW: That I would say you ought to do. Missionaries face this all the time. Missionaries have to make adaptations first of all in their behavior. If you're living in a part of the world that doesn't have electricity, you follow the rhythms of day and night in a way that one doesn't in the West. In the West, we can work long hours at night. But in some places you basically go to bed when the sun goes down and get up when the sun rises. If you're a missionary, that is an adaptation you make.

You can also make adaptations in dress. Sometimes when I'm in Africa I dress in African dress.

You also adapt as a missionary to the people in terms of empathy. You try to enter into their lives so that you can understand their fears. You may not believe that the source of those fears is real. For example, in parts of the world people are very worried about spirits that lurk in trees, rocks, fields, and so forth. As a missionary, you don't worry about such spirits. But you can certainly enter into their fears so that you can better understand how they are looking at their world.

But the one place where you absolutely cannot adapt is in terms of the message you are bringing. If you adapt there, your mission is over.

And the same is true in our Western context, which is increasingly a missionary context. By all means, let us make these other adaptations. But we cannot adapt to a postmodern skepticism about the reality of truth, or about our ability to discover the truth. I acknowledge that we must recognize our sinfulness, our biases, and our blind spots; we have to check each other in terms of our understanding of the truth of Scripture. But at the end of the day, we have to say—as we hear many times in Scripture—that we are convinced of this truth that God has given us. And this truth corresponds to what is actually there in reality. Yes, God is always so much greater and more awesome than anything that I can think, yet I'm also confident that when I die he's not going to be other than what he has revealed himself to be. I know this truth; I have it in Scripture. And that is the thing that cannot be yielded.

9M: ***You mentioned the idea of being a missionary in a foreign culture where people believe in spirits in rocks and trees, and not entering into that fear or belief, yet addressing people where they are at. How do we do that in a culture in which people are looking for therapy? In your books you have helpfully criticized a therapeutic gospel. But as I***

recently heard you say, "how people are feeling has become a relentless part of our self-consciousness." So how do we address people with the gospel as they are looking for therapy?

DW: Let me go back to this matter of spirits, which is a very real and deep fear in other parts of the world. We here in the West don't have that fear because we don't believe in those kinds of spirits. But I have found that for those who do, nothing is more liberating than understanding that, at the cross, Christ disarmed the powers of darkness. The conquest motif gives you a doorway, or point of connection, with such people. Then you move on to consider the other biblical metaphors for what Christ's death accomplished. As you're explaining the gospel, you then ask, "Why do we need to be liberated from the hold of these powers of darkness? It is because of sin." Then you go to justification.

I would say that the parallel for us in the West is not our fear of spirits, but the oppressiveness of an empty and meaningless life. That's probably our point of entry in the West. There is no question that living in Western societies, and not the least in America, is very, very difficult. We tend to think that because we have so many opportunities, consumer goods, and everything else we want that life is easy. And certainly it's easier in some respects than for people who scratch for their food every day. Our challenge is not so much physical—food, safety, disease—it's psychological. It's inward, because of the difficulties of living in this culture.

We live with levels of stress, anxiety, and depression that are unprecedented. All of us struggle with not being connected, whether to our families or to a place because we move around. We may have proximity to people but are oftentimes without good or close relationships. All of these things take their toll upon us. And we cannot say, "This is not real." It is real. That's why the relentless question that haunts us all the time is, "How am I feeling?"

So I'm not opposed to therapeutic questions. The problem is, over the last number of decades we have moved from inhabiting a moral world to inhabiting a psychological world. When we encounter difficulties, therefore, we tend to look for a psychological technique that will address them.

Now I'm not saying that there aren't some techniques that can help us with anxiety and stress. Some people have found, for example, that if they stop every two or three hours, get up, walk outside, and breathe fresh air, it helps a little.

But this doesn't help them with the most fundamental questions. There is something worse than feeling bad; it is being bad. Our most fundamental questions are the moral ones, because our most fundamental relationship is how we relate to God in his character. So, though there might be remedial help for these pangs that we feel, the basic help that we need does not come from psychologists as psychologists. It should come from preachers who deliver the Word of God to us. It should come from God's truth, because God's truth can align the different parts of our life.

9M: ***So to summarize what you're saying for the local church preacher, "Show sensitivity to the alienation, the inner angst, the emotional turmoil people feel; yet use all these to segue to the Word of God and the more fundamental measurement of their relationship to him."***

DW: Exactly. We have to learn how to be men and women of God not in a prior age, not in a context that's easier, but in our own context. This is where we have to live. This is the time that God has given us. It's the only time that God has given us. So we have to learn how to do it, or it won't get done at all.

9M: ***Given today's particular circumstances and societal challenges, what do you perceive as some of the principal challenges to the church in our time for maintaining a right understanding of the gospel—from within the church and without?***

DW: I believe that the evangelical world is in a transitional time. The older evangelical coalition is running out of steam, and new approaches are emerging. The nice thing about habits is that you don't have to think. If you drive the same route to work, you don't think about it. But once these things fall apart all kinds of questions open up. Given declining biblical literacy, given the declining place of expository preaching in the church, the evangelical movement will find more and more live questions and less and less biblical capital from which to respond to those questions. This means that the evangelical movement will find itself in more and more trouble. I see that as a major trouble from within.

From without, I can only see an ever greater acceleration of what we experience. Globalization is a reality. As goods, information, people, drugs, and body parts move across national boundaries, it's as if they don't exist. What this does is bring to us and everyone else more and more knowledge of other people, other places, other religions, other lifestyles—all of which makes relativism an inevitability. And the church is going to have real trouble sustaining its belief in the uniqueness of Christ.

9M: ***I agree with where we are and where we're headed. But isn't this also exciting? It sounds more like the world of the New Testament. And I have no lack of confidence in the gospel's power to acquit itself. I realize that this may***

mean millions of families in the West that thought of themselves as Christian families of the second and third generations never were. But I can imagine that beyond nominalism is a very exciting array of witnesses to the truth of the gospel in the churches that God will raise up.

DW: I think this is right. What happens when a society or significant part of it remains in the habit of going to church, which is still the case today in the American South? Evangelicals get into the habit of thinking in certain ways. So people go to church simply because they've always gone to church. And habits of thought are sustained simply because they've always been thought.

What a new context does is to call everything into question. So it cuts both ways. I mentioned the negatives because you asked for the problems and challenges. But the other side to it is that we have many opportunities that are opening up—and without this confusing factor of nominal Christians. After all, the evangelical world has produced its own set of nominal Christians.

9M: ***You have often talked about secularization and secularism—secularization being a cultural process that we're all a part of; secularism being the relatively rare, post-enlightenment philosophy of "there is only this age." I believe there's an analogy to be made for Christianity, particularly when it embraces the majority of people in a culture. In parts of American culture, there has been an "evangelicalization" that has involved many. It may be morally disjointed and not uniform, but it's real. As this process falls apart, however, it becomes clear that perhaps most of those people who've been involved in the light habits and patterns of evangelicalization have not accepted the evangel itself—secularism's opposite. They've simply been part of a sort of cultural movement. But again, that falling apart presents an exciting opportunity for the gospel.***

DW: I think that's right. People will come into the church and really find redemption. The difficult thing is that they will find a false redemption from more and more dark and bad things coming out of society. Our society, from a moral and spiritual point of view, is coming apart at the seams. So we are going to find people coming into the church who have been involved in Satanism and all kinds of bad things. But that also is exciting. It just means that pastors are going to have their work cut out for them.

9M: ***Thank you for your time.***

DW: You're certainly welcome.

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July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Leaving Home, Returning Home

By Michael Lawrence

One of the greatest stories ever told is the story of a man trying to go home again. He'd been off fighting in the greatest war of his age, but now his biggest challenge lay ahead of him: getting home. His name was Ulysses, and his story is told in Homer's great work, *The Odyssey.*

Ulysses' problem is not merely that he didn't know the way. It's that somehow, having left, the world had gotten bigger. The obstacles had become harder (would he outwit the Cyclops or become his dinner?). The choices had become more agonizing (would he lose his entire ship to Charybdis or just a few men to Scylla?). And the temptations had become stronger (not just Sirens, but the beautiful Calypso tempting him to abandon home altogether). At several points in the story, you wonder if Ulysses will ever make it back. Not only that, will he find his wife and his son, his home and his kingdom, as he left them? Most important of all, will they find him the same man he was when he left twenty years before?

Two thousand five hundred years after that story was written down it still resonates with us. Despite all of the advances in technology, medicine, and knowledge which have added to our "quality of life," deep down the feeling that we live out our lives in a place which is habitable, but finally inhospitable, is as inescapable to moderns as it was to the ancient Greeks. As Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, "What befalls man is a tragic lot. There is no denying this in the final end. But we must deny it all along the way. Mankind was fashioned for eternity." Fashioned for eternity, and yet we find ourselves *here*, in a world that--for all it's beauty--is savagely cruel and unforgiving. We sense that this world is not the way it's supposed to be, and yet we cannot figure out what happened, or how to fix it. All the while we know that Wolfe's conclusion was right, that even with great effort "you can't go home again." We're not even sure where home is.

This story of leaving home and needing but not knowing how to get back again resonates with us because it's a story far older than Homer's epic poem, and far more personal than Wolfe's novel. It's older, because it's a part of The Story, the narrative God tells of his actions and words that stretches from the beginning of history to its very end. It's more personal because it's our story, yours and mine. It's the story of the restlessness, the longing, that just won't go away no matter how good life gets.

A few months back we began a series of articles on biblical theology. The purpose of these articles is to understand the Bible as a single divinely inspired narrative, a revelation of God's purpose and plan for humanity that unfolds in time and space. If you missed the first article, which introduced the series as a whole, you might find it helpful to start there. That article was about creation and can be found here. This month, we want to look at the problem that stands at the heart of the biblical story, what Christian theologians refer to as the Fall. As we consider the entire story of the Bible from this perspective, I hope we will understand better not only our own condition—what it means that we have all truly left home—but also how we can actually make it back again.

THE STORY OF THE FALL

The story of the Fall begins in Paradise. God has created Adam and Eve and he has put them in a perfect world in order to be a reflection of his glory. He's provided them with everything that they need. He's given them meaningful, enjoyable, and satisfying work. He's given them each other. And he has established them as rulers over all creation under him. In fact, there's only one limit he has placed upon their freedom and authority. There is one tree in the Garden of Eden--the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil--that they are not to eat from. Into this setting comes Satan inhabiting the body of a serpent. He tempts Adam and Eve to do the one thing that they are not to do, to eat from this forbidden tree. Incredibly, they fall for his scheme and choose to disobey God. In doing so, they fall from a state of blamelessness before God and each other into a state of shame, disgrace, and moral condemnation.

Immediately everything changes. Because of their decision to rebel, God judges Adam and Eve. Life will be filled with pain, toil, and sadness. What's more, they are kicked out of Paradise and exiled from their home. No temporary banishment, an angel wielding a flaming sword is put at the entrance of the Garden to make sure that they will never return alive. But their physical expulsion is just the prelude to a far more profound exile that will affect not only them, but all of their descendants. We who were created to live forever--fashioned for eternity, as Wolfe put it--are subject to the eternal exile of death.

At this point, many in our culture want to put the story down. They react against the story because it seems to present a picture of a mean and petulant God who is overreacting to what amounts to catching his children with their hands in the cookie

jar. Men called to preach and teach this story need to be prepared for that reaction and ask people to withhold judgment. It's only as the story unfolds and the magnitude of this rebellion becomes clear that God's curse is vindicated.

As the story proceeds, we find that the consequences of Adam and Eve's rebellion are even more profound than at first appeared. Children are born, but not in innocence. Adam and Eve's very nature has been corrupted and twisted. Augustine described it as a "turning in on itself," so that now human nature no longer reflects God's glory but only its own cramped sense of self. And that nature, along with the guilt it earns, is passed on to their children. And so the Fall didn't simply happen and we move on. Rather it continues and deepens as creation succumbs to death and decay. As W. B. Yeats famously said and as Chinua Achebe illustrated, "things fall apart, the center does not hold." Satan had managed to murder the souls of Adam and Eve. Now Cain actually murders his brother Abel. Satan had managed to drive a wedge between Adam and Eve as they each blame the other for their predicament. A few generations later, Lamech abandons any pretense at marital union, and takes for himself two wives. Cain murdered out of jealous passion, Lamech murders for a mere injury. And so it goes, until humanity's wickedness had become so great that "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). God decides he must finally judge the very men and women he had created in his own image.

God sends the Flood to destroy humanity, sparing only Noah and his family, and the world gets a fresh start. It would seem that Noah is a new Adam who gets to "try again" in a freshly scrubbed world. The only problem is that Noah and his family still have the fallen nature they inherited from Adam. Once again the progress of sin picks up right where it left off. Eventually humanity is back where they stood on the eve of the Flood. This time the object of their evil intent is not so much violence against each other but against God, as they attempt to establish their utter and complete independence, as symbolized in the Tower of Babel. Once again God judges humanity, this time not by destroying it but by frustrating it. In Genesis 11 humanity's language is confused, dividing us from one another. God scatters humanity across the face of the earth and so frustrates our idolatrous designs.

In this context of division, frustration, futility, and death, God calls out for himself a special people. Beginning with Abraham, God separates from the mass of humanity a people of his very own. This people--a corporate Adam--are to be called by his name. They are to obey him and know him as their God. But even here the Fall continues to make itself felt. Lot and his family choose the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah over the godly society of Abraham. Esau chooses the comforts of this world rather than the promises of God. Finally, even after God has rescued the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the edenic Promised Land, the nation of Israel choose first to worship God in the form of idols, and then eventually to abandon God altogether for the idols.

What Israel did corporately, her kings did representatively. Israel demanded a king in order to be like the nations that did not know God, and their first king, Saul, proved to be worthy of their desires. A later king, Solomon, began well, but his heart was eventually turned to idols through loyalty to his foreign wives. Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom, deliberately set up idolatrous worship to weaken the ten tribes' loyalty to Jerusalem. Ahaz, king of the southern kingdom Judah, demonstrated where his loyalties lay by building a copy of the altar to Baal in Damascus and setting it up inside Israel's Temple.

In response to this, God repeatedly visited his own people with judgment. In a replay of Genesis 11 and Genesis 3, God first divides them and then finally kicks them out, exiling them from the Promised Land. Seventy years later, the southern kingdom of Judah returns from exile, but it's clear that her spiritual exile continues. God does not re-inhabit the rebuilt Temple, and the Holy of Holies stands empty. Eventually, even the prophets fall silent. At the end of the Old Testament, God's visible people seem no better off than the Gentiles. Both alike stand under threat of God's judgment. In fact, the final words of the Old Testament are an echo of Genesis 3, warning that God will come and strike the land with a curse.

As the New Testament opens a new prophet, John the Baptist, appears on the scene and picks up where Malachi left off, warning the people of the judgment that is to come. But it would seem that no one is listening. God sends his own Son, Jesus, who leads a life of perfect love and perfect obedience, a life that should have offended no one. But humanity has become so wicked that now Jew and Gentile plot together to put to death the only man who never deserved to die. Together they nailed him to a tree, a cross, and they declared that their only king was Caesar.

That was two thousand years ago. Since then, humanity's corruption and evil has known wider scope and greater efficiency. But nothing has really changed. All the wars, including the ones going on now, all the assaults and murders, the slavery, the genocides that have repeatedly marked the last hundred years, the exploitation of women and children for purposes of sexual gratification, even the cruel indifference of the rich for the poor, all of that has just been commentary on that first rebellious declaration of independence from God.

What will be the end of the Fall? What will be the end of this story? Another prophet named John, the apostle John, tells us. In Revelation 18 we see the final Fall, a day yet in the future when this world will fall under God's final judgment, never to rise again. On that day, all those who throughout history who persisted in their rebellious declaration of independence, who chose to worship idols rather than God, will be left outside of heaven, and the tormented anguish of their exile in hell will last for eternity.

