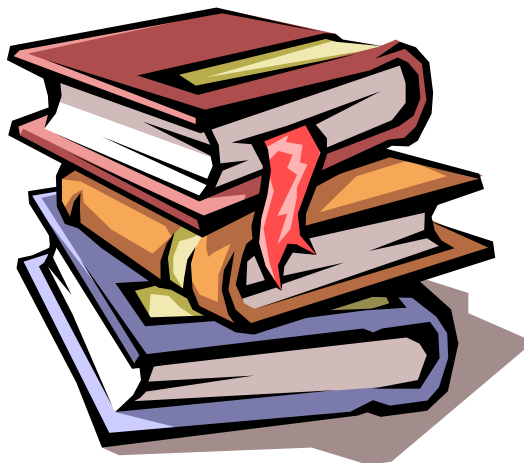


SEVEN BASKETS OF FRAGMENTS

ESSAYS ON SCRIPTURE, THE GOSPEL, MINISTRY, AND CULTURE



ROBERT A. SNYDER

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In gratitude for the time spent as pastor of
Open Door Bible Church

*Unto me,
who am less than the least of all saints,
is this grace given,
that I should preach among the Gentiles
the unsearchable riches of Christ;...*

—Ephesians 3:8

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Preface

When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.

—John 6:12

The apostle John presents some details of Jesus that are instructive for our daily lives. For example, after the resurrection, Jesus folded His burial face cloth and put it in a place by itself (John 20:7). Some days later, Jesus made breakfast on the beach for His men, complete with fire, fish, and bread (John 21:9). Surely there are echoes here of washing their feet; and in telling them, “Come and eat,” we hear reiterated the initial invitation, “Come and see” (John 21:12; 1:39). Hospitable, household tasks—the folding of clothes, the preparation of meals, and the gracious invitation to be with Me—are tasks that might to some seem beneath the Son of God, *risen from the dead*, yet they are the marks of Him who still invites us to open the door and promises to dine with us (Revelation 3:20).

Earlier in John, we have another little household trait: the frugality of not wasting food. After feeding the five thousand with a minimal lunch, Jesus then commands His men to gather the scraps, that “nothing be lost” (John 6:12). Interesting, having just experienced the luxury of feasting on the bounty of a miracle, His disciples may have thought to themselves, “Jesus, why should we bother to pick up the scraps, when You can multiply one scrap into another huge meal?” In telling them not to waste the bounty of God, we surely have a lesson for us, not to waste what God has given, whether it came directly from heaven or through the hands of our labors. The means is not the point. When God has blessed, gratitude at least will lead to the frugal management of His gifts.

To me, ideas and insights fall in the same category, as gifts from God. Even though God can give a million more insights, through a score of writers, He has not promised to do so, and He may not. Therefore, since God has given the insights of the following essays, they should be published and not wasted, even though they are mixed with human ideas and may lack the taste from a better kitchen. In a way, the selection here is homemade, composed mainly of blogs written for the church I served, and presented here without editing.

May the Lord be pleased with this offering, as I am currently in the business of gathering His scraps, and may you, the reader, find something here to feed your soul and direct your life! God bless you!

The Lord’s Day, June 16th, 2013

Bob Snyder

Basket One • Scriptural Expositions

The Theme of “Seed” in Genesis

May 7, 2012

Seed is in relation to kind. What kind of plant the seed comes from is the kind of plant that will come. This fact of life is plain from the opening chapter of Genesis, where God speaks, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so” (Genesis 1:11). By divine inspiration, this concept of seed is planted early in our minds as we read Genesis—like begets like through seed.

Throughout the rest of the book, the word “seed” is used seldom of plants and animals (7:3; 8:22; 47:19, 23, 24), and only once for the physical seed of human life (38:8, 9). In all other references, the word is used as a metonym for physical descendants of some kind, including both males and females (46:6-7). According to the apostle Paul, in a verse we will examine later, it is important that this word is singular (“seed”, not “seeds”). Interestingly, other words could have been used for offspring, including “children”, which would be a variation of the root word for “generations”, the word that structures the book (e.g. 2:4; 5:1; etc.). The Holy Spirit, however, in His all-knowing wisdom, chose a word that is a collective singular, with only one plural occurrence in the Hebrew Bible (1 Samuel 8:15). Think of a box. There may be many things or only one thing within the box labeled “seed”, but there is just one box, not many (“seeds”).

For this word and its importance theologically, there are two centers of gravity in Genesis—the indirect promise for man hidden in the curse on the serpent (3:15), and the repeated promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding their “seed” to come (12:7). Let us consider each as they occur in Genesis, and then see what the divinely-ordained interpreters of the New Testament saw in each. In quoting from Genesis, we will use with slight modification the King James Version, because it retains the word “seed” in translation, and not the word “descendants”, which would be otherwise be a fine translation, if it were not for the loss of the singular and the connotation of like begetting like according to its kind.

First, in cursing the serpent, God promised, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: [he] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (3:15). In this verse, the “thee” is the serpent and “her” is “the woman”—not necessarily Eve, who is yet to be named, but perhaps representative of generic womankind. The idea of a woman having seed may seem incongruous at first, but it is a Hebrew idiom that is found elsewhere in Genesis (16:10; 24:60; cf. 4:25). In itself, the phrase “her seed” does not necessitate a virgin birth. Interestingly, it is God who purposely puts enmity or hostility between these parties. In the course of this divinely-appointed enmity, or perhaps even as a result of it, there will be a mutual bruising, with the serpent getting the worse end of the deal, in an image that is easy to picture.

Second, in the promises to the patriarchs, we first read that God promises to Abram a land and much offspring (“seed” would fit in here), if he obeys in leaving his country and following God in faith (12:1-2). Moreover, we also see that God will make Abram the touchstone of destiny for all individuals, depending on whether they bless him or curse him. Each would have his destiny determined in kind—the ones blessing are blessed, and those cursing are cursed. Moreover, there is also a universalism for groups, in that each family of the earth will be blessed in him (12:3).

Abram does obey, and so the Lord makes the promises of land and seed explicit to him: “Unto thy seed will I give this land” (12:7). From this simple beginning, the promises are repeated and expanded throughout the book, generation after generation. For example, God promises that Abraham’s seed will be as numerous as “the dust of the earth” (13:16; cf. 28:14), as “the stars of the heaven” (22:17; cf. 15:5), and as “the sand which is upon the sea shore” (22:17). Once Abraham passes his ultimate test of faith in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, God then adds the notion of victory—“thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies” (22:17)—a kingdom note perhaps hinted in the “kings” mentioned earlier (17:6, 16) and repeated in the premarital blessing to Rebekah, “Be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them” (24:60). Interestingly, this note of conquest may hint at an ultimate inheritance that someday would surpass the land of Canaan, for Isaac is told in the context of Egypt that he is to inherit “all these countries [lands]” (26:3, 4). Moreover, Isaac’s son Jacob is told to

“spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south”, as if this somehow would make possible the promise mentioned next in the text, that “in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (28:14). After all, according to the apostle Paul, the promise was that Abraham would be “the heir of the world” (Romans 4:13).

In the midst of all these sayings, at a strategic moment, God calls Abram by a new name—Abraham—and makes a covenant with him, saying, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (17:7-8). Here we see that the collective “seed” implies multiple “generations”, and that the promises pertain to time indefinite (“everlasting”). Moreover, we also see that God will belong to whoever is included in “thy seed”—a promise that Jesus says implies life after death (Matthew 22:31-32).

In hearing that his aged wife Sarai (now called Sarah) would soon have a son, Abraham laughs in faith, but then thinks of the son he already has and exclaims, “O that Ishmael might live before thee!” (17:18). This son is through Hagar, Sarah’s maid. God makes it clear that though He will bless Ishmael, the covenant is with Sarah’s son Isaac, and “with his seed after him” (17:19). Ominously, it appears that Ishmael will not “live” or be in the presence of God.

From this interchange with God and Abraham, we learn that to be an heir of the promises, it is not enough to be Abraham’s physical descendent. This fact is confirmed once Isaac is born. Within two back-to-back sentences, God informs Abraham that Isaac alone shall be heir, since “in Isaac shall thy seed be called,” and then adds that Ishmael would become a nation, since “he is thy seed” (21:12-13). Interestingly, though both sons are “seed”, only in the one son shall those *designated* or *called* as “seed” inherit the promises. The insertion of this word “called” must not be overlooked. Abraham and his wife Sarah have already been *called* by a different name. Now, within Abraham’s physical family, God is sovereignly naming the seed of Abraham.

This observation is confirmed to us in the New Testament, when Paul asserts that not all physical Jews are truly Jews. He quotes Genesis 21:12 and explains, “They which are the children of the flesh, whose are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Romans 9:6-8). This sovereign choice is confirmed in Isaac’s two sons, Esau and Jacob, for before these two twins were born or had done anything, good or bad, it was told to their mother Rebekah that the older would serve the younger, in contrast to the normal protocol of inheritance. It occurred this way, Paul explains, in order that “the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth” (9:11). Again, the act of God calling, naming, designating is ultimately determinative. The identity creates the reality, for as Paul said earlier in the book with regard to Abraham’s name, God “calleth those things which be not as though they were” (4:17). It is the same God who names Isaac, and who renames Jacob as Israel.

To us non-Jews who believe in Christ, this sovereign calling is good news. If the blessings of Abraham were tied to physical descent, where would we be? However, the apostle of Christ Himself explains that just as physical descent cannot automatically include oneself, so neither can it automatically be excluding, since God has called individuals “sons” from not only the Jews but also from the Gentiles (9:24-26). Indeed, there is only One who is ultimately named “the Seed of Abraham”, and that One is Christ. He is the singular box. Paul says, “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). That Paul knows this to be a collective singular is shown later in the chapter, when he reveals the grand mystery, “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:29). That is amazing, and true. If I am a Gentile but also a true believer in Christ, then I too am a child of Abraham and blessed with him (3:6-9). I am his seed, for I am of his like kind.