THE CAUSE OF THE FALL

There is perhaps no more difficult question about the story of the Fall, nor more often asked by both Christian and non-Christian, than who or what caused it. On the one hand, we want to know who to blame. On the other hand, we want to make sure we're not. The Bible doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know about the Fall's cause, but it does make two things clear that challenge how we understand both the world and ourselves.

First, the Fall was *instigated* by Satan's malice and deception. The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about Satan, other than that he is a fallen angel, and therefore a creature himself. Though a powerful, supernatural being, he's not God's opposite number, God's evil twin. As a creature, his power is limited. But that power is real, and it was used to devastating effect in the Garden of Eden. The apostle Peter describes him as a "roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." In Genesis 3, where Satan first shows up on the scene, we're told of his craftiness and cunning. We witness him lie, manipulate, and deceive in order to frustrate, if he can, God's good purposes by precipitating humanity's downfall into death. From the beginning the Bible makes clear that Satan has an implacable hostility towards God and an unending hatred for humanity.

One of the things we need to understand is that we do not live in a spiritually neutral universe. This world and our lives are a battlefield, not a playground. True to his form as a liar from the beginning, Satan would deceive us into thinking that nothing is really amiss, at least nothing that we can't take care of ourselves. He would deceive us into thinking that we're better off without God, that our best interests are served by pursuing our own desires and enlarging our liberty from anything that would restrict us from meeting those desires and fulfilling them. But Satan was lying on that day when he deceived Adam and Eve, and he is still lying. Satan intends, not our freedom, but our enslavement. He doesn't intend to enhance our lives, he intends to hasten our death. He means to murder us, both body and soul, and to drag us down with him in his own condemnation. In our teaching and preaching, we need to expose the false sense of peace that this world offers, peace through pleasure or wealth or autonomy. That peace is not the peace of Paradise, but the peace of the morgue.

We should also consider well the Bible's warnings that Satan would deceive even the elect if he could. It's not just non-Christians that hear Satan's lies. Christians also hear lies: lies about the gospel, about God, about the world, about the church and fellow Christians, about themselves. We need to train our ears, and the ears of our people, to listen for the truth and to hold on to sound teaching. Our ears need to be saturated with the Bible and our minds shaped by the worldview the Bible creates, so that we will recognize the lie when it's whispered softly and sweetly in our ear.

Second, not only was the Fall instigated by Satan, it was also freely *chosen* by Adam and Eve. The Scriptures are achingly clear on who is finally responsible for the disaster we are in. Satan may have lied, but no one forced Adam and Eve to eat that illicit meal. This is what makes their sin so heinous and earns such lasting and devastating consequences. You and I sin in part because it is our nature to sin. We're also surrounded by a corrupt and corrupting world. But not so Adam and Eve. They were standing in the middle of Paradise. They lacked nothing, and everything around them testified that Satan was lying and God was good and to be trusted. For the first and the last time in history, there in the Garden, humans sinned in utter freedom.

Many are tempted to blame God for the mess this world is in. I understand the feeling, but we need to know that according to Scripture, that is just another one of Satan's subtle lies. Adam and Eve were created in such a way that they were able to say no to sin and Satan's temptation. They had every natural help and aid you could want. They were standing in Paradise. They had each other. They had a clear, unequivocal, simple command from God. It wasn't hard to understand. No, there is nothing gained by trying to turn the tables and shift the blame to God. We're in this mess because the finest examples of the human race ever to draw breath made an utter and complete hash of it. It's only arrogance that whispers, "If I had been there, I would have done better. I would have chosen different."

As Christians, this realization should lead us to a profound humility. Too often we are rightly accused of self-righteousness and arrogance. But we of all people should know better. We are in this mess because we put ourselves there. When we witness someone else's sin, we know as Luther said, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Understanding the Fall should produce humble Christians.

Ultimately the Fall *resulted* from Adam and Eve's idolatrous desires. The telling phrase is Genesis 3:6. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." Wasn't there any other fruit in the Garden that was good for food and pleasing to the eye? Of course there was, on every single tree. But Adam and Eve chose to eat from this tree because they believed Satan's lie. Satan had said to them, "if you eat of this tree, then your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." There's the cause of the Fall. Not content to be mere creatures; not content to be the highest of all creatures, ruling over God's creation; not content to have a mere relationship with God, reflecting back to God his glory, Adam and Eve desired to be like God. In other words, Adam and Eve desired to be beside God as his peer, indeed, they desired to be gods themselves.

The Bible calls this idolatry: the substitution of the creature for the Creator as the object of our loyalty, desire, and worship. It's not that Adam and Eve were hungry or deprived or ignorant. Plain and simple, it's that they weren't God and they decided they wanted to be. They wanted to set their own rules, be their own authority, and pursue their own glory. It was an act of self-worship, and therefore an act of utter and complete rebellion against God, the One who alone is to be worshipped and obeyed.

Like Adam and Eve, most of the time the final object of our worship isn't some creature out there, it's this creature right here. In the end my idolatry centers on me. What's more, if I can persuade you or bully you or manipulate you, my idolatry will include you worshiping me as well.

Here is why God's judgment of sin is not the irrational over-reaction of a hot-headed parent. As long as we think of sin as simple rule-breaking we will never understand the enormity of sin, the incredible offense that it gives to God, and the justness of his response. Fundamentally, sin is not a matter of our behavior, though it eventually shows up in our actions. Fundamentally, sin is a matter of our hearts, for as fallen creatures our ruling desire is to remove God from his throne and to sit there instead. Were it not so devastatingly real, it would be laughable, like a child playing dress-up in his father's closet. Were it not so evil it would be pathetic, like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. But idolatry is neither laughable nor pathetic, for its effects are devastating, and its course is terrifying. Sin is no trifling matter. There is no more deadly lie that Satan would have you believe.

THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL

What effects have come from the Fall? The immediate and most obvious effect is that humanity was *banished* from God's presence. This is what it means that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden and exiled into a world that had turned hostile.

The Bible is clear in its testimony that God is a holy God. He can neither tolerate sin in his presence nor can he allow sin to go unpunished. So Adam and Eve are expelled from his presence in the Garden of Eden and a flaming sword prevents their re-entry. This scene of sinners being expelled from God's presence lest they be utterly destroyed is repeated again and again as the Bible tells the story of the Fall. In Exodus 32, God has rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and Moses is on Mt. Sinai, receiving God's word for the benefit of God's people. And what do the people do? They immediately turn from worshipping God as he would be worshiped and instead make for themselves idols! In response, Moses calls the Levites to his side at the gate of the camp. The camp of the Israelites was to be a holy place, a veritable moving Garden of Eden. But just as sin had entered the Garden of Eden, so it had invaded the camp. Recalling Genesis 3, Moses tells his brother Levites to strap swords to their sides and to go throughout the camp executing God's judgment.

What follows is the banishment. We see it in the very architecture of the Tabernacle and the Temple. Both were signs of God's presence with his people, but also signs of his separation from him lest they come into his presence and be destroyed. Only one man could ever really go into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year. Later Jewish literature tells us they tied a rope to him so that they could drag out his dead body, should God in justice break out against that man's sin.

The effect of sin is to cut us off from God, to banish us from heaven. It's not that sin requires God to engage in some moral calculus, to see if our good outweighs our bad. It's that at this very moment our sin requires God to patiently restrain himself, lest he justly destroy his rebellious creatures. And he will not always exercise such restraint.

People are not helped if our churches and preaching allow them to think of God as they would like to think of him. What they need is to think of God as he really is, a holy God who judges sin justly. This is why the New Testament takes so seriously the character of our fellowship in the local church. Paul asks in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "[W]hat do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" It's not that Paul didn't want believers to talk to unbelievers. Quite the contrary. In every conversation, in every interaction, in every encounter, he wanted unbelievers to see the difference between the church and the world, so that God's character would be accurately displayed and known.

Banishment from God's presence is not the only effect of the Fall. We are also *corrupted* in our nature. The Bible is clear that the problem of sin is not fundamentally one of behavior or education. No, it is far more radical. The problem is our heart. The Psalmist said in Psalm 51 that we are conceived in iniquity and born in sin (Ps 51:5). We come out of the womb as sinners. Jeremiah warns that the heart is "deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt" (Jer. 17:9). We aren't sinners because we sin; we sin because we are by nature sinners!

This does not mean that the Bible teaches we are as bad as we could be. But it does mean that there is no aspect of our lives, no aspect of our thinking, desires, or behavior that is untouched by the stain of sin. Even our best deeds, says Isaiah, are as filthy rags since they come from hearts that are committed to our own glory rather than God's (Is 64:6). That means that, unlike Adam and Eve, when you and I sin we are doing just what comes naturally to us. It is our nature. As Jesus said, "out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). This in no way excuses our sin; we can't say "I have to sin. I have no

choice." But it does mean that we should abandon the notion that we are basically good people who have just lost our way. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that we are dead in sin; he tells us in Romans that we are by nature objects of wrath. When we sin, we are simply proving ourselves to be the children of Adam, chips off the old block.

This also helps us understand what the Bible means when it says we are slaves to sin, which is an image that Paul uses in Romans 6 and 7. Some people are fond of debating whether or not we have free will. The Bible's answer is that it depends on what you mean by "free." If by "free" you mean that we do what we want to do, that nothing forces us to believe or to act against our will, then the Bible's answer is "yes." Our wills are always free to act in accord with their nature. But if by "free" you mean that somehow our wills are morally neutral and above the fray, able to choose between good and evil on their own merits, independent of predisposition or motive, then the answer is a clear and unequivocal "no." Our nature is corrupted and, as Paul says, we are sold as slaves to sin. We can no more choose not to be sinners than a fish can choose not to be a swimmer. It's our nature.

Therefore we need more than a self-help program. We need something far more radical than a make-over that helps us straighten out our lives. All those things do is make for prettier, more presentable slaves. What we need is freedom. We need a nature that is freed from the corruption and bondage of sin. We can no more fix ourselves than a slave can free himself. A slave must be freed, and so must we.

This has profound implications for everything from our evangelism and preaching to our understanding of the Christian life. It means that conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit, changing our nature, not the result of a seeker making a decision. It means that real Christians have a new nature that results in their lives looking different than the world around them, because this nature says no to sin. It also means that the Christian life is a life of conflict, as the new nature battles against the old. The Bible calls these two natures the old man and the new man, and they are in deadly conflict with one another. I think often we grow discouraged that this war continues, but what we need to understand is that this war is not going on in the heart of someone who has not been born again. Conflict with sin is one of best evidences that someone has been given spiritual life. This is Paul's point in Romans 7. Rather than pretending there is no struggle, our churches should be places that encourage this conflict. Rather than shooting the wounded, our churches should be places that bind up those who are injured in the fight. Above all, our churches should be communities that hold out the hope of Christ, who alone can free us from these bodies of death.

THE PROGRESS OF THE FALL

One of the biggest mistakes we can make about the Bible's story of the Fall is to think of it merely as a tragic historical event that happened in the past, analogous to the Christmas tsunami of 2004 but with biblical proportions. The problem with this way of thinking is that we are accustomed to picking up and recovering from setbacks. It took a while and a lot of effort, but Chicago was rebuilt after the fire of 1871, and the same will be true of Banda Aceh, Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami. But the Fall is not simply a tragedy that happened. While certainly an historical event, the Fall is also an on-going reality that continues to develop and affect our lives. Like a disease that begins at a point in time, but then progresses and runs its course, so the Fall has a trajectory, a goal that it has not yet reached. And if we're ever to wake up from the deadly illusion that the worst is past, we must understand the *course* of the Fall.

To begin with, the Fall is *progressive*, not static. This is one of the reasons the story of the Fall is important. As we move from Cain's initial murder of passion, to Lamech's casual homicide, to the culture of violence among the men of Noah's day, we see that things get worse. They don't stay the same, and they don't get better. But not only is the progression of sin and the Fall writ large on human history, it is writ small in the human heart. As Paul says in Romans 6, our slavery to sin leads us to give our bodies to ever-increasing wickedness. Paul puts it this way in Romans 1:21: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." And then three times in devastating succession Paul says, "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity"; "Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts"; "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done."

At this moment, none of us are as bad as we could be. But left to ourselves without either the restraining hand of God or the grace of Jesus Christ in the gospel, sin will take its course in our lives. It never goes backwards. It always goes forward, because the Fall has a goal. And that goal is our death and eternal condemnation. Sin *will* lead you and me to ever-more and ever-increasing wickedness. It's one of the reasons addiction is such a powerful force and such a powerful image of sin. By definition, addiction is never satisfied. It always wants more. Idolatry is like addiction. Idolatry never delivers on its promises, but like an addiction it simply says, "Try again…and a little bit more. Maybe this time, you'll be satisfied." Like the addict left alone with his addiction, it is a terrifying thing to be left alone by God in our sin, for our sin, so tame now, means to devour us.

This is one of the reasons that God gave us law, to restrain sin in its relentless progress. As believers, we should not be afraid of the law. Though we can wrongly use the law to attempt to commend ourselves to God, we can also receive the law as a good gift from God. Having been set free from sin's power by the gospel, the law no longer condemns us, but shows us how to

live lives that reflect God's holy character. As preachers, we need to do more than use the law to drive people to Christ. We also need to teach the law so that Christians will know how to live in a lawless and godless world.

Even as citizens, we should not be afraid of or opposed to the enactment and exercise of law, and as Christian citizens we should actively promote good laws. Romantics like Rousseau and his modern heirs, whether on the liberal left or libertarian right, are flat wrong. The state of nature is not closer to the state of innocence. Rather, the state of nature is closer to the state of viciousness and brutality. God has given us law to restrain that progress. So as Paul reminds us in Romans 13, government and its laws are a good gift from God, to reward what is right and to restrain what is evil.

But though the Fall is progressive, it will not progress forever. The day will come when the Fall is *punished*. Because sin is never satisfied, but always clamors for more, sin is ultimately provoking to a holy God. God describes himself to Moses as patient and merciful. But as Peter warns us in 2 Peter 3, we should not mistake God's patience for indifference. God also says that "He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished." Despite what we might like to think, the course of the Fall does not end in rehabilitation or gradual reform as things get better and better. According to Revelation 18, the Fall comes to the final end it deserves.

Jesus says that the Day of Judgment has already been set in the mind of God, and the vision of that day revealed in Revelation 18 is terrible. Pictured as a great city, sinful creation falls under God's judgment never to rise again. Repeatedly the chapter echoes the phrase "never…again." Music "will never be heard in you again." Workmen "will never be found in you again." Light "will never shine in you again." Bride and Bridegroom "will never be heard in you again." So final and so complete is this vision of judgment that the angel declares the city itself "will never be found again."

Not only final, this judgment will be *just*. The same chapter tells us that God will remember the crimes of this idolatrous world and he will repay her for her crimes. He will give to each of us exactly what we are due. In its attempt to describe this awful day of God's vengeance, of his retributive judgment, the Bible uses various images: outer darkness, endless weeping and gnashing of teeth, a lake of fire, eternal death. What is clear in all of these images is that the justice of God's judgment is expressed in the unending punishment he inflicts. The offense of sin against an infinite and eternal God is an infinite offense. The punishment it deserves therefore justly never ends.

Here then is the mistake of thinking of the Fall as simply something that happened back in the past. The story of the Fall is a story of despair, like an incurable disease that leads inexorably to a painful death or like madness that drives it's victim ever further from sanity and reason. Left to ourselves, it is our story; the story of our past, but also the story of our never ending future. In our preaching and teaching, we may find it more comfortable to downplay this aspect of the Fall. No one likes to think of loved ones in torment for ever. But ignoring the truth does not make it go away. It simply leaves eternal souls unmotivated and unequipped to deal with questions of eternal consequence.