Being of like kind is more important than being of same descent. In Jesus’ day, the Jews often prided themselves in being Abraham’s children, as if this pedigree in itself qualified them as heirs of Abraham’s blessings. Even today, it is common for children of churchgoing folks to assume that they too must be Christians, as if somehow being a Christian is something into which one is physically born. Not so! We must be spiritually born of God (John 3:3-8). Until then, our pride resembles the devil, not God. Hence, John the Baptist called these children of Abraham a “generation of vipers” (Matthew 3:7) and Jesus flat out said to them, “Ye are of your father the devil” (John 8:44). After all, seed is in relation to kind.

This observation brings us back to the opening chapters of Genesis, to the initial center of gravity—the enmity between the serpent and the woman, between his seed and her seed. Somehow, the serpent has seed. Though this may seem strange to us, the words of Jesus and John the Baptist tell us that it was not strange to them, that some men were designated as the seed of the serpent, according to his kind. In fact, the notion of children may be more than figurative, as we see Satan giving Judas Iscariot the idea to betray Jesus, and even later indwelling Judas himself (John 13:2, 27). Within the dominion of darkness, Paul describes “the prince of the power of the air” as “the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience,” who are those “taken captive by [the devil] to do his will” (Ephesians 2:2; 2 Timothy 2:26). Believe me, there are children of the devil, and unless you have been spiritually born of God, you too are unwittingly doing the devil’s will as his child. Thankfully, one greater than the devil has appeared, who can free you from that evil domination. That one is “the seed of the woman”, who crushes the serpent’s head.

To identify this seed from the first book of the Bible, turn to the last book of the Bible. In Revelation chapter twelve, John describes two signs in heaven—a woman and a dragon—and he describes the enmity between the two, as the dragon seeks to kill the woman. In the drama, the woman gives birth to a male child, who is then “caught up unto God, and to his throne” (Revelation 12:5). Significantly, he is slated to “rule the nations with a rod of iron” (cf. Psalm 2:9). The woman then escapes for her life to “a place prepared of God” for her (Revelation 12:6). Losing both the woman and her child makes the dragon angry, so the text significantly says that he “went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12:17).

The remnant of her seed? Who is her initial seed? Obviously, the seed of the woman is the male child born to her, who ascends to heaven in order later to descend to earth to rule the nations. This, of course, is Jesus Christ. Moreover, the dragon is identified as “that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). In mentioning the woman, her seed, and the serpent, we find the interpretive clues given to us by the Holy Spirit Himself. He left us with many details difficult to interpret, but the big picture is clear. This is a vision-world reenactment of Genesis 3:15—something that God used J. Ramsey Michaels to point out to me, in his introduction to interpreting the book of Revelation.

Given this interpretation of Revelation 12, the next chapter identifies for us the seed of the serpent—the beast that rises out of the sea. He looks just like the dragon, and he is given power to “make war with the saints, and to overcome them” (13:1-2, 7). For those familiar with Revelation, it is clear that the beast represents a world-wide empire and its evil ruler (see 13:7; 17:11). Moreover, this beast incorporates images of the evil regimes pictured in Daniel—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome (cf. Revelation 13:2; Daniel 7:1ff). Therefore, both an individual and an evil regime can be identified as being the seed of the serpent, just as earlier in Revelation, a Roman provincial seat of government is identified as “Satan’s seat” (2:13). Moreover, the seed of the woman is not just the Messiah, but also the “remnant” who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12:17). These are the “saints” of the next chapter—the ones persecuted by the seed of the serpent.

Clearly, the visions of Revelation show us that “the seed of the woman” does not include all of humanity, those descended physically from Eve. This is not surprising, for we earlier saw that not all those descended physically from Abraham are called the seed of Abraham. Moreover, just as the seed of Abraham is a collective singular—a box with the label “Christ”—so also is the seed of the woman both an individual and a group associated with Him. In fact, the apostle Paul tells the believers in Rome, “The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Romans 16:20). As believers in Christ, we too shall participate in His coming reign, when He crushes the evil one who crushed His heel on the cross. As the seed of Abraham in Christ, we too shall possess the gates of Christ’s enemies, and spread out to inherit the world.

Interestingly, persecution is the present hallmark of this divinely-ordained enmity. It is in the Revelation narrative of the beast, and it is also in the opening chapters of Genesis. According to the book’s own structure, as determined by the Spirit of Christ through His servant Moses, chapters two, three, and four go together. This is confirmed by the many verbal echoes of chapter three in chapter four, where the same word is used in a fresh way. (The book of Revelation does this all the time with prophetic images.) Given this structure, we must interpret the narrative of Cain killing Abel in light of the fall and its curses. That slaughter is an example of the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. In other words, Cain is a child of the devil, even as the apostle John comments in his first letter: “This is the message that ye heard from the beginning [the beginning of Genesis?—cf.

John 8:44], that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother” (1 John 3:11-12a). Did you catch that phrase, “of that wicked one”? Cain is the seed of the serpent, and, as the rest of Genesis four shows, so are the wicked men like Lamech, who abuses his wives, and many of the builders of civilization, both in the arts and in technology (see Genesis 4:16-24). Moreover, the book of Genesis also foretells how the seed of Abraham would someday be enslaved and afflicted in a foreign land, and then be liberated by God (15:13-14). This nation is Egypt, which is described in the inspired poetry of the Psalms and Isaiah as a serpent named Rahab that God had “broken...in pieces, as one that is slain” (Psalm 89:10)—a neat reference pointed out to me by my friend Tom Pryde. Therefore, the evil Pharaoh of Exodus is in line with Cain and the beast, as one who literally tries to kill off the chosen seed of Abraham, which, as one persecuted, seems to blend in with the seed of the woman.

Beloved believer, listen to the words of the apostle: “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you” (1 John 3:13). This is John’s exhortation from the fact of Cain killing Abel. The enmity is divinely ordained. Jesus Himself did not come to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34), to divide up the human family into two camps. This is in keeping with His mission to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). There are two kinds of people in this world: those born of God, and those who are of the devil. If we have eyes to see, the marks of the two are quite obvious, even as John wrote, “In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother” (3:10). Do not be fooled by a world that loves universalism into thinking that somehow we must be one big family, with God as our Father and each of us as brother. No, no, no. There are still two groups and two destinies, and the divinely-ordained enmity will keep these two groups apart here on earth, even as the persecution is a sign of destiny after earth—destruction for them, and salvation for you (Philippians 1:28).

Interestingly, if Cain is the seed of the serpent, then he must not be included in the seed of the woman. This is striking, for Eve gave birth to Cain as well as to Abel. Again, physical descent is not determinative over designation and kind. But look closer at the text with me, even as B. H. Carroll helped me to see this first. Eve is renamed, just as Abram and Jacob. Adam first named her “woman,” based on her derivation from “man” (Genesis 2:23). This action occurred in the context of Adam naming all the creatures, even as God “brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them” (2:19). Apparently, as one made in the image of God, the God who calls things into being, Adam is given the privilege of calling the creatures, and thus determining something of their future, for “whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (2:19). Now, Adam renames the woman Eve, meaning “Life”, for she is “the mother of all living” (3:20).

Now ponder this question with me: *Why does Adam rename the woman?* In a book where new names are linked to a heightened status before God, this renaming should be considered carefully. What did it signify? In context, Adam renames her in response to something God had just spoken. After all, she has not born a child yet, so the only way she could be called “mother” is in light of what was to come, based on God’s certain word. Somehow, both the ideas of “living” and “mother” derive from what God had just spoken.

Regarding “living,” the renaming could be out of relief that they did not die immediately, as God had threatened earlier and in mercy passed over; but if so, why would those slated to return to dust be called “the living”? In the context, the tree of life is limited to Eden and barred from mankind in general (3:22-24); therefore, how could those outside Eden be identified as “the living”, unless they were someday going to eat from that tree and live forever? Remember, Ishmael is not said to live, having been kept outside the covenant; but if God is your God, you will live forever. Someday, you will partake of the tree of life (cf. Revelation 22).

Regarding being called a “mother”, is it in response to the painful births anticipated (3:16) or to the victorious crushing of the serpent (3:15)? Putting the two words together inclines me to think that Adam is responding in faith to God’s promise of redemption through the Seed of the Woman. The pure and perfect Text does not tell us how much time occurred between the verses mentioned here, but perhaps Adam pondered and pondered, and gave Eve her new name after he had received light from God as to her significance. In response to such faith, it makes sense that God would then clothe the man and his wife with the skins of freshly killed animals (3:21)—a divine act that may symbolize the atonement and the believer’s justification, when the righteousness of God in Christ covers his legal shame.

Even going further on in the text, it is interesting to note Eve’s different responses upon giving birth. When Cain

was born, she explained his name by saying, “I have gotten a man from the LORD” (4:1). When Seth was born, she explained his name by saying, “God...hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew” (4:25). Do you see the difference? Without making too much of this difference, it is still the case, though, that Cain is said to be a “man”, while Abel and Seth are said to be the “seed” of this woman.

Ultimately, Jesus Christ is both the Seed of the Woman and the Seed of Abraham, in whom all the promises of life, land, and victory are fulfilled. Those who believe in the Giver of these promises are clothed in righteousness, and are given a futuristic name, indicative of what God will do in them and for them. Those who remain in darkness will continue to do wickedness, and will someday reap the reward of the serpent himself. This division within mankind is established and kept up through divinely-appointed enmity, which is exhibited in real persecution by the wicked on the righteous. As believers, we should expect this and not be surprised when it comes. As our fathers were, so also are we—sojourners in a land that we will someday inherit, whenever we rise to life (or are changed) at the return of the Messiah to inherit the earth and reign with Him forever.

Patriarchs: The Life of Abraham (Part One)

November 27, 2007

Have the lives of the rich and famous ever impressed you? Your favorite celebrity, president, hunter, actress? There’s one rich and famous man you must know, if you are to make sense of your world. Three world religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all claim this man, who is arguably the most important man in the Old Testament. His name is Abraham, the “father of many nations”.

One grand journey of faith characterized this man’s life. At age seventy-five, God suddenly called him away from his home and relatives to an unknown destination, promising him a land and a lad, through whom He would bless the world. Until that point, the Fall and the Flood had brought a curse, but now God freely announced to bless, and He freely selected an average citizen for this radical command and promise.

How many seventy-five-year-olds do you know eager to start over? How many are expecting a baby? Abraham did go to the land, and the promise for the child became his quest of faith. “Perhaps God would have me adopt my servant?” No, the child would be from Abraham himself. “Perhaps God would give me a second wife?” No, the promised child would come from Sarah, his aged and barren wife. In this quest, Abraham believed in God, and God reckoned his faith to him for righteousness. Finally, at age one hundred, Abraham’s ninety-year-old wife birthed their beloved son, Isaac, the father of the Jews. A miracle baby! By the laws of nature, he should not be here, nor should his descendents, the Jews!

Then God shocked Abraham again, and tested his obedience of faith: “Sacrifice your only son, your beloved son, to Me.” Abraham went to obey, believing that God would raise the child from the dead, but God stopped him and provided a substitute ram instead.

All of this shouts to us the Christmas message! Abraham never possessed the promised land nor saw the promised worldwide blessing. These promises had to wait for another miracle birth, when a Jewish virgin conceived and brought forth a child prophetically named God-With-Us. A miracle Baby! By the laws of nature, He should not be here! Then God shocked His people again, first by sacrificing this One for their sins as the substitute “scape-goat”, and then by raising Him from the dead. This promised One is named “Jesus”, for He shall save His people from their sins.

Where’s your faith this Christmas season? Have the laws of nature bound your soul to expect only what you can see or what you can reason, or does the God over nature command your faith? Are you bound to the curse of nature, or do you believe in the blessing of God, who gives life to the dead—dead bodies, dead marriages, dead souls? Your sin brings death, but Jesus brings life. Believe in Him and live.

Sources: Genesis 12-22; Matthew 1

Patriarchs: The Life of Jacob (Part Two)

November 27, 2007

Throughout the Bible, God is called “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Think of it! Can you imagine having centuries of believers identifying God as *your* God? To have others call Him “the God of (your name)?” What made these three men so special that God was not ashamed to be called their God?

The title “patriarchs” means “ruling fathers.” These three men were the ruling fathers of the Jewish people—a father, son, and grandson, through whom all the Jews arose. Three things characterized each of them. First, they were nomads and lived in tents. Even though God had promised to them and to their descendants the land of Palestine, they each died without having received an acre more of it than their family cemetery. Second, amidst the great corruption of the land, they each worshipped God, building altars and calling on Him to bless them. Third, their lives were marred with errors. For all his faith, Abraham made some real blunders. He should have never taken a second wife, nor lied (twice) about his first wife. Isaac, his son, pulled the same stunt, lying about his wife as well; but the greatest life of deceit goes to Jacob, whose name means “heel-catcher”, that is, one who pulls your leg.

Jacob was born as the younger twin behind Esau. Together, these two portray two main styles of sin. Esau was hairy, a hunter, and a lover of rough women and ways. Jacob was a man of the house, a typical respectable white-collar man, who knew how to get his own way without breaking the law. For instance, when Esau once came in hungry from hunting, Jacob offered him some stew for the price of the family birthright. Esau foolishly sold it for a meal, but Jacob should have never accepted. Legal, but dirty. Then, when Isaac determined to give the firstborn blessing to Esau anyway, Jacob tricked his aged father by pretending to be his brother, and ran away for his life.

Amazingly, God visited Jacob in his famous dream about the ladder and essentially promised to be *his* God. What?! Did God chose to be Jacob’s God because he was more righteous than his brother Esau? Hardly. It was pure grace. True, God also punished Jacob by having his father-in-law trick him, when at Jacob’s wedding an older sister pretended to be a younger sister. God’s justice is patient and spooky; but His grace is even more amazing. God remained with this deceiving man, and eventually transformed his character (he was “born again”) and changed his name to “Israel”, because he prevailed with God and with men.

Which of the brothers do you most resemble? The inward sinner or the outward sinner? Are you the respectable citizen or the local scoundrel? In a way, it does not matter. No style of sinning hinders God’s grace, should He freely set His love upon you. Just remember, no one can say “God is my God” except by God’s own gracious choice of sinners in Christ Jesus.

Source: Genesis 25-32

Patriarchs: The Life of Joseph, the Dreamer (Part Three)

January 22, 2008

Please consider this life with me. The Lord says that what happened to His people in the past happened for our instruction, that we may learn from their example. What can we learn from the life of Joseph?

Joseph was a marked man. First, his father Jacob favored him above his half-brothers and clothed him with an outlandish coat. Then God Himself favored him with prophetic dreams about ruling over his family. For both of these reasons, his ten older brothers hated him and sold him into slavery in Egypt, dipping his beautiful coat in blood and misleading their father that a beast had killed his son.

How do you know that God has favored you? Some would place your hope in a beautiful coat, a beautiful body, a beautiful marriage. But what happens when the coat is dipped in blood? Has God’s favor departed? Others would tell you to keep holding on to your dreams. But are they *your* dreams only, bright mirages that keep you going down the hard road of life? The human soul runs on dreams, but dreams not based on God’s word are canyons without a bridge.

Joseph knew God favored him because it was *God* who gave him the dreams. Your hope is only as solid as your footing on the black-and-white promises of the New Testament. If you are ignorant of these promises, all your dreams are illusions, for only the truth sets us free. If you believe these promises and are banking on the Son of God to heal your soul and save your life, your dreams have been replaced by His plan for you. You have a future and a hope.

But you may still go to Egypt. You will still be hated. God's favor in Christ guarantees the result, not every in-between. Even so, when Joseph was a slave in Egypt, God was with him and prospered him and gave him favor in the eyes of his master. Then, after being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, God was with him and prospered him and gave him favor in the eyes of his warden. Then, after being forgotten for two years, God suddenly exalted him and gave him favor in the eyes of the king. Joseph ruled, and his brothers bowed. The dream was fulfilled.

Believer, don't let your windy road to glory make you doubt God's favor. Look again at the promises. Your dreams are God-given. Then look for His presence. He has not left you. Some way, somehow, God will still show you His favor in slavery, in prison, forgotten. Your trials make look the same as other men, but they will taste different.

Source: Genesis 37-42

Jacob, Bethel, and Christ

May 28, 2012

Shechem and Bethel—the first two altars of Abram—reappear in the life of Jacob. Both places get an additional altar from Jacob, but only after he returns to the land. When he is leaving the land, he stops near Bethel, but without apparently realizing the significance of the place, for the Text says, “He came to a certain place and spent the night there” (Genesis 28:10).

Jacob is caught unawares. With a stone for a pillow, away from the city of Canaanites, Jacob has a dream with three “Behold!” moments—a stairway to heaven, the angels ascending and descending, and the Lord Himself standing on the top (or beside him). The angels move, but God does not. (Patrolling the earth? Doing his will?) Then God speaks promises of universal proportions—to give the land to Jacob and his seed, to multiply his seed as dust, to spread them out in all directions, and to bless all families in this seed. To these large promises, the reiterations of Abraham's and Isaac's, God adds personal promises of presence, protection, and returning to the land—promises that must have meant much to a lone man with only a staff, leaving his homeland with perhaps little hope of returning.

Instead of the warmth of greeting that his father and grandfather gave to God, Jacob responds in fear—and so is the response of all who have been away from God for a long period of time. Even more than fear, the visit in the dream is a shock to Jacob: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!” Here he was, asleep at the very gate of heaven, in the house of God, and *he did not even know it*. How many times is this same scene played out today when a sinner is first awakened to his sin and danger in the presence of the Lord among His worshipping people! And how many have slept in the very place that Grandpa or Grandma prayed, only to find out that the God they worshiped still resides there—and was listening to their prayers!

Having regularly spoken to his ancestors, this is the first time God speaks to Jacob, and it is pure grace. A cheater and deceiver, Jacob is running for his life! And even though God does not say, “I am your God,” the promises are huge, and Jacob responds with a vow, “If you will do as You have said, then You will be my God.” Moreover, Jacob names the pillar he anointed *Bethel*, the “House of God,” and promises to give God a tenth of all he receives. How interesting that the pillow has now become a pillar! Thus the stage is set for divine drama.

In Mesopotamia, the refugee meets his match. Having deceived his father in pretending to be his brother, Jacob is now deceived by his father-in-law Laban, who swaps the bride for her sister. From then on, the two men are in tension, with Jacob increasing in family size and property, and Laban becoming more and more possessive. Finally, Jacob is summoned by God to return home, and he runs. This time he is doubly trapped—trapped between his near past and his distant past, between the father-in-law who now hates him, and the brother he once cheated, who

planned to take his life.

Have you been trapped like this, with danger behind and danger before, and with no where safe to go? It is here that God acts. Laban is first warned not to harm Jacob, and the two men settle a boundary with a covenant. Then Jacob turns to face his brother Esau, and is now praying with humility for perhaps the first time in his life—confessing both his lack of worth for past grace, and his fears in facing his brother—yet he ends in faith, quoting the promise of God to prosper and multiply his seed. God answers—unexpectedly, again. Jacob is alone once again, and a “man” is said to wrestle with him all night. Jacob wins and will not let him go until he is blessed. Jacob is renamed “Israel,” but when he asks the name of the mysterious man, it is not given—a sign of the identity of the One who wrestled with him, whose name is to be revealed later to Moses at the burning bush. Apparently Jacob knew it was the Lord Himself who wrestled with him, even as the Psalms say, “With the crooked, You wrestle” (Psalm 18:26, possible translation; see Kidner), for Jacob named this place *Peniel*, meaning “the face of God,” saying, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Genesis 32:30). Perhaps the dislocated hip, down by merely touching it, showed Jacob that he was wrestling with Someone who had more strength in reserve.

Here is the antidote to fear: To fear something greater! How odd, at first glance, that Jacob was not consoled by God, but rather attacked in a wrestling match! Yet the cure worked. To Esau, Jacob said the next day, “I see your face as one sees the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). What man remains scary, when God Himself has been faced? Thus Jacob is a changed man. He comes to Shechem, camps before the city, and names the altar he erects *El-Elohe-Israel*, literally, “God, the God of Israel.” Having seen the completion of God’s promise, and having been humbled into faith in the process, Jacob here fulfills his vow, “You are my God.”

But he is still not at Bethel. It may not be a sin, for the Text does not say, but Jacob has yet to return to the House of God. Perhaps this explains the meaning of chapter thirty-four. By remaining in Shechem through the purchase of land—something that would tie a sojourner down, unlike the pattern of his forefathers—Jacob’s family is entangled in the affairs of the men of Shechem, who let a rape go by in typical Canaanite fashion and are thereafter slaughter through deception in typical Jacobite fashion. While Jacob is now Israel, his family still remains Jacob. And for how many men of today are there families harmed because they have not remained mobile for God, free of the world, but rather have neglected the House of God and seen unnecessary suffering enter their home?