THE CURE FOR THE FALL

When we understand the story of the Fall (and not until then), we understand why the message of Christianity is good news. In the gospel, God has accomplished a *cure* for the Fall, a rescue from this horrifying, accelerating descent in to hell.

Jesus is the Fall's cure. In Matthew 4, we see something absolutely extraordinary. The Son of God has become a man. Like unfallen Adam, Jesus was not born in sin, but was conceived directly by the Holy Spirit. Also like unfallen Adam, Jesus is called to obey God in the face of incredible Satanic assault. But that's where the similarities with Adam end. Whereas Adam stood in Paradise with a full stomach, Jesus stood in the desert of our exile from God with a stomach shrunken by 40 days of fasting. Whereas Adam had the help of a wife, Jesus stood alone. Whereas Adam had a single command to obey, Jesus had the whole law to keep and fulfill.

Beginning there in the desert and continuing all the way to Calvary, Jesus did what Adam failed to do. He resisted Satan's temptation to exalt himself on his own terms, whether that was to turn stones into bread, or to come down from the cross. Jesus freely chose to obey God, even to the point of death (John 10:18). "Not my will but yours be done," he said. Unlike Adam, he did not pursue his own glory, but laid that aside in order to glorify his Father. The irony is deep and rich. Unlike Adam, Jesus was in very nature God. He had every right to pursue his glory! But as Paul tell us in Philippians 2:6, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." And then, as a servant Jesus suffered the judgment of God. He did not deserve this judgment. Instead, he suffered it on behalf of those who did.

Jesus faced God's flaming sword, guarding the way back into the Garden and the presence of God, and he walked through it at the cost of his own life. He did this so that any who repent of their idolatry and turn in faith to Christ might find forgiveness for sins and reconciliation with God. He did it in order to be able to welcome us back home. Paul says in Romans 5: "If the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one

man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" That gift is the opposite of the curse: forgiveness instead of condemnation, life instead of death, reconciliation instead of exile.

At the end of John's vision in the book of Revelation, we see an incredible picture of the mercy that is found even in the judgment of God. In Revelation 22:12, Jesus says, "Behold I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." Given the story of the Fall, that doesn't sound like good news. But he goes on. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and go through the gates into the city." On the day that Adam and Eve rebelled, the Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, was there. And in the counsel of the Trinity, this determination was made. "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and so live forever." And so Adam and Eve were banished and the flaming sword was put in place.

There is much about that verse we don't understand, but at least this much is clear. God's decision to prevent Adam and Eve from eating of the Tree of Life was not only judgment, it was also mercy. To live forever as an unredeemed sinner is surely the definition of hell. With that act of banishment, God forestalled hell for the creatures he'd made. Throughout the rest of history, God continues to act in judgment with mercy in view, for his temporal judgments restrain his people from provoking him beyond measure, and so bringing the story to a premature conclusion. Ultimately, Revelation teaches us that the Son of God placed a sword at the entrance to the Garden of Eden, not just to keep Adam out, but so that at just the right time, he could walk through instead, in place of sinners like you and me. Having faced and satisfied the sword of God's judgment on the cross for us, Jesus now invites us to enter back in, to go through the gate and eat from the Tree of Life.

Christian, this is not your home. So stop living like it is. Live as one whose citizenship is in the heavenly city, the very Garden of God. Live as one who will one day walk through the gate of heaven itself. And in the mean time, tell people that they can go back home, if only they will find their home in Christ.

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July/August 2007

Topic: Theology

The Devil's Favorite Domino: the Penal in Penal Substitution

By Jonathan Leeman

I don't know if you noticed, but there is a long-standing practice of critiquing penal substitution and justification by faith as overly "legal" or "forensic." From the Council of Trent to the New Perspective and the Emergent church, writers have dismissed both the doctrine that God would forensically declare sinners as "righteous" as a legal fiction, and the proposition that Jesus had to pay our penalty on the cross as beholden to Western legal categories.

Why do we want to preserve a "legal" or "forensic" understanding of the atonement, justification, and our salvation? Most importantly, we maintain them because we think these explanations provide the best exegetical treatment of Scripture. But secondarily, it's worth meditating theologically for a moment on what the purpose of law is. If we were thinking about God's moral law, we might consult theologians like Luther and Calvin, who described the purpose of law as restraining sin, condemning sin, and revealing God's character. If we were thinking about the laws of the state, we might consult philosophers like Plato, Hobbes, Bentham, Holmes, or Hart, who point to the law's role in maintaining order, protecting the defenseless, or guaranteeing the freedoms of a citizenry. All this to say, one can describe the purpose of "law" or "laws" in various ways.

Yet a common theme that runs through all of these explanations is the idea of protecting something precious or worthy. I don't mean to say that "protecting something precious" is the very essence of what the law is or does. Philosophers can argue about that. But I do think it's fairly easy to see that one of the primary reasons we institute laws is to protect something precious. It's against the law to murder because life is precious. It's against the law to steal because property is precious. It's against God's moral law to lie because truth is precious. Every five year old who values his toys and every king who values his gold understands this much about law. That's why both will declare, "Don't touch these things, or else!" In that sense, one might say that laws function like fences or security systems. People erect fences and install alarm systems when they want to guard something precious.

This is why breaking a law results in a penalty. The enacting of a penalty speaks to—or better, declares—the value or worthiness of the thing being protected. If no penalty follows the transgression of a law, we learn that whatever the so-called law is guarding must not be worth much. If the penalty for transgression is severe, we learn that it is precious. Penalties teach. I discovered at a young age, for instance, that lying to my parents yielded a stronger penalty than squabbling with my brother over a toy. The lesson I learned from these different penalties? The truth is more precious than toys. The very idea of a penalty may be repugnant to human beings, but a penalty is what gives meaningfulness to the law as a guardian of worth (or schoolmaster or tutor; cf. Gal. 3:24). If the law is the sentry guarding that which is precious, the penalty is the sentry's pointy bayonet. It gives the law its prick, substance, meaning.

It's worth observing that at least part of our repugnance to the whole concept of a penalty must result from the fact that, in this fallen world, penalties rarely "match the crime." A law will be ill-conceived, and so the sentry stabs too hard, or not hard enough. Not only that, multiple layers of crimes and penalties may conflict with one another. So seventeen years of hard labor seems overwrought for the starving Jean Val Jean's act of stealing a loaf of bread. He's wrong to steal, certainly, but we also assume that various crimes of the state have been committed against him and resulted in his impoverished condition. Still, we can assume that, in principle, a penalty is just or right when it's appropriately measured to the value of the thing the law is guarding.

So God says to Noah, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6a). Why so severe? Human life is precious. Taking life must therefore result in the severest of earthy punishments. Letting a murderer go free is to say, "Ah, the life which he took wasn't worth much anyway."

What's interesting to notice in this particular passage of Scripture is why human life is described as precious. Here's the entire verse: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Gen. 9:6). The preciousness of human life, it seems, is found entirely in the fact that humans image God. Our worth is derivative. It's derived from the one we image.

Which is why King David knew that his murder and adultery were ultimately sins against God (Ps. 51). A law of protection had been placed around life and marital fidelity, two things made precious because of their relatedness to God. To kill is to destroy one made in the image of God. To cheat, at the very least, is to speak lies about God's fidelity to his people. And to do either one of these things as an image-bearer is to present a blasphemous portrait of what God himself is like. David's sin, though enacted against Uriah and Bathsheba and his own body, was finally against God and God alone. He broke God's law. He fell

short of God's glory. He exalted the idols of his lusts over and above God. He treated the glory and worth of God with utter contempt.

If I might use the language of God's "glory" and "worthiness" synonymously for a moment, we find here the connection between God's glory or worthiness and God's law. God's law is the infinitely high fence that protects his infinite worthiness and glory. It's the guardian (and declarer!) of his glory. To contravene his law is to disregard his infinite worthiness. To put this in less abstract terms, saying "no" to God is saying "what you think doesn't mean much to me, because you don't mean much to me."

(*Note for theologians*: Though Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement didn't say everything that should be said about what happened at the cross, what he said, I think, captures an element of Christ's work that formulations of penal substitution sometimes forget to mention: God's honor is impugned by sin. And that honor must be vindicated, or satisfied. And that satisfaction must be infinite. The doctrine of penal substitution fills out the details of Anselm's theory by observing that the offense against his honor is made manifest, as it were, through the transgression of God's law. The law requires a penalty. The penalty is God's wrath. God's wrath, after all, is the jealous guardian of God's glory. God's glory was then demonstrated at the cross—among other ways—by showing that God's law really did require a penalty for transgressions against it (Rom. 3:25-26).)

Why do we want to preserve a "legal" or "forensic" understanding of the atonement, justification, and our salvation? Because unless we want to be idolaters, we must concede that the most precious thing in and beyond the universe is God and his glory. Any worthiness and glory found in creation, even among human beings, is entirely derived from the creator. God's infinite worthiness and preciousness will, intrinsically to itself, yield itself in a counterpart—God's moral law. God's moral law is the fitting and perfectly matched protector of God's infinite worthiness. To deprecate God's law and its penalties is to depreciate God's worthiness, plain and simple.

The penal in penal substitution, then, guards (and teaches us about) the infinite preciousness and value and worthiness of God. To say that Adam's sin should *not* have resulted in death, to say that our sins do *not* result in God's wrath, to shy away from mentioning God's wrath in private or public, to say that penal substitution is overly obsessed with legal categories or overemphasizes the role of God's law, to say that the significance of Christ's death is diminished by bringing it into the realm of the law court, to say that the demands of God's law do *not* have to be satisfied, to declare a forensic declaration of "righteous" merely a "legal fiction," to caricature the Son's propitiation of the Father's wrath as "divine child abuse"—all this is to miss the role of God's law in protecting and declaring the worthiness of God; and therefore it is to belittle this ineffable worthiness and indescribable glory of God.

Let me ratchet it up one more notch: if the world, the flesh, and the devil desire, above all else, to diminish the godness of God, and to deceive us into thinking we can be "like God," there can be *no more dangerous lie in the universe* than to redefine the gospel in a way that subtly massages the penal out of penal substitution—kind of like when someone said to Eve, "You will not surely die." In a world of self-justifiers, it'll always be the first domino the devil tries to topple.

Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks.

July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Gospel Coalition Travelogue

By Michael McKinley

In late May, 9Marks sent me to the Gospel Coalition Conference in Deerfield, Illinois. The main speakers were Don Carson, Tim Keller, Crawford Loritts and John Piper. The complete audio of the conference should be available in mid-June on the organization's website, and numerous blogs have provided detailed summaries of the content of the talks. But, since 9Marks paid for my ticket, I should at least write something for them.

Therefore, I proudly present to you: "**My Trip to the Gospel Coalition Conference**" – or – "**A Travelogue from My Journey to the Center of Evangelicalism**."

TUESDAY, MAY 23

7:32 AM ET: Leave home for my 10:00 AM flight to Chicago from Washington DC's Reagan International Airport.

7:39 AM ET: Seven minutes later, drive *past* Washington DC's Dulles International Airport. Wonder if the guy making travel reservations for 9Marks is an idiot.

7:58 AM ET: Come to complete standstill in atrocious Northern Virginia traffic.

8:13 AM ET: Put on CD's from CCEF's conference on anger. Amuse self by imagining what David Powlison would do if he were stuck in this traffic in a 1998 Mercury Tracer with no air conditioning.

9:05 AM ET: Finally arrive at airport. Apparently, the 9Marks travel guy has redeemed himself by booking me on some exclusive luxury airline called "ATA." Imagine, an airline so chichi that it doesn't even have words in its name.

1:10 PM CT: Arrive at Gospel Coalition Conference a few minutes into Don Carson's talk, "What is the Gospel?" Initially, I was a bit disappointed. Not that Dr. Carson wasn't brilliant, he was. But this was the first time that I had ever seen him in person, and I guess I had really high expectations. I was expecting that he'd have a grotesquely oversized head with blood vessels popping out all over the place, or maybe that he'd have to have a separate wagon along side of him to wheel his gigantic brain around. But alas, he was just a normal looking guy in a navy blazer with a surprisingly calming Canadian accent.

2:03 PM CT: Carson's talk on the gospel from 1 Cornithians 15:1-19 was excellent. So often we take the content of the gospel for granted, or we assume that, because we've mastered a brief outline, we've explored the depths of the gospel. But Carson discerns from Paul's words eight different summarizing words and five clarifying sentences that served as an excellent kick-off to the conference. If you're going to plant your flag somewhere, plant it in the gospel.

2:15 PM CT: There's no more bottled water in the back. Either the Gospel Coalition accidentally ran out or they are preparing us for a Sweat Lodge experience during Tim Keller's talk. I'm kind of hoping for the latter.

2:30 PM CT: Browsing the conference bookstall, which appears to be have been stocked without any consideration to doctrine, theme, or authorial literacy. The definition of irony is a conference on the gospel led by Don Carson selling books by N.T. Wright. But at least I can pick up Phillip Yancey's new book on prayer (seriously). When did this become okay for a serious conference? What, were the Joyce Meyers books on backorder?

3:00 PM CT: Tim Keller speaks on Gospel Centered Ministry. Again, this is my first time seeing Keller speak live, and since he was invoked in hushed tones as the avatar of homiletics properly done at the seminary I attended, I was anxious to see and hear him preach.

He's the real deal, there's no doubt about it. He almost lulls you to sleep with his speech pattern, but you find yourself engaged and engrossed after a few moments. Even better than his rhetorical style was his clear and powerful presentation of the way that the declarative preaching of the gospel stands at the center of the true ministry. At one point, he said that the statement "Preach the gospel, if necessary use words" is a misunderstanding of the gospel. Amen. Given the nature of Keller's ministry

and his views on the church's social responsibility (not that I am necessarily in disagreement with much of them, but no one is listening to what I say so I don't need to clarify myself), and given the presence of lots of missional guys (you know the type, black plastic glasses and black T-shirts), I was really thankful for his clarity on the centrality of the gospel in ministry. It was a reminder that I needed.

Also, this guy is a quote machine. I am planning on running his whole message through the chop shop and working it into future sermons.

5:30 PM CT: Chicago local and fellow 9Marks writer Paul Alexander suggests we go to Applebees for dinner. How's that for local flavor? We settle on a pretty good rib joint. Television in background shows Yankees taking 3 run lead over Red Sox in the first inning. My faith in triumph of good over evil bolstered.

7:02 PM CT: Back to the conference for lots of singing and prayer followed by the evening speaker, Crawford Loritts. His title is "Passing the Torch" and his text is Psalm 78:5-7. I have never heard of him before, but I am looking forward to hearing him. He must be pretty great if Carson and Keller are his warm-up acts.

8:40 PM CT: Loritts' talk was good. He is a passionate speaker, a strong orator, and very clear on the gospel. I was motivated to consider the impact that my ministry will have on future generations. The talk was a bit thin in terms of content, but perhaps the speaker suffered from comparison to those who occupied the stage before him. I certainly wouldn't want to bat third in that line-up. But I leave it to you, gentle reader, to listen to the audio and judge for yourself.

9:45 PM CT: Yankees win. Thhhhhhhhhhuuuuuuuuu Yankees win!

WEDNESDAY, MAY 23

6:42 AM CT: Finish workout in hotel fitness area. Watched highlights of Yankees-Red Sox approximately 348 times in an hour long episode of Sports Center. Life doesn't get much better than this.

8:17 AM CT: Can't convince Michael Lawrence to do a Cool Hand Luke style egg eating contest with me in the hotel lobby. Seriously, what's a conference without someone getting protein poisoning? Apparently, I'm going to have to take responsibility for this myself.

8:31 AM CT: Don Carson speaks on the purpose of the Gospel Coalition. I have to admit, the whole egg thing was really messing with me, so I'm not sure I was the best audience. But I don't think I understand the purpose of the Gospel Coalition any better now than I did yesterday (at which time I had never heard of it apart from the question, "Hey, do you want to go to the Gospel Coalition Conference?" being directly addressed to me).