For these reasons perhaps, God summons Jacob back to Bethel. In response, Jacob wisely senses that his family is not prepared, so he calls them to put away their idols—one of them stolen from Laban himself by his own daughter!—and Jacob buries these idols under the tree at Shechem. When he reaches Bethel, he makes an altar and buries his mother’s maid under the tree at Bethel—the tree now named Oak-of-Weeping.

Two things strike us here. First, Jacob calls the altar *El-Bethel*, meaning “God of the House of God.” How good would be if all God’s worshippers were more considered with the God of the house than with the house of God! (This may not be the point of the altar, but it shows that Jacob is focused now more on God and on his worship, having previously declared God to be his God.) Moreover, how good would it be if God’s men summoned their families to put away their idols, with timing prompted by the Lord! Second, having missed out on his mother’s death, Jacob must have been quite honored to have cared for her maid in old age, and then have been quite moved to bury her at the House of God—and many today can testify how special a mother’s sister can be after the early death of a mother. Interestingly, the maid’s namesake Deborah sat judging Israel years later at a palm tree nearby.

At this point, the events are reenacted, as when an earlier elopement is later solemnized by a formal wedding. God repeats the naming of Israel and repeats the promises of a seed even as numerous as to be “a company of nations” (Genesis 35:11). Apparently, Abraham is not the only “Father of Many Nations,” nor are the “nations” to be physically fulfilled through Jacob, since Israel remained one nation—a point to ponder in light of Romans chapter four. As for Jacob, he repeats the ceremony of the pillow-turned-pillar, anointing it with oil and offering this time a drink-offering as well. He also adds his naming—the place is *Bethel*.

In Genesis, this return to Bethel is the true climax to Jacob’s life. From then onward, the focus is on his sons, especially Joseph and Judah. Even so, the memory of Jacob’s life persists, especially the legacy of Shechem and Bethel. Regarding Shechem, the woman at the well once asked another Mysterious Man, “You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?” (John 4:12). Before the conversation was done, she knew her answer. Regarding Bethel, Jesus once announced to Nathanael,

“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (John 1:47). This man is no *Jacob*, a deceiver. He is of Israel indeed. When Nathanael inquired how he was known, Jesus cited the fig tree, under which Nathanael had apparently been confessing his sins to God alone—a speculation perhaps warranted by the echo of Psalm thirty-two in Jesus’ words. Even if it is merely a miracle, it is enough for Nathanael to confess Jesus as the Messiah and for Jesus to respond with these intriguing words: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51).

Israelite. No deceit. Heavens opened, and angels ascending and descending. All of these appear to be echoes of Jacob’s first Bethel experience, but now, instead of a dream with a stairway, Nathanael is told of a Person—the Son of Man Himself.

Intrinsic to the original dream is the implicit connection between what Jacob sees and what Jacob hears (an astute point made by Andrew Fuller, and found often to be true in the book of Revelation). Somehow the stairway, with the moving angels and the stationary Lord Himself, matches the promise of seed and worldwide blessing. In Christ’s words, we see the fulfillment. He is the stairway to heaven, or as Jacob said, “The gate of heaven.” Through Him, God funnels all His providential dealings, even as all the angels go up and down this stairway. In one sense perhaps, Jesus is also represented by the anointed pillar, a literal Christ-Stone. He is our Bethel, our House of God. *Is it not time to put away your idols, and to return to the House of God, to the Person through whom your forefathers met with God?*

The Exodus: On Eagles’ Wings

March 27, 2008

Long before the Boeing 747, there was *the eagle*—
soaring to altitudes of 2,400 feet on a seven-foot wing span,
capable of carrying close to its own twelve-pound bodyweight,
suspended by over 1,250 feathers on each wing.
At the foot of Mount Sinai, God told Israel,
“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,
and how I bore you on eagles’ wings
and brought you to Myself” (Exodus 19:4)—
over two million individuals,
delivered from a military superpower
by ten blows against their gods and the parting of the Red Sea.
“On eagles’ wings,” God said—not just *one* eagle, but “on the wings of eagles.”

Are your circumstances pressing you down,
making it hard to walk through life, let alone feel a lift?
Have you been trying to “pick yourself up by your own bootstraps,”
tightening up your courage and stretching your mind for new plans and hopes?
Listen to the Lord:
“Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
and the young men shall utterly fall” (Isaiah 40:30).
There is a limit to all perfection (cf. Psalm 119:96).
Even the best of youthful strength has its breaking point.
But the promise of God is:

“Those who wait on the LORD shall *renew* their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).
Sometimes the most active step is to wait—
to wait expectantly for the Lord to act on your behalf,
but in His way, in His timing, and for His glory.

Will you seek the face of God today in prayer? The wings of eagles await.

The Bible and Modern Science

January 24, 2002

American Christians are often confronted with those who object to the Bible in the name of Science. This confrontation is particularly acute in the classrooms of our nation. Both laymen in the community and students in our schools could use some assistance. The following ideas are presented for meditation. (Please pardon the brevity. Though assuredly helpful, an *exhaustive* solution would also be quite *exhausting* to writer and reader alike!)

There are two ways to counter an offensive—a direct counter and an indirect counter. In the direct counter, we counter the opponent's game plan with a better game plan. In the indirect counter, we question whether we should be playing this game *at all*. In terms of the Bible-science debate, the direct counter will answer the opponent's science with a better science. In contrast, the indirect counter will question whether science itself has the goods to answer such monumental questions. I truly believe that the indirect counter is the one endorsed by the Bible (especially in 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21). Though the Scriptures at times concede that human science *should* lead an honest man to some recognition of a God and of the Bible's miraculous nature, the point of this concession is often only to condemn the stubbornness of man for not even following his own logic (John 9:30-33; cf. 10:37-38). When the rare man does fear God and obey the light he has, he still needs the word in order to be saved (e.g. the blind man in John 9 and Cornelius in Acts 10). At most, the Scripture comforts us that the prayers of such individuals are heard by God, so that help is on the way (John 9:31; Acts 9:3, 34-35).

In light of this position, let me offer you a quick-and-easy approach for *indirectly* countering the claims of Science.

Modern Culture seems to be built upon two main assumptions:

Progress – things just keep getting better and will continue to do so in the future

Science – united research among specialists in various disciplines will yield ultimate answers

In this analysis, Science is the engine to Progress. If we fund Science, Progress will continue.

Now regarding these two assumptions, the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament (which is *our* “philosophy” corner) tell us that Progress is a myth and Science is overrated.

First, regarding Progress, the main point of Ecclesiastes states: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8). Literally, it says that everything is *breath*. In other words, nothing lasts. As a consequence, everything must be done over again (and again, and again, etc.). Therefore, the writer concludes, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9). Now this does this mean that automobiles, for instance, are not new? This is a good question, for the naturalness of this objection demonstrates that we often think of Progress in terms of technological advancement. The Bible has no problems acknowledging advances in technology. In Genesis, the sons of Cain are cited as being the “father” of various arts and culture (see Genesis 4:16-22). Even Ecclesiastes itself acknowledges that the author was wiser and richer than all previous kings in Jerusalem (1:16; 2:9). Therefore, the reference to novelty must be to something new in an absolute *qualitative* sense, i.e. not just more of something or better of something, but a new something itself! Replacing carburetors with fuel injection just does not count.

To illustrate, let us consider the practice of medicine. Most of us would claim that we have seen much that is new in this area. The last century saw an explosion of new techniques and products. Probably the most celebrated was the polio vaccine, which has eradicated that disease from our shores. But can we really call all this medicine *new*? According to Ecclesiastes, we need to ask whether it has been in vain or not. There has been a lot of activity, but has the activity *progressed* to a point that the activity itself can stop? This is surely a big NO. If anything, our health insurance costs testify that the industry has grown rather than diminished. So while one disease goes away, another comes to replace it and the whole cycle begins *again*. The truth is, the expected life span has remained about the same for the last thirty-four centuries, for Moses wrote way back then that our days “contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years” (Psalm 90:10). Progress is a myth. No man has “authority over the day of his death” (Ecclesiastes 8:8).

Second, regarding Science, the book of Job warns against overestimating its power. In the middle of the book, the theme is addressed beautifully by a poem (Job 28). Man is pictured as a researcher—indeed, a *successful*

researcher: “Man puts an end to darkness, and to the farthest limit he searches out” (28:3). Better than any of God’s creatures, man is king of research. This is such a picture of Science, for regardless of all our instrumentation—from the telescope to the microscope—we still have nothing more than better eyesight. But our opponent may ask, “Does Science not give us far more than that? What about the theories, the paradigms, and such?” This is where the poem, and indeed the entire book, is most helpful, for it criticizes man for overestimating his power of inquiry. While granting that man has research abilities on earth (i.e. technological skill), the poem emphatically denies that man will ever find or value *wisdom*, even in death! “Wisdom” is the Hebrew word for what we normally call “Reason”. Man cannot claim to possess Reason. God alone has Reason, for He alone “sees everything that is under the heavens” (Job 28:24). Therefore, whenever Science steps off the futility treadmill of Ecclesiastes and starts pronouncing her grand explanations of the universe, we know right away (before even hearing the details) that she has transgressed her proper limitations. This is where Job and his friends got in trouble. Job did right and suffered. Human Science concluded that Job was a liar, and Job concluded that God had wronged him. Neither was right, for neither knew of Satan’s conversation with God. (Science did not see *everything*.) The spiritual dimension of reality by itself warns against the arrogance of Science. Moreover, Science should warn herself against this arrogance, for since she cannot answer all the questions on earth, how dare she make pronouncements on heaven too! (see God’s speech in Job 38-41).

Therefore, according to the Wisdom Books, Progress is a myth and Science is overrated.

But beyond giving critique, the Wisdom Books also prescribe a cure. Both books conclude that the proper “wisdom” for *man* is to fear God and obey Him (Job 28:28; Ecclesiastes 12:13). In other words, the problem is not intellectual after all, but *moral*. Man refuses to recognize the rights of God over his life, and so lives deluded in folly. For instance, instead of confessing that death has a moral cause (sin! Romans 5:12), man instead denies this truth and searches in vain for the magic *material* cure that will stop death. In light of this somber fact, let me conclude that the Wisdom Books provide grand support for the indirect approach. Since the problem is moral and not intellectual, all intellectual arguments against the Bible may best be answered indirectly, by questioning the proud assumptions behind the argument and then offering the promise of Jesus: “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone is *willing* to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself” (John 7:17). Since all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are “hidden” in Christ (Colossians 2:3), we sinners must ultimately come to Jesus for Wisdom, or never have it at all.

In closing, let me note that Jesus Himself countered indirectly the theological liberals of His day, the Sadducees. When they tested Jesus with their air-tight argument against bodily resurrection, Jesus prefaced His answer with this rebuke, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29). More faith and more Bible will clear up many of our supposed objections. Let us not lean on our own understanding.

Human Testimony to the Limitations and Dangers of Science

Sydney Godolphin

To know, can only wonder breede,
And not to know is wonder’s seede.

Alexander Pope

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

Isaac Newton

I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Carl Friedrich Gauss

I am becoming more and more convinced that the necessity of our [Euclidean] geometry cannot be proved, at least not by human reason. In some future life, perhaps, we may have other ideas about the nature of space which, at present, are inaccessible to us.

Note: For more thoughts on the Bible and Science, see the enumerated theses at the end of this chapter.

Fussing with Job, Fuming with Elihu, Fearing God

May 2009

“Then the wrath of Elihu . . . was aroused against Job; . . . because he justified himself rather than God. Also against his three friends his wrath was aroused, because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job.”

—Job 32:2-3 (NKJV)

The book of Job is the Bible’s book on suffering *for no apparent reason*. You remember: Job was rich, righteous, and blessed—having seven sons and three daughters, a man “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (1:1). Then one day, unknown to Job himself, God and Satan had a conversation.

“Have you considered My servant Job,” asked God, “that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?” (1:8).

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” replied the devil. “Stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!” (1:9, 11).

So God let him, and Job lost all his children and possessions in one day. Still, he did not curse God, but blessed Him, saying, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21).

Again, God and Satan conversed; and again, God asked if Satan had considered Job. “Skin for skin!” the devil replied. “Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!” (2:4-5).

So God let him, and Job lost his health and heard his wife (bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh) tell him to curse God and die. Still, he did not curse God, but reproved his wife, saying, “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (2:10). “In all this,” we read, “Job did not sin with his lips” (2:10).

But then the poetry begins, and with it, the mystery. On the one side, three friends accuse Job of wrongdoing, for how can a man walk blamelessly and yet experience such extreme loss and agony? On the other hand, Job defends himself and accuses God of wrongdoing, for how can a man walking blamelessly and yet experience such extreme loss and agony? On the horns of a dilemma, the conversation is hung, and some of the wisest minds of the East cannot find a solution. Then walks in Elihu, a young man, angry at both sides.

Now before discussing Elihu’s anger, let us sympathize a moment with both sides. Honestly, we may be more like Job and his friends than we realize. On the one side, when unusual calamity strikes another, do we not also suspect there must be some moral cause behind it, unknown to us? After all, has not our obedience often been the pathway to blessing for us? On the other side, when unusual calamity strikes us, do we not often interpret the pain as God’s displeasure? Do not the emotions of our heart, and the murmurings of our conscience cry out with Job, “Why do You hide Your face, and regard me as Your enemy?” (13:24). In other words, “God, what did I do to deserve *this*?” And yet, God was not Job’s enemy. From the beginning of the book, we know that God was *proud* of Job. Therefore, *both* sides are wrong, and Elihu is right. And if we doubt it, the whirlwind voice of God Himself adds eloquent confirmation to Elihu’s wrath (Job 38-41). As a result, Job repents; and God forgives (Job 42).

Here is where my thinking on Job has been corrected. In the past, I used to criticize Job by thinking, “Job, don’t you realize that we are sinners and that we all deserve hell? Job, anything this side of hell is a mercy. Quit complaining. God has not wronged you, O sinner.” That is *not* the solution. Though such reasoning is true in an absolute sense (Mt. 19:17; Rom. 3:10), it does not fit the repeated testimony of God at the beginning of the book. We are to consider Job as *blameless*, having done *nothing* to deserve this. *So why is he suffering?* That’s the rub.

Oddly enough, it is not Job’s sin that has led to his suffering, but Job’s blamelessness. God is showing Job off to Satan, who asserts that religion goes no deeper than self-interest. Wrong. Job shows otherwise, for Job refuses to curse God. However, even though Job does not *curse* God, he does *accuse* God; and here is where we learn of man’s chief temptation—self-righteousness. Elihu is angry with Job (and rightly so) for justifying *himself* rather than God (32:2). In other words, Job is saying, “I am righteous, but God has taken away my justice” (34:5). By saying that it does not pay to please God, Job has inadvertently begun to talk like the wicked (34:9, 36).

Brothers, listen. *God never does wrong*. If we should be born blind for the glory of God (John 9:3), or be crucified for the glory of God (John 21:18-19), or lose all our children, our possessions, and our health, as did Job, for the glory of God in heaven, God has done no wrong; for we exist for Him, and He alone is worthy of such glory. Amazing. I so often crumble at little things, and in self-pity react as if God has wronged me.

Ultimately, the mystery of Job is solved at the cross. Granted, Job himself is restored to health, wealth, and prosperity, and we are told to take note of “the end”—of God’s mercy towards Job (James 5:11); but Job himself never knew why all that had happened to him. Nor did he see the cross, when the absolutely Blameless One suffered most for the glory of God. We, however, who have seen what He suffered—and suffered for *us*—we have the advantage of knowing about both Job and Jesus. How can we now complain against Him? God help us!

Christian Education and Classical Literature

October 2007

Two weeks ago, I had a profound experience. I was reading a Greek play in preparation for teaching high-school boys at a home school academy. The play was the famous tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. After two-thirds of the play, my mind dropped into “story-grip” (to borrow Douglas Jones’ phrase)—that state of mind when the story takes over, filling all your thoughts and pushing out consciousness of one’s surroundings. At that moment, the epiphany occurred. I was taking pleasure in a story that was absolutely disgusting! Beguiled by the beauty of the literature itself, I had become immersed in filth.

Now perhaps you’re thinking that I overreacted. After all, many Christians—even Christian ministers—have taught the pagan classics to students for centuries, and their reasons are plausible. For instance, we live in Western culture, so we should learn the background and literature of our earthly land. Is this not what missionaries do in pagan lands? Moreover, the pagan classics provide sparring partners for young minds, enabling them to know how to conduct intellectual war. Together, these two reasons comprise the apologetic argument for reading pagan classics: we should read our enemy’s literature in order to fight the Lord’s battles more effectively.

In addition to apologetics, there are also personal reasons for reading such literature. First, in order to nullify the pull of curiosity, Christian educators should inoculate youth by introducing them to pagan classics in a controlled environment. One educator I respect described this approach as driving kids through the pagan neighborhood in a Christian bus. Second, we should not forget, “The earth is the LORD’s, and *all* its fulness” (Ps. 24:1). Anything beautiful or true in pagan literature ultimately belongs to God, who bestowed literary gifts upon the pagans in His common grace; therefore, Christians have the right to take over what the sinners have collected (Eccl. 2:26), to “plunder the Egyptians,” as some early church fathers used to say. Similarly, Peter J. Leithart has argued that we may teach pagan classics because man never creates something truly unprecedented, but only borrows ideas and storylines from God. Therefore, in an odd way, we are reading a divine “archtype” when we read a pagan classic, for “the devil has no stories” (Peter J. Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999], 28-35, 38).

All of these arguments have an element of truth in them, but they still do not explain the jarring, disconcerting feeling I received late that night two weeks ago. Why did my Christian sensibilities react so profoundly to my enjoyment of a pagan classic?

Let me suggest two reasons. First, the content of the literature was unclean. The play *Oedipus Rex* revolves around a king’s reaction to the discovery that he had unknowingly murdered his own father and married his own mother. In and of itself, the reaction—self-inflicted punishment—is enlightening, showing not only how the human soul knows there must be atonement for sin, but also how human pride sets its own price tag and feels satisfied with it, much as Judas Iscariot did in hanging himself. There is true education here, but it can be gained in two sentences (as I just demonstrated) without dwelling upon it for forty pages. The Bible itself is not shy in telling real sins, even really disgusting sins like the incest of Lot’s daughters or Tamar’s deceit, but the *Holy Spirit* chooses not to dwell upon them. Not so with an *unclean* spirit! The whole play returns again and again to murder and incest.

But is that it? Is it just a matter of time, dwelling for too long on unclean matters? There is another reason, coordinate to the first. The aim of the play was entertainment, so the form of the literature is beautiful. Here lies the

heart of the problem. It is one thing to report sins factually, another thing to dwell morbidly upon that report, but yet another to cast it into the form of entertainment, thereby appealing to our sinful flesh. Is this not the problem with the nightly news on television? Night after night of tragedy without one tear or call for either repentance or prayer! No, instead of such responses, we see news-casting celebrities and clever commercials (as Neil Postman made so clear in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*). The same is true of *some* works of pagan literature—not necessarily the works of nonfiction (like Herodotus or even Plato), but some (perhaps many or all) of the works of fiction, of pure imagination. These latter works are truly dangerous.

To prove my point, let me illustrate by way of analogy the difference between pagan nonfiction and pagan fiction. Works of pagan nonfiction greet our boys the way a man would, straightforward and arguing his point-of-view. Since everything lies in the open, his arguments can be analyzed and refuted, thereby affording skill in intellectual warfare. These works would be more dangerous if they accumulated, just as Proverbs warns about not hanging out with gangs (Prov. 1:10-19; 2:12-15). In contrast, works of pagan fiction greet our boys as a woman, using seductive speech and beautiful imagery (cf. Prov. 2:16-19). These works easily captivate their imagination, making them dream about such places and also long to create such tales themselves. As a result, a boy may be orthodox in his creed but apostate in his affections. That's scary! Youth should be warned about such seductresses the same way God warns His adoptive sons in the book of Proverbs, by *telling* youth what she says and does, rather than by leaving a boy with her for the evening or even going with him to visit her house (Prov. 7). Just as Proverbs warns, "Do not go *near* the door of her house" (5:8), so we should steer our youth clear of these works of fiction.