Two things stood out from Carson's talk:

1. He asked that we lead our churches to support the Gospel Coalition if we believed in their cause. Now, this is a tough dilemma. Frankly, I have no idea what this cause is about, though the phrase "Reclaiming the center of evangelicalism" did seem to be bandied about. Thus, I would normally have no intention of leading my church to give money to it.

But, and this is where it gets hard, my entire hermeneutical approach to any given text, and you might say my approach to my entire ministry is based on this one inviolable rule: ***do what Don Carson says.*** He's pretty much always right, or at least you'll sound smart as you go down in flames. Am I a cessationist? Am I amillenial? Do I believe in election? Let me ask you: what does Don Carson think? So, you can see the problem I'm having.

2. Whatever the Gospel Coalition stands for, it seems to be in favor of something Mark Dever does at his church called "Theology Breakfast," which basically consists of Mark reading theology out loud at 7:00 AM in a very crowded room. Carson talked about it for at least three minutes. Now, I have been a willing and—later, as someone whose checks were metaphorically signed by Dr. Dever—an unwilling participant in these theology "breakfasts." And let me tell you, this is not where the Gospel Coalition wants to plant its flag. Now don't get me wrong, I love theology and Mark Dever and spending time in Mark Dever's study. But I also really like sleep and personal space and donuts. What kind of diabolical program advertises a breakfast gathering wherein *no food is served*? Is this what the Gospel Coalition stands for? I hope not…

10:32 AM CT: Mark Driscoll and Michael Lawrence are speaking on how to mentor young pastors. Both make lots of excellent points about the church's responsibility to raise up and train pastors. There is a delightful digression that I will leave to the reader to investigate more fully.

Overall, I have to say, I was also a little underwhelmed by seeing Driscoll live for the first time. Based on his books, I thought for sure he would be hammering back Boilermakers between his points and crushing empties on his forehead. But he just seemed like a nice, funny, laid back guy. Less Henry Rollins, more Henry Winkler.

12:03 PM CT: John Piper speaks on the triumph of the gospel in the new heavens and the new earth. I happened to be sitting up front, and I am fairly sure that, right before he began, I heard him mutter under his breath, "Let me show you punks how a grown-up preaches." Or maybe I misunderstood him. As I said, the one-man egg eating contest didn't treat me well.

Seriously, this talk was amazing. You should not be reading this, you should be listening to it online. I have quoted from it in my church about 35 times in the past two weeks (that's my other pastoral strategy…when in doubt, quote John Piper). It was full of rich, Christ-centered reflections on the meaning of sin and suffering and the hope of heaven. It is always a blessing to be pointed to Christ by Dr. Piper.

1:00 PM CT: The conference is over. In all, it was very good. I thought that it lacked energy in some ways, but the speakers were spectacular and the hosts were pleasant. The conference organizers made it clear that this was something of a trial run, but I could definitely see it becoming much bigger in the future.

1:39 PM CT: Stuck in traffic on the way to Midway Airport in Chicago, which is about an hour away. Signs up ahead indicate that we're about a mile from O'Hare Airport. Apparently, the 9Marks travel guy hates me. Good thing my flight doesn't leave until 4:00 PM.

3:38 PM CT: Still stuck in traffic, almost surely not going to catch my flight. Rehearse with the driver of the car all the things I learned from the CCEF CD's about anger.

4:05 PM CT: Missed flight, still 35 minutes from Midway. Wife, home with three children under 5 years old, not happy about developments and not very interested in talking about how much traffic there is in Chicago.

12:04 AM ET: Finally land at Reagan, having caught a flight as a standby passenger.

12:49 AM ET: Drive past Dulles Airport. Too tired to be angry at 9Marks travel guy…

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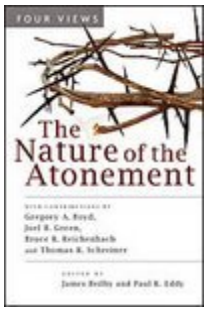
July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Book Review: The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views, by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert



IVP Academic, 2006, 208 pp., $20.00

Another in the "four-views" series of books, James Beilby and Paul Eddy's *The Nature of the Atonement* brings together four authors to discuss the question, "What image or understanding of the atonement does Scripture present as primary?" Greg Boyd argues for the primacy of the *Christus Victor* theme. Tom Schreiner argues for penal substitution. Bruce Reichenbach focuses on medical (or healing) images. And Joel Green promotes a "kaleidoscope" understanding in which no one image takes precedence over the others.

WILL THE REAL DEBATE PLEASE STEP FORWARD?

Looking over this list, one of the first things that comes to mind is that the selection of perspectives seems a bit random. Why Bruce Reichenbach on healing? Medical imagery is used of the atonement in Scripture, but have many people argued that it is primary? Why not N.T. Wright explaining how atonement works in the New Perspective? That's one of the more pressing outstanding questions in the New Perspective, and it would have been interesting to have included someone from that camp. Also, given Scripture's many-colored presentation of the atonement, doesn't Green's "kaleidoscope" idea automatically take the pole position? Why would anyone argue with that?

Some of these tensions show up throughout the book. For example, Reichenbach himself doesn't seem to argue for the primacy of his healing model, causing Schreiner to wonder if he somehow misunderstood the purpose of the book (149). Both Schreiner and Boyd argue forcefully for the primacy of their positions, but both repeatedly acknowledge that Scripture uses many images for the atonement, and that neglecting any of them creates a deficiency in a Christian's understanding of Christ's work.

At one level, then, the argument upon which this book is built isn't all that it's trumped up to be. Sure, they can debate which image ought to be primary, but everyone agrees that all of Scripture's images are crucial. And so the energy in the fight fizzles. Sparks only fly, after all, when someone says someone else is "wrong." No Christian is going to argue that healing as an image of atonement is wrong, or that Christ as victor over demonic powers is wrong, or that redemption from the slavery of sin is wrong, or that penal substitution is . . . Oh, wait. Yep, there's the rub.

The real argument taking place in *The Nature of the Atonement* is whether Christ's death should be understood as penal and substitutionary, and on that question there are not really four views. There are only two: yes it should, or no it should not. In other words, this book presents us with Tom Schreiner against everyone else.

THE GOOD

Essentially, Schreiner's essay is a clear and systematic presentation of the gospel. He begins by pointing out the inevitable clash between human sinfulness and God's holiness, and then presents the Bible's solution to that problem—*propitiation*, which is the turning away of God's wrath by sacrifice. The strength of Schreiner's essay over the others in the book is two-fold. First, Schreiner articulates a fully coherent picture of how God saves people from sin. He does not leave crucial questions unanswered as the others do. Second, Schreiner's presentation is deeply rooted in the text of Scripture. His exegesis of both Old Testament and New Testament passages is detailed and strong. And at the end of the day, the other chapters in the book falter because they never adequately address the passages of Scripture which Schreiner so clearly lays out.

That is not to say there is nothing to be gained from those other chapters. If one reads them merely as explanations of various images of atonement found in Scripture, they provide for good, informative reading. Reichenbach's is a useful compendium of the Bible's healing imagery, and Boyd's chapter offers a compelling story spanning the entire narrative of Scripture about how God accomplished victory through Christ. He also paints a wonderful picture of what Christ's victory means for how Christians ought to live. Even Green's chapter—though it is in my opinion the least helpful and most off-base—is a good reminder that Scripture's portrayal of the atonement cannot be reduced to any one image or understanding.

THE BAD

That acknowledged, the chapters by Boyd, Reichenbach, and Green are troubled by serious deficiencies at the heart of their arguments. Take Boyd's *Christus Victor* approach. For all the sweeping drama of his view, Boyd never answers the most central questions about the atonement: *How* exactly did Jesus save sinners? What did his death on the cross *do*? On those questions, Boyd leaves the reader wondering. Sure, he says that by his death Jesus won victory over demonic powers, but aside from an ambiguous discussion in which he only half-way distances himself from the ancient church's "Jesus as bait for Satan," he never tells us how Christ's death achieves this victory, much less how it deals with sin and guilt (36-37). Indeed, Boyd's final word on the subject of how the cross defeated the demonic powers is buried in a footnote: "at the end of the day we must humbly acknowledge that our understanding is severely limited" (37n). Reichenbach's and Green's chapters also suffer from the same lack of specificity. Because they reject (or at least severely minimize) the idea of penal substitution, they can finally offer no answer to the questions, "But *why* did Jesus have to die? *What precisely* did his death accomplish?" Only Schreiner answers that question satisfyingly.

One other deficiency that runs through the chapters by Boyd, Reichenbach, and Green is that they all shy away from the idea of God's wrath. Boyd could not be more straightforward when he says, "The New Testament concept of salvation . . . does not first and foremost mean 'salvation from God's wrath'" (35). He also counts it one of "the more problematic aspects" of penal substitution that "Jesus literally experienced the Father's wrath or that the Father *needed* to punish his Son in order to forgive us." Instead, Boyd proposes that Christ's death amounted to God surrendering his Son over to evil agents to have their way with him (43). Green similarly declares that the Old Testament sacrifices are not at all a matter of sacrifice or penalty, and finally concludes that when it comes to understanding the death of Jesus, "'assuaging God's wrath' and 'payment of the penalty of sin' are wide of the mark" (175).

Reichenbach more subtly expresses his discomfort with the idea of God's wrath. To his credit he says, "I will not argue that the penal substitution view is not an important scriptural motif." And in his response to Green, he even gives a hearty defense of the coherence and scripturality of divine wrath (198-199). For all that, Reichenbach still demonstrates a palpable uneasiness with the idea that God punished Jesus for our sin. He says at one point, for example, that it was sin, not God, who killed Jesus (137). He also argues that God did not *have* to punish Jesus in order to save us, even though he finally chose to do it like that anyway. In the scriptures, he argues, forgiveness is always conditioned on faith, repentance, and the forgiveness of others, never on punishment. Frankly, it is not at all clear to me what Reichenbach gains with this argument, willing as he is to say (sometimes) that penal substitution is in fact how God chose to do things. If nothing else, I suppose he disassociates himself with the idea of a wrathful God punishing his innocent Son in order to save guilty sinners.

THE UGLY

The real problem is that in making these arguments against the wrath of God in general, and penal substitution in particular, Boyd, Reichenbach, and Green have to ignore enormous sections of Scripture. Pages and pages of Schreiner's scriptural exegesis go unanswered, and one's left thinking that the other authors are bent on rejecting penal substitution on philosophical and emotional grounds no matter what Scripture says.

For example, what are we to say about Boyd's statement that Jesus didn't literally experience the Father's wrath, or Reichenbach's that it was sin and not God that killed Jesus (43, 137)? Isaiah 53:10 alone would seem to put the matter to rest: "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." And how do we answer Boyd's assertion that it is Satan, not God, who "holds that no one can be forgiven truly for free: someone or other must pay!" (103)? Hebrews 9:22 and Leviticus 17:11 would seem to undercut completely that understanding. Or how do we answer when Green attacks penal substitution by asking on what basis it could possibly follow "that Jesus' dying quenches the anger directed by God?" The answer: on the basis of 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 3:25-26 and John 3:16 and countless other individual verses, not to mention the whole storyline of Scripture. Green again: "Given the doctrine of [the Trinity] . . . how can one claim that the Son had to die on the cross in order to propitiate God's anger?" Again, because Scripture says!

The bottom line here seems to be that Scripture says things that Boyd, Reichenbach, and Green simply don't like. They like neither the idea of a God who has wrath against individual sin, nor the idea that he would pour his wrath out on a substitute in order to save us. But for evangelicals who understand the Bible to be God's self-revelation, philosophical arguments and emotional reactions against those concepts aren't going to have any traction. If the Bible says that God the Father crushed God the Son, then Joel Green throwing up his hands and saying he can't accept that on philosophical and emotional grounds doesn't tell us anything about reality. The most it tells us is how much authority Green is willing to give to his emotions relative to Scripture.

The Nature of the Atonement is worth a read, especially if you keep your eyes open to the real argument taking place. On the stated question of which image of the atonement is primary, I'm of the opinion that Schreiner is right. Given the storyline of Scripture and especially the OT sacrificial system, it's hard to see how any theory other than penal substitution could be central. But the argument about centrality, it seems to me, is not the only one taking place here, nor even the most important. The more important discussion is whether the atonement should be understood in penal and substitutionary terms at all.

Come to think of it, when you consider *how* Boyd, Reichenbach, and Green argue against penal substitution, there is another, perhaps equally fundamental question at stake: How do we as Christians go about answering questions like this? Will Scripture finally be the deciding factor, or will that role be taken by our own philosophical, cultural, and emotional preferences? How we answer that question will have implications far beyond any one theological issue. It will mean the difference between acknowledging that truth is revealed to us by God, or claiming that it is something we may determine on our own.

Greg Gilbert serves as an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. He is also the director of theological research for the president at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a writer for Kairos Journal, an online journal for pastors.

July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology, Book Reviews

We asked a roundtable of pastors and theologians *two* questions:

(1) You are standing on stage before 100,000 people from every nation on earth and asked to share the gospel in 100 words or less. What would you say?

(2) You are standing before a small crowd from your church's neighborhood and asked to share the gospel in 100 words or less. What would you say? [*Authors were asked to include a couple of words describing their neighborhood. We have included these in italics when provided.*]

Answers from

- Peter Adams—Melbourne, Australia
- Greg Gilbert—Louisville, KY
- Liam Goligher—London, England
- Michael Horton—Escondido, CA
- Michael Nazir-Ali—Rochester, England
- Frank Retief—Cape Town, South Africa
- "Ed Roberts"—Central Asia
- Mack Stiles—Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- Adrian Warnock—London, England

Peter Adams

(1) God made everything and everyone. He rules the universe, and made us in his image. He made us to know and serve him, and we will have to account for our lives.

Because we do not know and serve God, God sent his Son the Lord Jesus Christ to show us how to live, teach us about God, and die in our place, taking on himself the judgment we deserved. He then rose from the dead, and rules with God. We should turn to trust in God's Son, join his people, receive his Spirit, and live for his glory.

(2) Same as above.

Peter Adam is the Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne. His next book is entitled, Written for Us: Receiving God's Words in the Bible*, to be published by IVP in January 2008.*

Greg Gilbert

(1) There is only one God, who created the world and everything in it. Though God intended humans to rule the world under him, each of us has sinned against him, the penalty for which is death and hell. But because he loves us, God sent his Son Jesus to live a perfect life and die on a cross as a substitute for his people. On the third day, he rose bodily from the grave and now reigns in heaven, offering forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life to all those who repent of their sin and trust solely in him for salvation.

(2) *To an audience of mixed races and socioeconomic classes, from college students to professionals to retirees*: Same as above

Greg Gilbert serves as an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. He is also the director of theological research for the president at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a writer for Kairos Journal, an online journal for pastors.

Liam Goligher

(1) God can often seem absent, distant, or indifferent to us. But suppose he were to visit us, become one of us? Would we welcome him, or ignore or even murder him as people did Jesus Christ? God would then be justified in destroying us. The good news is that God the creator loves us his creatures and has come in Jesus to take the place of guilty people, died to bear their deserved punishment, and rose again; and that by

receiving Christ, people might have a living relationship with God now and enjoy him and all he has made for eternity.

(2) *Richmond is an upscale area of London with an upwardly mobile, young professional, socially progressive demographic*: *We* have been debating "God" recently, but what does God think about *us*? A look at Jesus (his life, death, and resurrection) reveals what God looks like with skin on. It immediately confirms that he is grieved by us. We're prepared to believe anything rather than the God who is there. We're even prepared to murder our Maker. We deserve hell! Yet instead of wiping us out he has taken our humanity, endured our deserved punishment, and won our freedom. He calls us into a right relationship with himself through trusting in Christ, so that we might enjoy him forever.

Liam Goligher is the senior pastor of Duke Street Church in Richmond, London, and is the author, most recently, of The Jesus Gospel.

Michael Horton

(1) What is your greatest fear? If I were asking that question in many parts of the world, answers would probably cluster around basic needs such as running water, food, vaccines, and shelter. For most of us in the United States, though, our greatest fears are more likely to be things like the fear of loneliness, some cataclysmic event that throws me off the ladder of upward mobility, divorce, or the inability to find any ultimate meaning in life. None of these fears is illegitimate, yet none is ultimate. These fears haunt us only because we have the luxury of having them haunt us. Until we are confronted with the reality of God—in all of his blinding majesty, weightiness, and frightful claim on our lives—we are overwhelmed by secondary troubles. But when for some reason there is the slightest glimpse of God in his holiness, we either do our best to domesticate him, turn him into a pet by suppressing the truth, or run for the hills to escape the confrontation.

God should be your greatest fear. Yet there is no salvation from God's just judgment from anywhere else than God himself. Only the same God who fills us with fear is able also to give us peace. If we are to escape this judgment, it will only be the result of the greatness in God's heart and not something in our own. That God has moved toward us—even lunged toward us—not in judgment, as we should have expected, but in loving embrace and reconciliation, clothing us in Christ's righteousness so that we can be acceptable in his holy presence, is the good news that you are called here and now to embrace. Christ lived a perfect life in the place of sinners, bore their sins on the cross, and was raised again for our justification. This means that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Not because of anything that you have done, experienced, attempted, or decided, but because of what he has accomplished for you, can you be assured of God's favor. It is good news, not good advice. It is not a call to self-improvement, but to die to self altogether and be raised a new person, in Christ. It is the free gift of forgiveness of sins, right standing with God, adoption as his heirs, and liberation from the tyranny of sin. As his ambassador, I am calling you in his name to be reconciled to God by turning away from all other saviors and lords and embracing Jesus Christ as your righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Come to him now. His love is greater than your enmity toward him; his grace is greater than your sin; his peace is greater than your fears.

(2) The same thing.

Michael Horton is the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, CA, and is the author of the upcoming, Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ, *to be published in September 2007 by Westminster John Knox.*

Michael Nazir-Ali

(1) In the midst of our darkness and failure, Jesus Christ shines as a bright light, showing us God's truth and love. He stands in our place, does what we cannot do together and are unwilling to do personally and so turns away God's anger from all our wrong doing and our abuse of others, ourselves, and God's world. His sacrifice on the cross is the climax of his mission which is to make us friends again with God. Let us accept for ourselves what he has done. Let us be friends with God with him and so share the new life which God has given him and which he shares with us.

(2) Angry and rebellious people killed Jesus but he could not be held by the bonds of death. He came back to life and met with people personally. These people were changed into a world-changing force. Today also, he wants to meet with you personally. Open your hearts, minds and homes to him and know the power of the new life he brings. He will not let you down. Put your trust in him and you will experience the strength and comfort he brings. Being with him will show you which way to go, what sort of life to lead and how to bring others to friendship with him.

The Rt. Revd. Dr Michael Nazir-Ali is the Bishop of Rochester, has acted as a consultant to the British prime minister on Muslim affairs, and is the author of multiple books, including Conviction and Conflict: Islam, Christianity, and World Order.

Frank Retief

(1) God the Creator of the Universe has sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world. He died to make the impossible possible – a doorway back to God for lost people. All people, whether aware of it or not, are alienated from God and under his judgment. But he has sent a Saviour and King Jesus Christ to offer forgiveness and life to all who will repent of their unbelief and turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. If you turn to Jesus Christ you will receive a welcome from the Father himself and you will be made a member of a new family who shares many blessings here and will participate in the world to come.

(2) *Drawing from 31 years experience at St James Church Kenilworth Cape Town, South Africa, which experienced a massacre by terrorists in 1993:* There is a God who rules from a place greater than Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban; who has more knowledge in his tiny finger than all the college-educated in Africa: who is totally unimpressed with our ideologies, obsessions with racism, group hatreds and constant fighting. He sweeps up into his love every ethnic and national group, for he created them all, and his plan for the future is more socially progressive than you could ever imagine. Where is this God, especially in our disease-ridden and war-plagued continent? He is to be found in Jesus Christ his Son whose great and grand promise is to accept all who come to him in faith, leaving behind all their sins, failures, and successes. He is the One Saviour who is above all our beliefs and superstitions and introduces you to none less than the Creator of the Whole Creation, including Africa with all her troubles. What privilege. What love. And all this through a Cross.

Frank Retief is the presiding bishop of the Church of England in South Africa. He is the author of several books.

"Ed Roberts" (*real name hidden for security purposes*)

1) In the name of Jesus Christ, the only living Savior of all peoples, be reconciled to your Creator! Live under the kind, gracious rule of Jesus Christ. He is the only way to have a right relationship with God, with his world and with other people. There is only one God. Turning away from him, we deserve his wrath. Humble yourself, agreeing with God that you have rebelled against him, choosing your own way, believing your own ideas, rejecting God's demands. In Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, rebels find forgiveness. So, stop rebelling. Believe with your heart; confess with your mouth: Jesus Christ is Lord!

2.) *For an urban, middle class Asian context, that is "progressively" Islamic, mildly superstitious/animistic, mostly weekly mosque-attending (males that is, women would not attend), not terribly familiar with Koranic teaching, contemptuous of America, largely ignorant of but scorning Christianity, and suspicious of outsiders, especially Christian outsiders:* Followers of Jesus believe that: the Lord our God is the one and only Lord God, that we should love him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength. Also, we should love our neighbor as ourselves. And this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. So, this is eternal life, that we might know the One True God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Jesus claims to be the Way, the Truth, the Life. Do you know this Jesus?

Mr. Roberts has planted a church in the U.S. and has been planting churches and doing leadership development in Central Asia for awhile.

Mack Stiles

(1) Maybe you don't know, but there is a heavenly dilemma over you. You are loved as God's special creation. But because God is also holy you are cut off from him by your wickedness and under his judgment. The Bible tells of God's one solution: Jesus, fully God and fully sinless man, ransomed us to God through his death on the cross. He paid our sin-debt and rose from the dead as proof that he is the way and the truth. Eliminate the dilemma! Turn from sin; follow Jesus by putting your complete faith and trust in him.

(2) Allah commands you to read the Injil. But what does it say? It says salvation comes from Allah's love, not Allah's rules! It says the straight path to Allah is faith in the Jesus of the Injil. The Injil gives only one path: Jesus, fully God – fully man and perfect, ransomed us to God through his death on the cross. He paid our sin-debt. He rose from the dead as proof that he is the path to heaven. Does Allah's strength not protect his word? The Injil says repent; follow Jesus; put your complete faith and trust in him.

[*Editor's note: in further conversation with Mr. Stiles, he said he often will use this story with unbelievers (which he says is not original to him):* Two men went to the mosque to pray. One was a rich man, the other a poor man. The rich man went through his libations and prayers as he did five times a day. As he was praying, he began to have a sexual fantasy about the young wife who lived next door to his home. But he finished his prayers and went home. The poor man stood off at a distance. He came so infrequently to the mosque, that he couldn't remember the positions for prayer or his libations. But he looked up to

heaven, beat his breast, and said, "Forgive me, O Lord, for I'm a sinner." Who went home justified? *Mr Stiles says that every Muslim he has asked this question has answered "The rich man."*]

Mack Stiles is a businessman in Dubai, UAE, and is the author of Speaking of Jesus*,* 17 Things My Kids Taught Me About God*, and* Mack & Leeanne's Guide to Short-Term Missions*. His son is a member of Capitol Hill Baptist Church.*

Adrian Warnock

(1) Despite our differences, we are similar in many ways — longing for the elusive peace and happiness found only in the God who made everything. We are both victims and perpetrators of evil that cannot be justly overlooked, rebels living as enemies of God. Only one man lived a perfect life — Jesus, who died our death, suffered our punishment, and was resurrected so that we could be reborn. Please read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, especially verse 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."

(2) *For a multicultural British audience*: In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul warns it is possible to believe in vain. Today many believe in God but do not belong to him or his church. If it is true that "Christ died for our sins . . . was buried . . . was raised," we need a radical change of direction in our lives—our own resurrection (Eph. 2:1-9). Believing in God isn't enough — Satan does. How tragic if Jesus sent you away forever saying, "I never knew you!" (Matthew 7:23) I urge you—have faith in Jesus, entrust yourself to him completely and make him your Lord. (Romans 10:9)

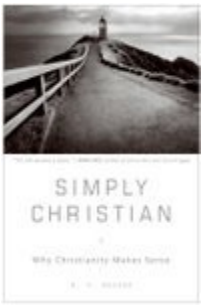
Adrian Warnock, a medical doctor trained as a psychiatrist, has a popular blog at www.adrian.warnock.info and is a regular preacher at Jubilee Church in London, UK*.*

July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Book Review: *Simply Christian*, by N.T. Wright

Reviewed by Andrew Davis



HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, 256 pp., $22.95

It is the unique privilege and responsibility of every generation of Christians to explain Christian faith—the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ—clearly and simply to the unbelievers with whom they share their time on the earth. It is also entrusted to every generation of Christians to protect that eternal message from corruption. The first of these two responsibilities is extramural, and causes us to probe the minds and hearts of our unbelieving neighbors to see what unique obstacles Satan has erected that make the gospel unintelligible to them. The second of these is intramural, and causes us to study the words we use to articulate the unchanging gospel and to align those words with the perfectly straight canon of Scripture to be sure they are faithful and true. Christianity must be simply explained, but it must be done in a way that is faithful to the Scripture. Otherwise, it will be simply damaging.

Many experts are promoting N.T. Wright's *Simply Christian* as a primary resource for explaining Christianity to skeptics and unbelievers. The dustcover promised "This will become a classic." *Christianity Today* heralded it as a worthy successor to C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* as a ready-made tool to slip into the hands of unbelieving coworkers. While such tools are extremely helpful in our evangelistic mission, it is essential that they be faithful to the biblical articulation of the gospel. If the tools we use contain errors, faulty articulations, misleading images and analogies, and harmful oversimplifications, then they do more harm than good. This is especially true if such a book becomes a "classic," trusted and embraced by a majority of the gospel-loving church.

It is my earnest prayer that a better book be written, appraised, embraced and disseminated than this one. Wright's book does have some remarkable merits. Its overall conception and purpose are praiseworthy: an attempt to simplify Christian doctrine and explain it in a comprehensive but accessible way to skeptics and unbelievers. Wright is a witty, thoughtful, and self-aware writer. He uses compelling images and word pictures. He is exceptionally concerned to give the "Big Picture" of the story of redemption of the universe, and therefore is a helpful corrective to the isolationistic individuality of Western Christianity. And he is remarkably thorough in his topical coverage for such a brief book. For these and other strengths we can be grateful.

But for all of Wright's laudable efforts and obvious gifts, *Simply Christian* clearly fails to articulate some key fundamentals of the faith: the deity of Christ, the Old Testament prophecies about his coming, God's purposes in Israel's history, the purpose of the Law of Moses, Christ as King over the kingdom of heaven, the substitutionary atonement in Christ's blood shed on the cross, the perfection of the word of God, the Great Commission of gospel preaching to every tribe and language and people and nation, justification by faith alone, progressive sanctification by the power of the Spirit, Judgment Day, the personality and power of Satan and his dark kingdom, and the eternity of hell's torments. Most pointedly, I do not believe *Simply Christian* tenderly and clearly warns individual sinners of their peril or calls upon them to flee to Christ and to his cross as the only remedy for personal guilt and sin before a holy God.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Simply Christian is divided into three main parts. In part one, "Echoes of a Voice," Wright isolates four "voices" left in the human soul which point toward God: the yearning for justice, the thirst for spirituality, the craving for relationships, and the attraction of beauty. The handling of these "voices" is an excellent and useful initial foray for communicating with unbelievers anywhere in the world.

In part two, "Staring at the Sun," Wright takes his readers through a conversational journey of Christian doctrine concerning God, Israel, Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom, Jesus: Rescue and Renewal, God's Breath of Life, Living by the Spirit. This section is more uneven and problematic, as I will highlight below. However, Wright does an excellent job of wrestling with the transcendence and immanence of God as he describes a universe in which God is neither identical to his creation (pantheism) nor aloof from it (deism), but rather actively involved in it in such a way that heaven and earth vitally overlap and intersect. This image of heaven and earth overlapping and intersecting becomes a central one for Wright's book, for he claims that the most important point of intersection is Jesus himself.

In part three, "Reflecting the Image," Wright also finds worship, prayer, Scripture, and the sacraments to be other vital ways that heaven and earth intersect. His call for personal repentance and faith in chapter 15, "Believing and Belonging," is rendered powerless, as I will mention, because of his rejection of the law as a diagnostic for sin. He likens regeneration to "waking up from sleep." The Bible speaks more of "being dead and being raised to life by the power of God" (Eph. 2:1-4). He culminates his book with a call for Christians to be active in bringing about the advance of God's program for the new heaven and the new earth such that heaven and earth will be perfectly overlapped, as Revelation 21 says will happen.

A SUMMARY OF THE STRENGTHS

Wright's fierce grasp on this all-consuming vision of the full redemption of heaven and earth is biblical and appropriate. The world will be put to right (justice), and God will dwell directly with us (spirituality) in perfect relationship with him and others (relationship)—a climax that will be ravishingly beautiful (beauty). Wright opposes a pale salvation in which individuals are rescued from this wretched dying planet and whisked away to "heaven" in some other dimension of reality without any concern for God's glorious "big-picture" plans in redemptive history, and rightly so.

Wright also does well in articulating and embracing Jesus' bodily resurrection, strongly rejecting any comparisons between Christ's resurrection and those of the old pagan religions with their "dying and rising corn gods."

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is likewise well defended, especially in calling the Bible "The Book that God Breathed" and supporting that claim from 2 Timothy 3:16.

And Wright does an outstanding service to the church in defending monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the only God-ordained holy pattern for sexual relationships. These are just some of the many strengths of his writing.

A SUMMARY OF THE DANGERS

However, if the church accepts this book as a primary articulation of its core faith, we have reason to be scared about the future of the church. Let's draw out some of the main flaws and explain why they are so significant.

1) The Deity of Christ

The question here is not so much, "Does Tom Wright believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God?" My instinct is that he does, just as Peter did in Matthew 16. The question is, has Wright written a book that will clearly lead unbelievers to make that confession themselves? Does the verbiage in this book clearly and biblically proclaim the deity of Christ?" I must sadly answer, "No." The primary data on the deity of Jesus in the book is in chapter eight: "Jesus: Rescue and Renewal." (As an aside, one noteworthy flaw is that Wright chose not to use "Christ" as a name for Jesus. For the most part, you see "Jesus" or "Jesus of Nazareth." This is not accidental on Wright's part, since he seeks to establish that "Christ" is a title, not a proper name. But why not give Jesus his title? He earned it with his blood! The New Testament certainly gives it to him throughout, from Matthew 1:1 through Revelation 20:6.) Concerning the deity of Christ, Wright chooses to delve into Jesus' own sense of his deity and mingle it with the kind of "call" a person has to be anything else in life: "I do not think Jesus 'knew he was divine' in the same way that we know we are cold or hot, happy or sad, male or female. It was more like the kind of 'knowledge' we associate with vocation, where people *know*, in the very depths of their being, that they are called to be an artist, a mechanic, a philosopher" (p. 119). Wright seems to think that Jesus read the Messianic passages in the Old Testament, saw the triumphant Son of David and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and "combined the two interpretations in a creative, indeed explosive, way. The Servant would be both royal and a sufferer. And the Servant would be… Jesus himself. Isaiah was by no means the only text upon which Jesus drew for his sense of vocation, which we must assume he had thrashed out in thought and prayer over some considerable time" (p. 107-8).