Again, am I overreacting? Does not the apostle command us to let our minds *dwell* upon things that are true, honorable, right, pure, and lovely (Ph. 4:8)? How then can we then justify assigning four hundred pages of ungodly imagination, thereby sending our boys off to their rooms with such a seductive partner? As one preacher warned Leithart, pagan literature "can be a kind of intellectual pornography, since the sinful mind of man quite naturally resonates to the themes of Greek and Roman literature" (Leithart, *Heroes*, 23). Nor is this warning simply based on the thoughts of fundamentalists. Literary critics Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren explain in their masterpiece *How to Read a Book* that while works of exposition aim to teach, works of imagination aim primarily to please. The only way to truly learn from a work of fiction is to "let it act on us," so that we experience, at times vicariously, what the author wants us to experience (Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* [New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1972], 204-207). That is why the authors of fiction aim at beauty and employ metaphor, inviting us not only to read between the lines, but to *live* between the lines. In reading such a book, we volunteer to experience these things for ourselves. Beware, then, what is handed to young minds to read or to see!

Perhaps you're now asking, "If imagination is so evil, why then did God create it?" Please note, I am not saying that imagination is evil. Without imagination, I would not be able to recreate in my mind (and thus understand) any series of events that are narrated to me—even true events, and events told to me by God Himself. It is imagination that enables me to see David squaring off with Goliath, and to appreciate how he *ran* to the battle line. Therefore, imagination is not evil, but a particular use of it may be. Similarly, language in itself is not evil. It is true that much of the beauty, language, and imagery of pagan fiction are ultimately derived from God, because we live in His world, but these elements are perverted, twisted, and put to evil uses. Like meat offered to idols, we can appreciate the tastiness of the meat or the beautiful turn of a metaphor, while despising the idol and making sure that we do not participate in the worship service. True, someone should extract the good elements from such literature (i.e. plunder the Egyptians), but that does not mean we should train our boys to do this, nor is it necessary. Erasmus already did much of this labor in the sixteenth century (see his *Adages*), and even today God may call a master of such literature to faith in Christ, thereby enabling the church to receive gifts from these pagans—even the metaphor of plundering the Egyptians presupposes prior slavery in Egypt, not going into Egypt to get the plunder. In fact, God warned the Israelites not to return to Egypt (Dt. 17:16; e.g. Jer. 42:19).

We need to be wary of utilitarian thinking. God is great. It is not necessary that we amass horses like Egypt (Dt. 17:16) nor eat the king's food, which Daniel successfully and respectfully resisted (Dan. 1). Nor is it wise to employ the inhabitants of the land (cf. Jdg. 1:27ff), which led to "the Canaanization of Israel" (as Daniel Block put it), or to covet their gold, which God warned would lead to a snare (Dt. 7:25), rather than to adhere to God's commands through faith and to rid our lives of all leavened elements. We must be wary of the rationalization of Saul in sparing Agag and the livestock (1 Sam. 15)! In short, I sincerely doubt that we should expose our youth to the seductive, imaginative books of paganism. Is there not wisdom in Jesus' words to Peter, "Watch and pray, lest

you enter into temptation” (Mt. 26:41)? Like Peter, our youth are too immature to handle the powerful temptations of immersion in pagan fiction. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak (Mt. 26:41). Their imagination will be taken captive (contra Colossians 2:8) instead of having the power to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Even beyond these spiritual reasons, sheer exhaustion and, by implication, distraction may harm our youth, as the book of Ecclesiastes warns regarding exceeding the bounds of the inspired collection (Eccl. 12:11-12).

Often the objection is made that Paul must have studied pagan literature since he quotes from some pagan sources (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12). That is possible, but it is also possible that such sayings were stock phrases, as we may quote “These are the times that try men’s souls” without having ever read anything by Thomas Paine. Furthermore, Paul was trained by the Pharisees, not by the Sadducees, who adored Greek culture.

Therefore, in light of these considerations, I propose an alternative to the typical humanities schedule of a liberal arts Christian academy that emphasizes classical literature. Instead of reading the large epics of Homer, Vergil, and Dante, or the plays of the Greeks, let us begin with the literature of the Bible, taught as *literature*. Is this not the canon of Christians? Even beyond all the warnings issued above, it would be tragic just to miss the opportunity to instill the sacred writings into our youth on both an analytical and literary level. For instance, why read Homer when Isaiah is left untouched? Did not God put powerful imagery into the prophecies of Isaiah? This reason alone should tell us that even if the pagan literature had no inherent dangers in it, the Bible still deserves to be studied first as a masterpiece of literature. Our time is limited, and “of the making of books there is no end;” therefore, we should give first place in a liberal arts education to the “words of the wise . . . given by one Shepherd” (Eccl. 12:11-12). Note, this task should not be relegated to the church, for the church will rarely take the time to analyze a biblical book literarily. It is the task of a school, and a school should honor God in this way. Later, if it is necessary to know about the characters of Homer for college, perhaps the epics may be skimmed or if not, there are plenty of worthwhile summaries available (e.g. Leithart).

Before leaving this short critique, I would like to add one desideratum. In recently preaching on Psalm 77, I noticed how many of the Psalm’s potent images were obscured by even the most “literal” translations. This bothered me, for it keeps God’s people from appreciating these works of art and from understanding their fuller meaning. Let me make a plea: if we will study the books of the Bible, especially those of the Old Testament, on a literary level, then we need translations that qualify as fine English literature. This is often the goal of translators of Homer. Why can we not expect this of translators of God’s book? Moreover, this is in one sense a necessity, because we are teaching English-speaking boys, and thus must teach them English literature. May God raise up such literary servants in His church (cf. Mt. 13:52)!

The Psalms: Poetry on Steroids

September 26, 2009

Before David faced Goliath, he made an interesting point to show that he was the man for the job. David said that this giant would become like the lion and the bear that he had caught *by the beard* and killed (1 Samuel 17:32-37). Now catch that last detail. By the *beard* implies that by *hand*, David had killed both a lion and a bear. In all the Bible, only Samson is recorded as having done such a feat, for he earlier had ripped into a young lion that had roared against him (Judges 14:5-6). Since Samson had done his deed due to the Spirit of the Lord coming “mightily” upon him, it is presumably the same source that enabled David to do such a deed as well, for the Spirit had come upon both men (1 Samuel 16:13). David. As strong as Samson? Apparently so. He certainly sank that stone hard into the giant’s forehead!

Now ponder a bit with me. If this beard-business is what results from the Spirit coming upon David’s physical abilities, what results from the same Spirit coming upon David’s poetic abilities? You get the Psalms! You get poetry on divine steroids! After all, David is *the* sweet psalmist of Israel, by whom “the Spirit of the Lord spoke” (2 Samuel 23:1-2).

Poetry on steroids in exactly what I saw this past week with a few friends of mine--Tom Pryde, Troy Neujahr, and Randy Eilders--as we were working through portions of Psalm 110 together. The key insight came on Tuesday night, when Randy let me look through his copy of *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, by Wilfred G. E. Watson. Under the topic of sound, Watson noted that Hebrew poets frequently paired words with the same three root letters, almost like

homonyms, though the letters may not necessarily be in the same order. In doing this, a technique that Watson calls “rootplay,” the poet may actually invent one of the words (Watson cites ‘*qb* in Isaiah 40:4 as a possibility; see p. 240). In English, rootplay would pair words such as “prod” and “drop”—something that is not rhyme, but yet is similar to rhyme in employing sounds to pair words.

This concept fascinated me! Soon I realized that I had probably seen rootplay the week prior in Isaiah 32, but had not recognized it. Now sensitized to this technique, Psalm 110 just seemed to pop with examples of similar sounding pairs. Here, check these out:

In verse one, David wrote, “The LORD says to my lord [*ladoni*], “Sit at My right hand [*limini*].”

In verse three, David wrote, “...than the womb [*merehem*] of the dawn [*mishhar*].”

In verse six, David wrote, “He will judge among the nations [*goi-word*]; he will fill with corpses [*goi-word*].”

So what is the significance of rootplay for us, even for those of us who do not know Hebrew?

Twofold. First, **congregations** should be aware that the Holy Spirit is concerned that the praise of God sounds cool. There are some words in this psalm that apparently are chosen primarily for their *sound*, especially when another word could have conveyed basically the same meaning. For example, there are many ways to say “at the right hand.” In fact, the psalms employ four different prepositions to convey that thought (*min* in Psalm 16:8; *b* in Psalm 16:11; *l* in Psalm 110:1; and ‘*al* in Psalm 110:5). So why is it *l* in Psalm 110:1, as seen above? The word *limini* sounds cool with *ladoni*! Do you see? Christian, God is concerned that our songs of worship have poetic beauty, not just truthful content. We should evaluate our hymns on both *what* is said and *how* it is said, for it is only *right* to sing the truth with beautiful words (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:10). Even our translations of the Bible should strive for beauty in sound. It is noteworthy that this was apparently a translation goal for the King James Version, accomplished, by the way, with great success.

Second, **preachers** should be aware that in poetry, a rare word or an odd phrase does not necessarily convey a significant meaning conceptually. For example, the phrase “the womb of the dawn” may simply refer to the sun or to the sunrise, for the poetic rhythm of verse three in Hebrew seems to demand two nouns instead of one. In other words, the two words may be there more for aesthetic beauty, both in sound and in conceptual imagery, rather than for great theological truth, though that possibility cannot be ruled out altogether. Similarly, the word “judge” [*din*] in verse six is a rarer Hebrew word than the normal word “judge” [*shaphat*], but the semantic range is nearly identical according to *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Therefore, it would probably be a mistake to see in the choice of this word a larger significance than that it simply sounds cool in Hebrew. Perhaps my previous blindness to sound is partly due to the fact that I had first learned exegesis (the analysis of a text’s meaning) in the New Testament, where there is not much poetry. How different is the inspired poetry of the Hebrew Bible! And such a wonder! Truly, it is poetry, as it were, on steroids.

Do you see? God loves beauty as well as truth; and for truth, beauty is only right. Congregations, do you value beauty in your worship? Preachers, do you value beauty in your preaching or in your writing? Christian, do we live lives of holy beauty, and thus “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (Titus 2:10)? May it be so! As one of our beautiful psalms says, “Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it” (Psalm 90:17).