This is rather shocking. The image of Jesus reading Isaiah's Suffering Servant passages, "thrashing it out in thought and prayer over a considerable time," then concluding, "Oh, I am called to be a suffering Messiah, and, also the Son of God as well!" is foreign to Christ's self-statements, especially in John. Jesus used the Scripture to prove and support his calling to other people, but there is no clear indication that his mission came from anyone but God himself, not through reading but by direct speech and revelation: As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11).

Other prophets certainly had direct calls from God. They didn't merely read the Scripture and have some vague internal sense that God was calling on them to do something about Israel's sin. Rather, "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" (Jer. 1:1), and so it did with Ezekiel, Joel, Jonah, Micah, etc. These prophets all had a direct encounter with the living God, and they were called to be prophets. Jesus entered earth from heaven and, while the miracle of the incarnation called on him to enter life as a helpless baby, yet his heavenly Father had educated him as to who he was by age twelve (Luke 2:49), probably by

the same kind of direct speech we saw in his baptism account cited above "You are my beloved Son." Christ didn't thrash this out in prayer over an Isaiah scroll. His identity was revealed to him directly by the Father, who then gave him his work to do and his words to say. The Gospel of John in particular makes much of Jesus' constant reliance on the Father for every aspect of his ministry, and especially for the evidence of his deity and call to be Messiah: "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me" (John 5:36-37). Jesus went to the Father directly for even the very words he was to speak to the people: "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10).

If Jesus only arrived at his sense of Messiahship from reading Scripture (Scriptures that read the same to every Israelite), there was the chance that he was deluded. Rather, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as receiving the highest possible testimony (testimony weightier than that of John): the Father himself spoke to him, and did so continually. Therefore, to take Wright's view of Christ's conception of his own deity is harmful.

Now, to his credit, Wright doesn't pull back from ascribing full language of the deity of Christ to the apostles within one generation of Christ's life. Wright here flies in the face of liberal attacks on the gospels which state that ascriptions of deity to Christ came long after Christ was dead, and were part of the predictable mythologizing process the church did generations later. Wright rejects that completely (p. 117).

2) The Atonement

One of the greatest flaws of this book is the tacit denial of penal substitution, of the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ, of propitiation of God's just wrath by the shedding of Christ's blood. Anyone even partially connected to New Testament scholarship over the last decade knows of the "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) and of N.T. Wright's leading role in that controversy. While Wright does not directly discuss those issues in *Simply Christian*, his "new perspective" on the Law of Moses and on justification is still pervasive.

For example, when Wright traces out the history of Israel, he masterfully draws out the major themes worthy of notice by someone investigating Christianity: the king, the temple, the law (Torah) and the new creation. He is even more skillful at linking these four themes to his original four "voices":

The God of Israel is the creator and redeemer of Israel and the world. In faithfulness to his ancient promises, he will act within Israel and the world to bring to its climax the great story of exile and restoration, of the divine rescue operation, of the king who brings justice, of the Temple that joins heaven and earth, of the Torah that binds God's people together, and of creation healed and restored (p. 88).

However, it is amazing that Wright barely mentions the animal sacrificial system, the Day of Atonement, the Passover Lamb, or any of the symbols of Christ's redemptive work on the cross. The animal sacrificial system, as pointed out clearly in the book of Hebrews, was meant to be a shadowy picture of the reality found in Christ, whose blood sacrifice has atoned once and for all for the sins of all who would believe in him. But Wright sees the Temple merely as the place of union between heaven and earth, and the Torah as merely a pattern describing how Israel was to live together as the family of God.

Therefore, blood sacrifice never shows up in Wright's book—a significant omission. Even worse is the omission of Christ's actual work on the cross. In the aforementioned Chapter 8, "Jesus: Rescue and Renewal," Wright follows a more or less chronological description of the final week of Christ's life. He spends one paragraph on Jesus' purposeful arrival at Jerusalem during the Passover feast, another paragraph on his cleansing of the temple, three lengthy paragraphs on the Last Supper (in keeping with Wright's sacramental bias), and a mere one paragraph on Christ's final hours of suffering. Of that single paragraph, half of it is spent on Gethsemane and the trials Christ underwent. The actual death on the cross is mentioned quickly and without much elaboration. For the central event in the Christian faith to be handled so lightly is puzzling.

Even worse, however, is how Wright discusses the significance of Christ's work on the cross. Over and over through the rest of the book, he uses the same kind of expression: Christ "exhausted the powers of evil" by his death. The impersonal "powers of evil" are never named, and how Christ's death "exhausted" these powers is never really explained. While this theme is a rich one and supported in Scripture, Wright, as he seeks to explain Christ's death in simple terms to unbelievers, leaves out some major doctrinal themes that are needed to complete the biblical picture of Christ's atonement.

Christ's accomplishment on the cross is so overwhelming, so infinitely rich and deep, that one image or one metaphor can never capture all its truths. So the New Testament uses a variety of language to capture it. For example, there is the *forensic* (courtroom) language, in which Christ's death is described in penal terms: a law transgressed, a righteous penalty (death) required, an offended Lawgiver whose penalty must be upheld, a court trial undergone, etc. This language is especially strong in Romans 1 to 3 and Galatians, and it is precisely what Wright wants us to gain a "new perspective" on. Therefore, Wright totally avoids any language of this kind.

There is also *battlefield* language in which Christ's death is seen as a military victory over an evil foe. This is the language closest to Wright's. However, when this language is used in scripture, there is always a sense in which Christ triumphed over Satan, a personal enemy with an evil kingdom:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:15)

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Heb. 2:14-15)

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (1 John 3:8)

Oddly, I found only one reference to the devil or Satan and his organized kingdom of evil in the entire book, and that was an allusion to what people mistakenly thought about Christ. It seems odd that, if Wright is going to make so much of Christ defeating the power of evil, why was there almost nothing about the serpent whose head he had come to crush (Gen. 3:15)? Instead, evil seems to be a vague, impersonal force which rears its head mostly in major world-shaping movements (mindless materialistic capitalism, religious fundamentalism, crushing beast-like governments, etc.). This impersonal force finds an echo in individual human hearts, but it's not primarily there. Individuals seem more like unwilling victims of this impersonal "evil" which Jesus' death somehow "exhausts." So Wright employs even the "battlefield" language of the atonement only partially.

The Bible also uses *marketplace* language to describe Christ's work on the cross, in which buying and selling for a price is foremost. Here, the key word is "redemption," the release of slaves by the payment of a price:

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

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9)

There is also *relationship* language, in which God is offended by our sin and must be reconciled to us. The key words here are atonement ("at-one-ment") and reconciliation, but one must also put propitiation in this category as well:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Col. 1:21-22)

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. (Rom. 3:23-25)

In the case of both reconciliation and propitiation, the issue is that our sins have offended a holy God, producing estrangement in the relationship and rendering God as our enemy. In both cases, it is God's work to propitiate himself and to reconcile us to himself; this infinitely weighty work is beyond our power to achieve by any means. This is what Christ achieved in his infinitely weighty work on the cross--the greatest display of God's glory in history.

Here is what Wright loses by omitting all this language (and other types) from his discussion of the cross of Christ: the cross is the greatest display of the glory of God in all of history. The cross presents humanity with all the attributes of God put on perfect display: his justice, his wrath, his righteousness, his mercy, his love, his patience, his power, his wisdom, his compassion, his grace, and more and more besides! Sadly for Wright, here he could have found the perfect completion of his "four inner voices":

- The yearning for *justice* is found perfectly at the cross, for God poured out his wrath on his only begotten Son to pay the penalty for the sins of all who would trust in him. It was the greatest display of justice in human history (Rom. 3:26), and there will never be another to rival it;
- The thirst for *spirituality* is found here as well, for "a new and living way" is opened into the very presence of God (Heb. 10:20) by which we can draw near to him.

- Here also we can find a perfect *relationship*, for by the blood of Christ God is forever at peace with us. We are adopted into his family, and the unshakable foundation of peace between formerly hostile people is laid (Eph. 2:14-17).
- And finally, the *beauty* of the cross is found not in the thing itself but in what it makes possible in the universe, for the cross is followed inevitably by the resurrection and the new creation in which all the filthy and ugly effects of sin are purged forever.

In his zeal to avoid the "Old Perspective on Paul," Wright has missed a full, rich discussion of the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. The pale "exhausted the powers of evil" is too vague, and seems untrue, because Wright also avoids strong discussion of personal evil as exposed by the Law of God.

3) Personal Sin, Repentance, and Judgment Day

The omission of talk about personal sin, repentance and Judgment Day necessarily follows from the previous discussion. If the Law is not meant to stand as a judge over our personal behavior, then our sin remains as indistinct and vague as the "powers of evil" Wright speaks so much of. Scripture is not so vague: everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

When Wright discusses Israel's exiles into Assyria and Babylon, he sets up these pagan empires as monsters from which little victim Israel needed to be rescued. Although in a vague way Wright acknowledges Israel's sin, Daniel was not so vague in his magnificent prayer of confession: "All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you" (Dan. 9:11) The Law was given so that we might recognize sin in ourselves and seek a Savior (Rom. 3:20, Rom. 7:13), not merely so that we would know how to live together as the family of God.

The great danger here is that Wright's interested, seeking, but lost readers will fail to flee the wrath to come by repenting and trusting Christ. Passionate personal appeals to turn from sin in all its forms and to seek salvation in Christ are of the essence of the ministry of reconciliation (Acts 2:40, Acts 20:31, 2 Cor. 5:20), but they are muted in *Simply Christian*. Wright says, "'Sin' [he actually puts it in quotation marks here] is not simply the breaking of a law. It is the missing of an opportunity [to come close to God]" (p. 236). This kind of language is overly tame and entirely different from the fiery speeches of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist (e.g. Matt. 3), Jesus (e.g. Matt. 23, Luke 13), and the apostles in the book of Acts.

Wright seems to have a great personal aversion to the doctrines of God's active wrath against sin and of the propitiation of that wrath through blood sacrifice. He uses especially inflammatory language against propitiation when he actually praises a pantheistic prayer in which a pagan seeks to tune his heart to the "silent rhythms of the world around." Wright adds provocatively, "That is pantheistic prayer. It is (in my judgment) a lot healthier than pagan prayer, where a human being tries to invoke, placate, cajole, or bribe the sea-god, the war-god, the river-god, or the marriage-god to get special favors or avoid particular dangers" (p. 163). The doctrine of propitiation is that God does in fact have a passionate wrath against sin, and that his wrath is propitiated by the blood sacrifice of his only begotten Son (Rom. 3:25, Heb. 2:17, 1 John 2:2, 1 John 4:10).

Wright also never mentions hell and the eternity of God's pouring out of his just wrath on the damned (Rev. 14:11). There are two great displays of God's justice in the universe: the cross of Christ and hell. At one of those two places, every single transgression in history will have been addressed by the justice of God. Therefore it is right and loving for ministers of the gospel to warn people to flee from the wrath to come (Matt. 3:7, Eph. 5:6). Wright never does this, and this is a grave failure.

4) The Scripture

Though Wright does an excellent job of calling attention to the power of the "God-breathed" nature of the Scripture and speaks of it as a major point of overlap and contact between heaven and earth, he does a number of things which undermine one's confidence in the perfection of the word.

For example, Wright has an annoying habit of speaking of the later editing and assembling of the Law of Moses, or the compilation of the sayings of Isaiah, or the writing of Daniel centuries later than the book's figure actually lived. These statements are unproven speculations common among biblical critics and play no helpful role in a book for unbelievers.

Wright's handling of Daniel was especially troublesome. He speaks of the book as though it had been edited and accepted only during the second century B.C. while its visions were being partially fulfilled (p. 176). Concerning the glorious Daniel 7, Wright says,

although it is quite possible that the passage goes back to an actual person called Daniel who had strange turbulent dreams and longed to interpret them, the book is closely related to a well-known genre that uses the conscious and deliberate construction of fictitious ‘dreams’ for the purpose of extended allegory (p. 195).

He then likens it to John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Yet that is not how the book of Daniel presents itself. Has he failed to notice that every chapter from Daniel 7 through 11 is rooted in a specific place and time?

Daniel 7:1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream…

Daniel 8:1 In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision…

Daniel 9:1-2 In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—in the first year of his reign…

Daniel 10:1 In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision…

Daniel 11:1 And in the first year of Darius the Mede…

Since the whole theme of Daniel is the absolute sovereignty of Almighty God over the rise and fall of human nations, these historical tags are essential. If "all Scripture is God-breathed," as Wright asserts from 2 Timothy 3:16, did a man named Daniel actually have the dream recorded in Daniel 7 "in the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon"? If not, that verse is false. This is not a minor point.

But it gets worse. He uses Daniel 7 to show how much of Scripture could be interpreted metaphorically and not "literally." He says the four beasts from the sea did not really exist and no one would claim they did. Well, Daniel himself didn’t think the beasts really existed, but rather that they were in a dream and thus *represented* realities. Just as the statue in Daniel 2 *represented* the flow of history from Babylon through the Roman Empire, just as the tree in Daniel 4 *represented* Nebuchadnezzar himself, just as the ram and the shaggy goat *represented* Media-Persia and Greece (see Dan. 8:20), so also these four beasts from the sea *represented* four great world empires. The angel interpreted these beasts in Daniel 7:16-17, so this vision is given with its own internal interpretation, and we are not left wondering what it signifies. Wright picks an artificial bone when he points out that Daniel 7:2 says the beasts came out of the sea but that Daniel 7:17 says the kings arise from the earth, as though there might be some contradiction even within this vision. Again, careful analysis of the words renders this a worthless issue: the beasts do come from the sea, but the kingdoms they represent arise on the earth and will seek to rule the earth. Wright’s whole point here is to reject a wooden "literalism" when it comes to handling the complex richness of biblical language. Fine, but his methods in handling Daniel 7 actually undermine confidence in the word of God.

The worst moment of all comes when Wright completely botches the glorious and prophetic "Son of Man" vision in Daniel 7:13-14:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13-14)

Christ calls himself "Son of Man" throughout his ministry, then quotes this very passage at the climactic moment of his trial:

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:60-62)

Jesus was calling the high priest’s attention to the clearest passage in the Old Testament on the deity of the Christ. Here is someone other than Almighty God (the Ancient of Days seated on the throne) coming on the clouds of heaven (a distinctly divine posture) into the presence of God, and receiving authority, glory, and power. In Daniel 7, moreover, the Son of Man receives "worship" from every tribe, language, people, and nation. The word "worship" in Daniel 7:14 is always used for divine worship, not merely human service rendered to another human authority figure. It was the very thing that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to give the golden image in Daniel 3. Every time this Aramaic word is used it has to do with worship offered to a deity. This "Son of Man" is therefore a human figure who receives privileges given only to Almighty God. And it is because of this significant word "worship" that I must reject a direct correlation between the "Son of Man" and the "Saints of the Most High." Yes, both the Son of Man and the saints of the Most High receive the kingdom, but this word "worship" cannot

be ascribed to any but God himself. Thus it is strong testimony to the deity of the incarnate Christ. It is for this precise reason that Jesus quoted Daniel 7 at that key moment, as the high priest was about to condemn him to die. Jesus chose the right scripture!

Other passages also allude to the coming with the clouds: Jesus himself used it in the Olivet Discourse, saying that the nations would see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory (Matt. 24:30). The angels speak to the skyward-gazing apostles who had just witnessed the ascension but lost sight of him in the clouds, and predict that Jesus would come back to earth in the same way he had left it—presumably with the clouds. And John quotes it in Revelation: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (Rev. 1:7).

So why does Wright do what Jewish scholars have done with the Son of Man vision of Daniel 7, namely, argue that the "Son of Man" is the Jewish people as they receive the kingdom from God? Wright almost ridicules the idea of Jesus returning with the clouds and gives to the people of God a privilege that belongs only to Christ:

And the coming of the 'Son of Man' in 7:13 is interpreted, not in the literal terms of a human figure flying around on a cloud, but in the metaphorical but thoroughly concrete terms of 'the holy ones of the Most High' (that is, loyal Jews) 'receiving the kingdom and possessing it forever and ever' (7:18).

How can a Christian minister give up the Son of Man vision so easily? Yes, the saints receive the Kingdom, but *under Christ*. The Son of Man does not represent "loyal Jews." The phrase "All rulers will worship and obey him" (Daniel 7:27) makes it plain that there will be human rulers who will worship Almighty God while they rule on the earth, but who are *not* the Son of Man who receives the kingdom. Rather, "all authority in heaven and on earth" is given to Christ (Matt. 28:18) and in his name alone will the saints rule. N.T. Wright's handling of Daniel 7 greatly undermines the high view of Scripture he espouses elsewhere.

5) Other Issues

There are a number of smaller issues with *Simply Christian* worth mentioning in a general way. Wright frequently seeks to be irenic and conciliatory to outsiders, but does so by using expressions that should not be used. For instance, he commonly calls Islam a "great" religion. But Islam is a Satanic falsehood that seeks to destroy human souls by denying the deity of Christ and by offering works righteousness in the place of faith in Christ's work on the cross. What is "great" about that?

He says that Judaism and Islam are "second cousins" or "estranged sisters" of Christianity. But isn't giving these Christ-denying religions such status harmful to Wright's apologetic goals?

Wright also uses inflammatory language that would be offensive to politically conservative people: he likens the Pharisees to the "religious right" (p. 102); and he describes those who bomb abortion clinics as evil, but never once speaks about the evil of abortion itself. He also chooses as examples of Christian courage those who stood up for righting social ills, such as William Wilberforce, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu, but he never points to missionary martyrs who lay down their lives for the gospel, such as those dying in the Sudan now at the hands of Muslims.

Wright does well to speak of the "New Creation Now" drive for the church, but is very weak on the Great Commission and the drive to "seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10) by preaching the gospel all over the world (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 1:8).

Finally, Wright says very little about personal spiritual development in Christ (sanctification), and tends to minimize it under the larger issues of worship, sacrament, and work for social justice in the name of the kingdom. Wright's sacramentalism is also an issue for me as a Baptist. He seems to put the Lord's Supper at an equal status to the word of God in its power and effect in the church. The Bible does no such thing. Psalm 19 and 119 are both extended paeans of praise for the power of the written word of God, and the primacy of the word is clearly established throughout the Bible. There is nothing close to that about the value of the Lord's Supper in spiritual formation, even if we are commanded to do it for our spiritual edification.

SUMMARY

N.T. Wright's *Simply Christian* is the product of a thoughtful, articulate scholar who is seeking to give the church a tool to communicate Christianity to an unbelieving world. But if the theological and apologetic vision of this book becomes the normative pattern for the church, the results will be grievous for the advance of Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

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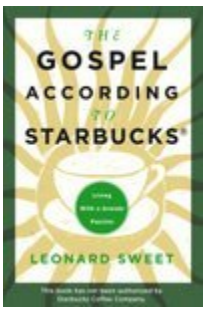
Topic(s): Theology

Book Review: *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, by Leonard Sweet

Reviewed by Byron Straughn



WaterBrook, 2007, 224 pp., $13.99

It seems like trash-talking the church has even become a popular new literary genre among Christian writers. In book after book we're told that, ever since the Enlightenment, the church has been missing the boat. Instead, to find out where to turn, we need to come meet some cool guy at a coffee shop on Sunday. He'll be "authentic."

Leonard Sweet adds to this genre in his latest book, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with Grande Passion*. Apparently, the church has a lot to learn from Starbucks. Starbucks wants the best for you. Starbucks understands the need for a safe place to hang out, and the unhurried baristas want to "know your soul." Starbucks doesn't just sell coffee, it sell *relationships*. When you pull up to the drive-through and pay $3.75 for the venti mocha that cost the company a dime, you can know that the person leaning out the window is deeply committed to you becoming emotionally balanced, relationally nourished, and spiritually anchored.

Now, I'm really not a mean person (if anything I worry too much about what people think of me). So I looked and looked for things that I can commend about Leonard Sweet's *The Gospel According to Starbucks.*

And I did find a few things. Sweet wants to see the church move beyond mediocrity. Amen! He desires that the church be attractive. (Doesn't Paul teach that our lives should commend the gospel—Titus 2:11?) He has kept his finger on the pulse of trends and changes in the world. He affirms some historically orthodox Christian beliefs such as the atonement and Christ's deity. And he'll teach you a lot of business world trivia and coffee factoids—especially related to Starbucks.

The problem is, none of this is essential to the point of the book. The point of the book is that the church should learn from Starbucks. Starbucks is an E.P.I.C. entity: it is *experiential*, *participatory*, *image-rich*, and *connecting* (two chapters are devoted to each). And as with Starbucks, so the church should be all those things. That's the point. That's the wisdom for the ages. May the church be like Starbucks. There's also an epilogue that provides a brief ecumenical summary of caffeine through the centuries. That's nice.

I'm really not a mean person, but…the book is just over 200 pages. I'd say it felt about 200 pages too long.

It's also not entirely clear who the book was written for. If written for believers, you would expect Sweet to draw on the writings the Bridegroom has given to his Bride instead of *Fast Company*, Turkish proverbs, and Mark Twain. If written for non-believers, why would Sweet set up a fundamentalist straw man and then invite someone to be a part of something so unattractive?

Maybe the audience is ambiguous so that Christians can impress their cool non-Christian friends. That feels like today's grande temptation. But is the book cool? Maybe for a giggly fourth grade boy. Sweet spills a lot of ink over body fluids. For example, the larger part of one chapter concentrates on excrement. "Wine is pee-juice: grape Shih Tzu." The illustration culminates with "Where was Jesus born? In a stable. What goes on in a stable? More Shih Tzu." Another chapter goes into the vomit-motif of Rev 3:16, offering us a "theology of barf bags."

Get rid of Sweet's impressive fluency in the hottest Xbox games, box office flicks, coffee chain rhetoric, and rock star celebrity chatter, and I'm not sure how much substance is left. If good literature feeds the soul, this book tastes like Rice Krispies. The snap, crackle, and pops are striking, but chew a spoonful for a second and all you have is dust. It's not that the book is filled with heresy, it's just that with the rich spread of Gospel saturated literature out there, why not feast on something else?

Pastors, please don't model your church after Starbucks, Disney, or Toyota. Teach your flock what God has to say to the church, not what the management gurus observes in successful franchises. Jesus is not trying to sell the world a product, and he doesn't need to market his grace.

I really hope I'm not a mean person, but my bottom line has to be: don't read the book. Do something better with your time. Do something *experiential*, like visiting the shut-ins in your church. Do something *participatory,* like joining the church and submitting your life and love to an actual body of people. Do something *image-rich*, like writing music about the different

metaphors for the atonement. Do something to *connect*, like befriending all those people in your congregation who are not cool. Connect by drinking deeply together from the communion cup of our Savior, the one under whom all things are coming together—including our broken but redeemed lives.

The gospel is astounding, but it's not according to Starbucks. It's revealed, not intuitive. We learn about it from the book that God has given us, and we experience it in the family that he is creating.

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July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology

Book Review: *Soul Cravings: An Exploration of the Human Spirit*, by Erwin Raphael McManus

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

Nelson Books, 2006, $19.99

Dear Mr. McManus,

I just finished reading your book *Soul Cravings*, which I first heard about in a podcast interview you did. You said in the interview that *Soul Cravings* is different from all your other books, in that it's directly written to non-Christians. I'm continually looking for books that present the gospel clearly. I was glad to hear of another.

You also mentioned in the interview that your book didn't have page numbers, because today's generation isn't linear or propositional, but abstract and relational. Now, I admit that did make me chuckle a bit. I have degrees from two avowedly secular universities, and, for all the time I spent in their libraries, I never once found a book without page numbers. (Sometimes I wonder if we evangelicals can be so fascinated with being relevant, we out-relevant the culture!) Still, your comment intrigued me, so I purchased the book.

Well, as I said, I've just finished reading it. One of the first things that struck me is your heart for non-Christians. You remind me of the woman in Jesus' parable who finds the lost coin and then invites all her friends to celebrate. This book is like her invitation. It's evident that you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and you want others to know such goodness. How encouraging. Thank you.

I also thought you did an excellent job of personally identifying with non-Christians. Your language is down to earth. Your illustrations are familiar to what human's generally experience. Your tone is sympathetic and kind. Let me put it like this: it feels like you get into a non-Christian's brain, emotional outlook, and worldview assumptions, you look around the universe with him, and then attempt to point him in a better direction—toward God. Your ability to do this, I thought, was Christ-like, even "incarnational," as some use that term these days. It challenged me to think more carefully about, yes, the voice I adopt when speaking to non-Christians, but more than that, the posture of my heart. Does my heart remember how much, as a fallen human being, I share in common with my non-Christian neighbors? Or have I, in Pharisaical fashion, placed myself in a higher, self-justifying category of some sort? Thank you for your example.

In all of this, your book was both earnest and personal, and without being narcissistic. I haven't read any of your other books, and I've never heard any of your sermons. But if you are anything like the voice of the man narrating this book, I can see why a lot of younger individuals in the ministry want to learn from you. You strike me as personable, affirming, and understanding. I trust that, were I to spend time with you face to face, I would find myself humbled, encouraged, and challenged. You clearly have a lot to teach the evangelical church about relating to people in the world around us.

For all these reasons, it makes me genuinely sad that I would not give your book to give a non-Christian. I'm not saying that God couldn't use it to get a conversation started. He can use anything of course, and the positive qualities of your book could very well work in that direction. But the book itself leaves *so much unsaid*, to state it as charitably as I can, that what the person would gain from your book itself is not Christianity or the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To state it a little more starkly, I finished the book and immediately went to your church's website to see if I could find some sort of doctrinal affirmation, and was genuinely surprised to find your church's affirmation of the Southern Baptist Convention's 2000 Baptist Faith & Message. The "applied theology" of your book falls significantly short of the basics affirmed in this document.

Start with the book's starting point—finding God through the soul's cravings. You never mention Augustine, but a couple of times I wondered if your whole purpose was to give a book-length treatment to his oft quoted phrase, "God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you." That's a beautiful and profound sentiment. Our hearts will have no rest apart from God.

Here's your version of this: "I am absolutely convinced of one thing: God has placed cravings within your soul that will drive you insane or drive you to him. Your soul longs for God; you just may not know it yet" (I can't really cite a page number, of

course!). Your book is then divided between three broad categories that characterize our souls' most essential cravings—intimacy, destiny, and meaning. We all seek intimacy, purpose, and truth, which we will only find in God.

If the human soul could truly be said to long for God, your course of travel would make sense. You write,

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is within us….It seems what he is implying is that we have a better chance of finding God in the universe within us than in the one that surrounds us. And it is on this path that I invited you to walk with me. I invite you to engage in an exploration of the human spirit, to journey deep inside yourself and search out the mystery of the universe that exists with you.

For as New Agey as that sounds, I think you simply mean to say that reflecting upon the cravings inside of us will demonstrate that we were made for God, kind of like C. S. Lewis' comment in *Mere Christianity* about the analogy between our physical appetites and spiritual appetites. Each points to something that quenches it.

I think I know what Lewis is getting at. I certainly know what Augustine is getting at. The problem is, it's patently untrue that all human beings are all really seeking God, as you put it. Mr. McManus, please, find me one verse in the entire Bible—just one!—that says human beings in the flesh are seeking God. It says just the opposite. It says that we hate God (at least the true one) and God's rule. It says that we want to be God. And it says that our hearts are literally enslaved to opposing him. Augustine was right when said that our hearts are never at rest apart from God. But that doesn't mean our hearts seek him. When Jesus speaks of God's kingdom in our hearts, he's talking about what *must be* established, not what *is* established.

With this fundamentally flawed starting point, the doctrines of man, sin, the cross, and salvation I found in the book, amazingly, were died-in-the-wool, nineteenth-century liberal Christianity. Think Schleiermacher and his "God-consciousness" as it relates to "self-consciousness" (decidedly different from Calvin's connection of the knowledge of God and man, which is based in revelation).

About our longing for love, you write, "We run from God because we long to be loved and we have convinced ourselves that the One who is most loving could not and would not embrace us. We run from the One our souls crave."

About our longing for destiny and purpose, you write, "When we stop believing the world can become a better place, when we stop caring about the lives and conditions of others, we lose a part of ourselves."

About our longing for meaning and truth, you describe the man who told you that he saw no need for God, to which you responded to him, "You must have really been hurt at some time in your life."

According to your book, we just need to be convinced that God loves us. We just need to believe he has a good plan for our lives. We just can't let the turkeys get us down. The problem with the human condition, finally, is a lack of knowledge, or knowing something, or getting it. "Don't you see, buddy? God loves you. I mean he really, really loves you."

In your book, the problem from which we need to be saved is *not* the heart's willful opposition to God. In fact, in what I take to be your understandable attempt to sympathize with non-Christians, you pooh-pooh all such talk: "For the past two thousand years, Christianity, along with pretty much every other world religion, has made the primary focus the sinful nature of us all. In some ways I think this has led to a not-so-subtle self-hatred." Okay, I don't want to make sin the "primary focus" of Christianity either. But isn't it the primary problem?

You do present something like a doctrine of conversion, and a conversion that leads us away from certain sins—"from greed to altruism," "from indifference to compassion," "from hate to love," "from apathy to activism." But your overall call to conversion sounds like you're trying to persuade a shy turtle that it's safe to poke its head outside the shell, rather than to call the warring rebel to lay down his arms against the king. It's the conversion of after-school specials: "C'mon, Jimmy, the other kids at school really *do* like you. You really can participate in the school play, if you would just believe in yourself."

To put this in more highfalutin terms, your doctrine of man, sin, and conversion remind me much too much of a counter-Enlightenment Romantic's. Remember Rousseau's noble savage, now enslaved and conformed by civilization? Or Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality"? Or Emerson's refusing to march to the beat of any other drummer? Or Whitman's "Song of Myself"? I loved that stuff in college. *Leaves of Grass* was my Bible. I'm serious. I looked for joy in some sort of poetic and rational intersection of my soul's longings, nature, beauty, and "God." What that yielded was hedonism, and not of the John Piper variety.

According to the Bible, the soul's cravings are warped. This is the fundamental error of your book. In your book, our soul's cravings are not even neutral, as Pelagius would have them. They're good, and to be trusted. It's almost like we all just need to "wake up" to what our souls are really saying, and how God is their fulfillment. I'm reminded of Thoreau's line about "the

mass of men living lives of quiet desperation," or another line of his about never having met someone "fully awake." These may sound like trenchant observations on Thoreau's part, and in some ways they are. But he's also misdiagnosing the real problem, which is not that we need to wake up. It's that we secretly hate God as God, because we want to do what we want to do. The craving for intimacy, for instance, is fine. The problem is, we demand intimacy on our terms and for self-glory, willfully opposing God's terms and God's glory. This is why Jesus had to say, not "Seek first intimacy," but "Seek first the kingdom [or rule] of God."

Given your book's optimistic anthropology, it's not surprising that the only doctrine of the cross you present is pure Abelardianism, which, of course, the liberals of the German Enlightenment eventually picked up. God's work on the cross awakens us to the fact that, wow, God really is loving! Here are your only two references to the cross in the entire book (at least of the references which you own as yours).

On a cross, Jesus of Nazareth hung naked and beaten for love. Talk about rejection. It would be easy to conclude that God made a fool of himself. What was he thinking to die for love? He gambled everything on the power of love. That love was more powerful than hate. That love was more powerful than death. What was he thinking to die for us, to give himself for you and for me, knowing we might just kiss him in the face and then walk away. Love's crazy like that.