Will the Bell Ever Toll on the Wicked? A Meditation on Psalm 36

April 19, 2011

Blessed vagueness:

“There the workers of iniquity have fallen;
They have been cast down and are not able to rise.”

There—not where, not when, not how, but a fact:

Someday the workers of iniquity will be cast down, never to rise again.

According to Psalms 5, 6, and 14,

these *workers of iniquity*, these trouble-makers, feed on God's people;
they are the object of His hatred and of His command to depart.

But is it forever?

Is there no point of returning?

Why must there be a vague point, in a vague place ("there"),
when the bell tolls once and for all on the wicked,
when they are *not able to rise*?

According to Psalm 36,
there is something in the nature of the wicked
and something in the nature of God that demands such a bell.

Regarding the wicked man, it is his inveterate, internal corruption:
"He has ceased to be wise and to do good."

As in Psalm 14, so also here:

"There is none who does good, no, not one."

Because we doubt this, we doubt hell.
If we believed this, we too would throw the wicked away.
In fact, we would marvel that God does not do so sooner!

But by nature, we do not marvel, we do not believe.
Like all others, we too flatter ourselves in our own eyes.
We have reasons for our iniquity, our hatred.
Like all others, we have no fear of God before our eyes,
and without this core worship, all good deeds are idolatry to our glory.
By nature, we too are children of wrath, but we think not.

*Until the Spirit of Truth gives us an "oracle" about our hearts,
we lack this fundamental insight about ourselves and others.*

As in Psalm 14, so also here: The problem is our denial of God.

Against this cave of iniquity shoots forth the expansive glory of God:
"Your loyal-love, O LORD, is in the heavens;
Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains;
Your judgments are a great deep;
O LORD, You save man and beast."

Against our denial stands the open-heartedness of God:
"How precious is Your loyal-love, O God!
And the sons of men take refuge under the shadow of Your wings.
They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house,
And You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures.
For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light."

Our views are so cramped, but His glory so expansive!
Our views put Him out, but His love calls us in!
We think big of ourselves and little of Him,
but when His oracle convicts, light and life are restored.

"Oh, continue Your loyal-love to those who know You,
And Your righteousness to the upright in heart."

Let no generic love rob us of our refuge, O God of loyal-love!
Let no such love treat all in the end the same, O God of righteousness!
Be loyal to us who acknowledge You,
and rightly affirm Your glory in rewarding us who take refuge in You!

And, if You really do love us, being loyal to us in Your love to Christ,
then cuff the hand that drives us away from You,
and chain the foot of pride that refuses to fear You.

“There the workers of iniquity have fallen;
They have been cast down and are not able to rise.”

When the bell tolls forever on the wicked, it will be liberty to believers.
In ceasing to love those ceasing from good, God does not cease to love.
In cutting the foot of pride and the hand that drives, He loves His own.
While many are condemned, others are saved by the bell.

And to deny such a bell is to rob God of His glory.

Will a Final Bell Ever Toll on the Wicked? A Revised Meditation on Psalm 36
April 21, 2011

Dinner bells, school bells, fire bells—all mark a crisis in time.
Whether to come or to go, to start or to stop,
an unforgiving moment has passed:
The bell has tolled and time is up.

Church bells in particular have this ominous quality.
On the day of marrying, the bells tell that two lives are done and one begun.
On the day of burying, the bells tell that life is done and something else begun.
But what is then begun?
And will that—whatever it is—ever end?

In particular, *will a final bell ever toll on the wicked?*

Please note: This is very general question.
For the sake of argument, some are wicked.
Who they are, what they are, where they are—
these are questions for another time.

What I wish to know now is:
Will the bell toll once and for all on the wicked?

Not patience, as if the deadline is delayed;
Not mercy, as if the debt has been paid;
But pure, stored up justice to be dished out someday.

According to Psalm 36,
there is something in the nature of the wicked
and something in the nature of God
that demands
that the bell must toll—
that the workers of iniquity must fall, unable to rise again.

Concerning the wicked,
He has ceased to be wise, to do good.
No fear of God is before his eyes.

In his eyes, he has done no wrong.
In his mouth are trouble and deceit.
Trouble—these are the thoughts upon his bed.
His path is no good;
his evil not despised.

In other words,
he will not change and he cannot be trusted.
All this is known by the oracle of God alone.

Were you to assess the extent of his ruin,
you would surely fail.
God alone sees that true worship has no place in his heart.
The ruin is total, revealed by the oracle of God.

Against this cave of iniquity shoots forth the expansive glory of God:
“Your loyal-love, O LORD, is in the heavens;
Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains;
Your judgments are a great deep;
O LORD, You save man and beast.”

Against our denial stands the open-heartedness of God:
“How precious is Your loyal-love, O God!
And the sons of men take refuge under the shadow of Your wings.
They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house,
And You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures.
For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.”

Our views are so cramped, but His glory so expansive!
Our views put Him out, but His love calls us in!
We think big of ourselves and little of Him,
but when His oracle convicts, then light and life are restored.

“Oh, continue Your loyal-love to those who know You,
And Your righteousness to the upright in heart.”

Let no generic love rob us of our refuge, O God of loyal-love!
Let no such love treat all in the end the same, O God of righteousness!
Be loyal to those who acknowledge You,
and rightly affirm Your glory in rewarding those who take refuge in You!

And, if You really do love us, being loyal to us in Your love to Christ,
then cuff the hand that drives us away from You,
and chain the foot of pride that refuses to fear You.

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And to deny such a bell is to rob God of His glory.

Broken Bones, Rejoice!

April 23, 2008

When King David sinned and sorrowed, he prayed:

“Make me hear joy and gladness,
That *the bones You have broken* may rejoice” (Psalm 51:8).

Bones—almost nothing deeper, the source of our very blood, and support of our entire body.

When true conviction for sin comes,
it crushes deep, dries up our life-energy, and removes all ability to stand under the weight.
Our *bones* are broken—not one, but *many*.

There are many superficial convictions of sin—
an embarrassing moment, a painful consequence, or even a fleeting thought of hell—
but these are often more smarting than damaging,
more like a skinned knee than a shattered joint.

But when *God* convicts, *bones* are broken, . . . and recovery must come from *Him*.

If God has not yet broken our bones, it is better to be broken by His *word* than by His *rod*.

Jesus said, “No one is good but One, that is, God” (Luke 18:19).

Again, “Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:34).

And His apostle wrote, “There is none who does good, no, not one” (Romans 3:12).

One soft word in the hands of the Holy Spirit is enough to convict us.

“A soft tongue breaks the bone” (Proverbs 25:15, NASB).

If God has broken our bones, we must be careful not to resist the Holy Spirit.

“Do not be wise in your own eyes;
Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your body and *refreshment to your bones*” (Proverbs 3:7-8, NASB).

For all who embrace Spirit-given brokenness, the Gospel comes as good news:

Jesus never sinned—

“[The Father] guards all his bones; not one of them is broken” (Psalm 34:20).

Yet for our sake, He bore the penalty for our sin in our place—

“He was pierced through for our rebellions,

He was crushed for our perversions;

The punishment for our peace was upon Him,

And by His whipping we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5, RAS)—

so that “whoever believes on *Him* shall not be disappointed” (Isaiah 28:16 LXX; cf. Romans 10:11).

Listen!

The devil is too strong for you.—Your sin, too strong.—Let alone, the cords of death.

But through Christ Jesus, you can sing,

“My soul shall be joyful in the LORD;

It shall rejoice in His salvation.

All my bones shall say,

‘LORD, who is like You,

Delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him,

Yes, the poor and the needy from him who plunders him?" (Psalm 35:10).

"Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Thanksgiving for Birth from a Cave: A Meditation on Psalm 71:6

April 15, 2011

Yesterday was my sister's *thirty-fifth birthday*.
Half-way—according to Psalm 90,
which teaches us to number our days,
more by *what is left* than by what is behind.

On that day, I read for devotions:

"By You I have been upheld from birth;
You are He who took me out of my mother's womb."

I thought, "Have I ever thanked God for my birth?"
—not for the gift of life,
which I have often done on a birthday,
but for the birth itself.

According to the Psalms, the womb is a cave:

"My frame was not hidden from You,
when I was made in secret,
and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth."

How many never survive the cave!

How many die in transit to the light!

Stillborn—O God, comfort the heart of such parents!

But to me, life from the womb,

and now in Christ Jesus, life from the tomb,

—in Him who first "descended into the lower parts of the earth,"
but now has "ascended far above all the heavens" to fill all things.

Continually, O Lord, may my praise be of You!

Psalm 100

April 26, 2013

There are two basic reasons for worshipping the Lord: *He is God* and *He is good*. Ironically, both of these words seem to be related in English, as in other European languages, almost as if to say, "God alone is the Good One"—something that Jesus Himself said. Together, these two themes form the simple outline of Psalm 100:

"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!

Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

Do you see the simple outline?

Be joyful, glad, and sing, knowing that the Lord is God.

Give thanks, praise, and bless, knowing that the Lord is good.

Are we? Do we?

Interestingly, out of all the commands of the Bible, one would think that commands such as “Rejoice!” or “Be glad!” would be some of the easiest to obey. Who would not want to be joyful? And yet, in our everyday experience, joy is often elusive, and our loss of joy shows we have lost sight of God as *God!* We need to *know* this afresh, and this becomes one of the chief reasons to *come* before Him, week after week, in public worship.

Another chief reason for coming to worship is thanksgiving. Literally, the command is to make *verbal confession* about the Lord. Public worship is a confession of faith. If there is anything this psalm pushes against, it is a deer-stand Christians who refuses to come public with his faith, joining with fellow believers in united song. There is no “moment of silence” here!

In thanking God, let us remember that God is *good*, not *indulgent*. His eye is on the long-term that lasts “to all generations.” Our faith must eye the same.

So there you go. The Lord is *God* and the Lord is *good*.
Everything we have is from Him, and everything we have from Him is good.
Therefore, let us come and worship.