To trust in God, you have to know that he loves you without condition. This is the beauty of Jesus' death on the cross. It is God's declaration of love for you. His love embraces you wherever you are on your journey, and he does not leave you there.

In other words, beholding God's grand expression of love on the cross should change us as it shows us how loving God really is. Well, that's true to a point. But you still haven't told the non-believer what exactly he's beholding on the cross. He is, in fact, beholding the Son of God taking upon himself the wrath of God for the sins of all who repent and believe. That picture is amazing. But it's more. It's actually *doing* something, like paying for sin.

Are you beginning to see why I was surprised to find an affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message? It affirms original sin, God's holiness and wrath, penal substitution, and a strong conception of repentance in conversion. I trust that you affirm those things. But I fear that your practice, at least in this book, rests on an altogether different theology. By calling me to look for God in my heart's longings for intimacy, destiny, and meaning, you're calling me back to all the old idols of my college years. You're calling me back to a worldview embedded in today's secular culture. You're calling me, in the language of Feuerbach, to project my own subjective essence into the world outside myself and to objectify it as God (cf. Is. 44:13-17; Ps. 115:4-8).

Mr. McManus, I'm still waiting for someone with all your creative gifts of communication, cultural sensitivity, love for non-Christians, and joy in your salvation to write a book for non-Christians that gets the gospel right. Will you?

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July/August 2007

Topic(s): Theology, Book Reviews

Third Mark of a Healthy Church MEMBER: Gospel Saturated

By Thabiti Anyabwile

The greatest need in the world today is the gospel. It is the greatest need of the world because men, women, and children are perishing without a vital knowledge of God through the good news of his Savior Son Jesus.

The greatest need in the church today is the gospel. The gospel is not only news for a perishing world, it is the message that forms, sustains, and animates the church. Apart from the gospel, the church has nothing to say—nothing to say that cannot be said by some other human agency. The gospel distinguishes the church from the world, defines her message and mission in the world, and steels her people against the fiery darts of the evil one and the false allurements of sin. The gospel is absolutely vital to a vibrant, joyous, persevering, hopeful and healthy Christian and Christian church. So essential is the gospel to the Christian life that we need to be *saturated* in it in order to be healthy church members.

How then does one immerse oneself in the gospel? What path might lead to greater spiritual health?

1. KNOW THE GOSPEL

The first order of business is to know the gospel. This seems such an obvious statement that stating it can feel silly. But, in point of fact, many professing and believing Christians possess a shallow understanding of the gospel as a result of years of hearing short "gospel presentations" tacked onto the ends of sermons. Still others who know the message of Christ find themselves awkward and incapable of sharing the good news clearly with family and friends. Taking steps to be sure we know the gospel with some clarity and depth, then, is a necessary first step.

It's helpful to rule out some ideas frequently presented as the gospel. The gospel is not simply that (i) we are okay, (ii) God is love, (iii) Jesus wants to be our friends; or that (iv) we should live right.[1] Neither is the gospel simply that all our problems will be fixed if we follow Jesus or that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. All of these ideas may be true in some sense, but only in a partial sense and never as a solely sufficient statement of what the gospel is.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is literally "good news." As *news* it contains statements of fact and truths derived from those facts. As *good* news the gospel holds out hope based upon promises from God and grounded in the historical facts and truths that vindicate those promises.

The gospel or good news of Jesus Christ is that God the Father, who is holy and righteous in all his ways, is angry with sinners and will punish sin. Man, who disobeys the rule of God, is alienated from the love of God and in danger of an eternal and agonizing condemnation at the hands of God. But God, who is also rich in mercy, because of his great love, sent his eternal Son born by the virgin Mary, to die as a ransom and a substitute for the sins of rebellious people. And now, through the perfect obedience of the Son of God and his willing death on the cross as payment for our sins, all who repent and believe in Jesus Christ, following him as Savior and Lord, will be saved from the wrath of God to come, declared just in his sight, have eternal life, and receive the Spirit of God as a foretaste of the glories of heaven with God himself.

It is this message—briefly stated here—that we must imbibe and delight in if we are to be healthy church members.

2. DESIRE TO HEAR THE GOSPEL/PREACH THE GOSPEL TO YOURSELF

And so, we must cultivate and protect a ravenous desire for this message. Regularly hearing and plumbing the depths of the gospel increases our knowledge of the message, affection for the Savior, and skill in sharing the message.

So, we should listen actively for the gospel and gospel implications in sermons. Don't turn off your ears when the pastor begins to appeal to non-Christians with the gospel message. Listen to it afresh. Reaffirm your belief in its truth, promises, and power in your life. Appropriate it for any sins you are made aware of by the sermon or through self-examination. See *your* sins nailed to the cross as you hear the good news. Consider whether there are any new promises or aspects to the gospel included in the sermon. How will you hold onto those truths?

Listen so actively and longingly for this news that you feel your poverty and malnourishment when it is missing in a sermon. And when you find yourself dissatisfied or longing, preach the gospel to yourself. It's a message that comes to you, for you.

Own it. Rather than merely listening to others, or listening to that voice that plagues you with doubts, worries, and fears, listen to the voice of God in the gospel by proclaiming it to yourself when the need arrives. C.J. Mahaney in his excellent and helpful book, *Living the Cross Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing*, suggests that we along with other saints memorize the gospel, pray the gospel, sing the gospel, review how the gospel has changed us, and study the gospel.

3. TAKE THE GOSPEL TO ITS CONCLUSION

As you reflect on the events and promises of the gospel, press forward to the conclusion of the gospel. John Piper reminds us that God is the gospel, that the gospel is a message about God giving himself to us in love.

Until the gospel *events* of Good Friday and Easter and the gospel *promises* of justification and eternal life lead you to behold and embrace *God himself* as your highest joy, you have not embraced the gospel of God. You have embraced some of his gifts. You have rejoiced over some of his rewards. You have marveled at some of his miracles. But you have not yet been awakened to why the gifts, the rewards, and the miracles have come. They have come for one great reason: that you might behold forever the glory of God in Christ, and by beholding become the kind of person who delights in God above all things, and by delighting display his supreme beauty and worth with ever-increasing brightness and bliss forever.[2]

4. ORDER YOUR LIFE AROUND THE GOSPEL

As church members, our aim is to understand the gospel so deeply, so intimately that it animates every area of our lives. We set out to escape the fallacy that says (in practice or effect) that the gospel was meant to be preached until it reached me and then bottled up until Jesus comes. We want the gospel central to our communication with others, central to how we encourage and correct, central to individual career and relationship decisions, central to the decisions the church makes corporately, and central to all our habits of life. We want the gospel, the God of the gospel, to take priority in every area of life. Gospel-saturated church members should consider any number of strategies for organizing their lives around the good news of Jesus Christ:

- Intentionally frequenting the same stores (cleaners, restaurants, etc.) with the aim of building relationships and familiarity with store personnel, and hopefully having gospel conversations.
- Using vacations for short-term mission trips.
- Volunteering in community-based organizations to influence for the gospel.
- Hosting home discussions regarding religion and philosophy.
- A staple: inviting neighbors over for dinner or for holiday parties and talking with them about Christ.
- Hosting Bible studies in the work place.
- Joining neighborhood clubs (garden clubs, cycling clubs, etc.) to build relationships and further gospel opportunities.
- Inviting friends to church and special religious events where the gospel was sure to be center stage.

We want to recognize that there is no risk in sharing the gospel, only the reward of faithfulness. We want to be "at the ready" with the words of life.

5. SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH OTHERS

It sometimes appears as though some Christians believe the gospel was meant to be preached widely until it reached them, and then stored safely in the vault of their personal history away from everyone else. Some suppose that just sharing their testimony or living a good Christian life is as effective a witness as doing evangelism. No doubt such a life is a witness of some sort. But is it a witness to the cross of Jesus Christ? Does "witnessing" by personal testimony and general habit of life point effectively enough to the cross and the Savior?

In too many cases such attempts only leave a vague impression of religiosity, not a brilliant display of the glories of God in the redemption of sinners through the sacrifice of His Son. If we would contribute to the health of our local congregations, we must be committed to not only harvesting the gospel for ourselves but of shipping it to others as well. We must do the work of an evangelist. With urgency and love, we must tell the non-Christians among us to repent of their sins and to believe on Jesus Christ. We must tell them that turning to God does not result in an easy life, but the decision is well worth it. The forgiveness and satisfaction their souls long for is found only in the person of Jesus Christ.

We have an opportunity to improve the work of our pastors by planting and watering gospel seeds even as he plants and waters through his pulpit ministry. We can greet and talk with visitors to our churches and invite our non-Christian family and friends. We should use the occasion of their visit to discuss spiritual things, particularly their understanding of and acceptance or rejection of the good news. We can meet together with other Christians specifically to plot and pray for evangelistic

opportunities. A gospel saturated life is a life that splashes out onto others with the good news. A healthy church is built, in part, on healthy gospel-motivated members.

6. GUARD THE GOSPEL

Finally, a healthy church member takes serious the responsibility of guarding the gospel from corruption and abandonment. The New Testament seems to place this responsibility ultimately on the congregation rather than on the pastors alone. When the church at Galatia was unsettled by false teachers looking to add circumcision to the demands of the gospel, the Apostle Paul writes not to the pastors and elders but to the churches themselves. He addresses the membership and calls them to guard the gospel he had preached to them. His instruction is strong: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8-9).

The Galatians, indeed all Christian church members, are to be careful concerning what they entertain in gospel preaching. The Apostle John warns his readers that "if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 10-11). Peter reminds his readers that those who follow the "shameful ways" of false teachers "bring the way of truth into disrepute" (2 Pet. 2:2). So, it's understandable, then, that Jude exhorts his audience to "*contend* for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). The healthy church and church member contests, resists, fights for, and protects the apostolic gospel delivered and preserved in the pages of Scripture. And without accepting that responsibility and being vigilant in understanding, applying and preserving the gospel, we leave it to be corrupted, abused, and abandoned by unscrupulous teachers and the forces of the evil one.

CONCLUSION

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, God offers himself for sinners and to sinners. It is the gospel that makes us aware of the love of God, of our depravity and need for redemption, and of the possibility of eternal joy through worshipping God. It is this same gospel, and a healthy understanding of it, that creates health and strength in members of the Christian church. Let us be saturated in it!

Suggested Reading for a gospel-Saturated Life:

Jerry Bridges, *The gospel for Real Life*
Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*
C.J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life: Keeping the gospel the Main Thing*
Charles Spurgeon, *The Power of the Cross of Christ*
John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

For Pastors

D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*

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Footnotes:

1. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), see chapter 3.
2. John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), p. 38. Italics in the original.

July/August 2007

Good Friday Meditation: A Fitting Crown

By Michael Lawrence

They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. Matthew 27:28-29

Nobody excelled at political theatre quite like the Romans. From triumphal arches built to celebrate the conquering of walled cities, to the worship of emperors, Rome did not miss an opportunity to underscore her imperial authority and supremacy. Not even in the execution of a prisoner for sedition.

Such an execution is what was going on in the Praetorium that day. The soldiers knew the score. Jesus had claimed to be king, and was to die for the offense against Caesar. To make a point of the ridiculousness of his claim they played pretend with him, dressing him up with royal robe, crown, and scepter. But the robe was a Roman soldier's cape, showing who was really in charge; and the scepter was a rough wooden staff. The only ones to wield it were the soldiers, who would beat him with the sign of his own pretended authority. This rough abuse, along with spit and mockery, was the honor Rome gave to make-believe kings.

A CROWN OF THORNS

But what I'd like to consider here is the crown they gave Jesus that day. Throughout the ancient world, crowns were the universal symbol of royalty. Caesar himself wore a crown with plaited leaves of the laurel cast in precious metal. It was a symbol of both victory and divinity. In mocking contrast, Jesus' crown was twisted together from thorns. Modern readers of the Gospel accounts, of course, usually focus on the pain such thorns would have caused, and no doubt the soldiers intended it to hurt. But they had already flogged him, and they were about to nail him to a cross. So physical pain doesn't seem to have been the only thing on their minds. They were after something more—a pain that would pierce through to a man's pride.

So they sent someone to search for thorns. And he would have had to search. No one cultivates thorn bushes, and they were in the middle of a palace in the middle of a city.

When they had found this most worthless of plants, they took its cruel leaves, and crowned what seemed a worthless man with worthless claims.

A FITTING CROWN

In fact, nothing could have been more fitting, though not fitting in the way in which those soldiers may have thought. For Jesus did not claim the throne of Rome or any other empire. No, his claim was over the whole world, the entire creation, and for that only thorns would do.

Why only thorns? To understand that, you have to stop and hear the story of thorns in the Bible. Throughout the Scriptures, thorns are a symbol and proverb for futility and pain. Wherever God's blessing is withdrawn, wherever his curse is found, thorns abound. They are a picture of unfruitfulness and desolation. They choke out and smother good plants. They block the path of the wayfarer. A source of frustration and trouble, they are good only for burning. And it is no wonder: their origin is not on day three of creation along with the rest of the plants, but on day one of the Fall.

When God created the world, he created it good. And the Bible tells us that he created all kinds of vegetation as food for animals and people. The Bible also tells us that he created mankind to act as vice-regents under his Supreme Lordship. They were to rule the world, not as independent authorities, but as stewards under him. But Adam and Eve, our first parents and representatives, were not content to rule under God's authority. They were not content to accept his provision or to administer his rule. They would be king and queen by themselves; they would provide for themselves, and they would decide for themselves. They rejected his command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They decided that was the fruit they wanted most. And so they reached out and took it.

And all of us have been doing the same ever since. We make up our own rules. We provide for ourselves whatever meaning to life we choose. Our empires aren't large. Unlike Adam and Eve, we make no claim to be rulers of the world. Just rulers of ourselves. But where our rule holds sway, like Caesar, we brook no rivals.

In response to Adam and Eve's rebellion, God cursed the productive and life-giving world he'd made. And something new appeared from the ground. In return for Adam's painful toil, Genesis 3:18 tells us that the ground would now produce thorns and thistles, in addition to the good plants God had already created. Here then was the symbol of Adam's rebellion, something new he could claim as a result of his rule. It's a perfect match. Like the thorn, the autonomous rule of mankind—and the independent rule of our own hearts—has produced an unbroken history of pain, suffering, and futility. Such rule has proved as worthy as the crown it created.

But if that's the story of thorns, how could it be fitting that Jesus Christ wore them as a crown? For here stood the incarnate Son of God, fully God and fully man, the creator of the world in his divinity, sinless in his humanity, and so doubly undeserving of such a cursed diadem! It was his throne that had been assaulted by Adam; his word that had been doubted by Eve. It was his mouth that had spoken the curse. How could it be fitting that he now wear its symbol, and, what's worse, suffer its execution?

FOR LOVE'S SAKE

There is no reason, except for love. In love, God decided that the story of thorns would end at the cross. Out of his sheer grace and mercy, the Father, even as he spoke the curse, already planned to send his Son to take the curse upon himself. Even as he caused thorns to spring up from the ground, the Son had already decided to wear those same thorns on his brow.

So when the time was right, the Son of God put aside his heavenly glory, a crown that does not fade, and he took on flesh. And then Jesus Christ, the true and only King of the world, put on our crown and suffered the wrath of God that you and I and every other imposter king descended from Adam deserves.

And by wearing that crown, and suffering its fate, Jesus brought the reign of thorns to an end. For all who repent of their rebellion and put their faith in him, Jesus not only suffered as our substitute, paying the penalty we deserved, he also reigned as our king, rescuing us from sin's curse and bringing us into his glorious kingdom, a new creation where thorns do not grow and brows are not pierced. A kingdom where we will wear crowns, not of our own making, but of his, crowns of righteousness which we will gladly throw at the feet of their rightful owner. For then we will see Jesus, crowned not with thorns, but with "glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9).

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