The Cords of Death and Cup of Salvation: Meditations and Questions on Psalm 116

September 14, 2011

Come, ponder some thoughts with me. *Could Jesus, the Son of Mary, be in this psalm?*

First, why is this psalm here in this position? As part of the Hillel (Psalm 113-118), with the “Praise the LORD!” ending each one except Psalm 114, the focus is on praise, building to a crescendo with Psalm 118, when the Messiah enters the City of God. *Could it be that the death and resurrection of Jesus is in Psalm 116, even as the ascension is in Psalm 118?*

When Peter pronounced at Pentecost, “...whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:24), there is a verbal parallel in Greek with Psalm 116:3, “The pains [lit. cords] of death surrounded me...” Remember, the Hillel was quoted at Pentecost! These were words that the Greek-speaking, visiting Jews from around the Mediterranean would have been familiar with, and perhaps had even quoted earlier that day.

Later, the psalm echoes, “You have loosed my bonds” (Psalm 116:16). *Intriguing, isn’t it?*

Now, let’s dive into the psalm and see what we see.

The psalm appears to have two parts, with a bridge in between. The opening verses form four neat foursomes, with the inner two ending with a note of salvation, and with the final one ending with an additional line: “I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (vv. 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-9). *Could there be a verbal tie with the Messianic elements of Psalm 27:13?*

The final verses also display a repeated pattern, with the opening verse mentioning the name of the “LORD” (Jehovah), and with the inner verses repeating themselves a bit (compare vv. 13-14 with vv. 17-18), having a final form similar to Psalm 89.

Together, the opening verses and final verses express the thought, “I love the LORD because He hears prayer for gracious deliverance; therefore, out of my love for Him due to His grace towards me, I resolve to worship Him—and what shall I offer, but the fulfillment of my vow to praise Him if delivered?”

In between the two sections are a set of connecting verses, like the bumpy part connecting the two ends of an earthworm:

“I believed, therefore I spoke, I am greatly afflicted” (verse 10).

“I said in my haste, “All men are liars” (verse 11).

Interestingly, the Septuagint divides this psalm at verse ten into two psalms, making the first start with *love* and the second with *faith*. *What should we make of this division?*

Also, the apostle Paul quotes verse ten in 2 Corinthians 4:13, “I believed and therefore I spoke,” which follows the Septuagint perfectly, and which perhaps aligns with the Hebrew as proof aligns with cause (Hebrew: “I believed, for the reason (proof) that I spoke,” i.e. the cause of speech is faith; therefore, the proof of faith is speech). *Could it be that the psalms were separate originally, and that Paul is quoting the opening verse of Psalm 116b as a signal to point to the entire poem?* Personally, I doubt there are two psalms here, but the Septuagint confirms that the big break in the poem is at verse ten.

All this is fine and dandy, but what is the point? Here is my playful understanding of the text at this point.

The Messiah has just emerged from death—a very close call. He looks back in verses one to nine and loves the Lord for hearing His prayer for deliverance. Even as it is impossible for contractions to keep a baby in the womb, for the harder the grab the more the push to come out, so also it was impossible for the tomb to keep the Messiah inside. This deliverance gives Him even more resolve to worship the Father—to “call upon Him as long as I live” (v. 2), which shows up later in the psalm.

He then recounts what made the difference in His deliverance: *Faith*. In the stranglehold of death, not one man could be trusted to keep his word (v. 11, “All men are liars,” which is true, for Paul quotes it in Romans 3:4). Instead, the Messiah resolved to believe the LORD and that is why He spoke (v. 10).

Then, turning to the future, He pondered what He should do now to render thanks to the Father for such a close deliverance. He will worship because God regarded His death as precious, even as He does all His “godly ones” (v. 15; cf. Psalm 16:10). Again, He repeats His resolve to worship, and this time mentions the loosening from death (resurrection), and closes with worship in the City of God, which is Psalm 118. Death, resurrection, and ascension—the psalm closes with the Gospel!

Could it be that this “son of Your maidservant” (v. 16) is the Son of God, who has no biological earthly father, but does have a mother, who addressed herself as “the maidservant of the Lord” and who was commended for her faith (Luke 1:38, 45)? *What do you think?* The only other time this phrase, “son of Your maidservant,” is used is in Psalm 86:16. *Is there a tie?* Again, the reference to “land of the living” may link this psalm with Psalm 27, which may prophetically speak of the desertion of Jesus’ legal parents while He remained in the temple (see Psalm 27:10).

At any rate, it is not wrong to love the Lord for what He does for us. Some may be quick to say such love is selfishly driven, and it could be in certain forms, but here in Psalm 116, we have a clear example of loving God *because* He does something for me (v. 1). The test is what happens next. The selfish man runs off with his benefit as a dog with a bone, or as the nine lepers—rendering no thanks, but fixated on the benefit. Here we find the Messiah absorbed with God: “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me?” (v. 12, an echo perhaps of Psalm 103:2). Even though He is free from all cords, and could run to any place or to anyone, the Messiah is happy to run to God—not constrained by outer cords, but compelled by inner love. *Ah, may such a love compel us as well, who have been saved from the second death!*

True Revival: A Meditation on Isaiah 32:15

November 7, 2009

“Until the Spirit be poured out upon us from on high,
and the wilderness be a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field be counted for a forest” (Isaiah 32:15).

Do you really want to see a change in your life? Not simply a change of style or even in habit, but a fundamental, deep-down change, where you yourself are truly different, where the very state of your being is different. Do you want to see such a change?

In this passage, the fundamental condition of the landscape changes. The wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and fruitful field is counted as a forest. Literally, the barren desert becomes an orchard-like area of organized growing plants, and the existing orchard is reckoned as a forest--not that this orchard *becomes* a forest, for that would be a step-down into a disorganized state, but that the lush greenery of the orchard bursts into thickness that is *reckoned* as a forest! All this occurs when "the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high."

Upon *what* is the Spirit poured out? Land? Interestingly, the prophet write, "Upon us." This may be the first clue that the prophet is not dealing primarily with landscape or vegetation, but with people. Later in Isaiah, God announces that the pouring out of the Spirit upon people will be like the pouring out of water on thirsty land, producing new believers like fresh rains produce new plants (Isaiah 44:3-5). In the New Testament, this same passage is echoed in Jesus' words to His apostles to wait for power "from on high," which they would receive when the Holy Spirit would "come upon" them (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; cf. Isaiah 32:15 LXX; Titus 3:6).

Therefore, the landscape is poetry for certain kinds of people. In essence, the prophet is saying that when the Holy Spirit is poured out from on high, the dead become alive, and the living become abundantly alive. In other words, revival is for both the dead and the living, the lost and the saved. The only question that remains is: *Which are you?* Are you a wilderness in need of life, or an orchard in need of a new growth spurt through a fresh rain-shower of the Holy Spirit? Either way, the need is the same. *Oh God, pour out Your Spirit on me today!*

Before leaving this verse, let me point out one final detail. The word "pour out" in our text literally means "to make bare," which occurs when a bucket is fully poured out and the bottom is thereby bared. In other words, the prophet says that someday the bucket of God's Spirit will be *emptied* upon the earth. In that day, as the rest of the passage foretells, righteousness and justice will establish peace and safety for God's people forever (Isaiah 32:16-18). Until then, we ask God to *tip* His bucket just a little--to get more of a taste of those great days to come. And as we ask, if we ask in faith, we have the promise of receiving, just as Jesus reasoned based on the gracious goodness of His Father: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" (Luke 11:13).

Encouragement towards Evangelism: A Meditation on Isaiah 42:6-7

August 11, 2010

"I the LORD have called thee in righteousness,
and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee,
and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;
to open the blind eyes,
to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house" (Isaiah 42:6-7).

Lately, I have been wrestling with my own personal unbelief in prayers offered on behalf of the unsaved. While it is easy to pray believingly when some sinner shows signs of openness, it is hard to pray with any kind of faith that the indifferent or hard-hearted will eventually turn to the Lord. I hate this unbelief, and desire to attack it through the truth of Scripture. Therefore, my mind has been meditating on the promises of Isaiah, spoken for our day, including the great text above, spoken by the Father to His beloved Son.

To open blind eyes. To bring out of prison. Strong promises from the strong, sovereign God. The eyes and prison here are spiritual in nature, for even though the Lord Jesus did indeed open the eyes of the physically blind, in fulfillment of an earlier prophesy in Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 35:5-6; Matthew 11:5), as well as set physical prisoners free (Acts 5:19-20; 12:7ff), such demonstrations of power seem to have been symbolic of His greater inner work in opening the eyes of the heart and setting free those oppressed of the devil. The proof of this assertion is seen in the nature of the blindness and imprisonment in the latter chapters of Isaiah, as well as in their fulfillment described in the New Testament.

When the apostles Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel at the synagogue in Antioch Pisidia, they were requested to preach again the next Sabbath. Upon returning, they found "almost the whole city [gathered] together to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:44). This popularity provoked the Jews to envy, so that they spoke against Paul,

“contradicting and blaspheming” (13:45). In response, the apostles said:

“It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, ‘I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13:46-47).

Remarkably, the apostles quote a text given to the Messiah, an individual (“thee”), as something that “the Lord commanded *us*” (13:47). The solidarity of the Messiah with His people is striking. What they experience, He experiences, just as Jesus had earlier asked, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (9:4). Moreover, what the Messiah is commanded, the entire church (or at least the apostolic ministry of the word) is commanded: We are to be a light of the Gentiles, in order that His salvation may reach the ends of the earth (a quote from Isaiah 49:6)!

This same solidarity is exhibited later, when Paul recounts the words of Jesus spoken to him at his conversion:

“But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness..., delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me” (Acts 26:16-18).

Here again is another echo from the Messianic mission in Isaiah (this time from Isaiah 42:6-7). Please note: The Lord Jesus has taken what the Father had spoken to Him and is now applying it to His apostle. Surely this can only be fulfilled by the Spirit of Jesus working in and through Paul! But here is the exciting news: This same Spirit is now at work in us, lending support to the same apostolic ministry of the word. How do we know that? The prophecy finds fulfillment only when God’s salvation has reached the very “ends of the earth,” which God Himself describes in Isaiah as the villages of the deserts, the tops of the mountains, and the islands of the sea (Isaiah 42:10-12). These regions were certainly not canvassed completely in the days of the apostles.

In the order of things, the eyes must be *opened* before the sinner can *turn to the Lord*, that is, be converted. These two acts are not of the same nature, for once the eyes are opened through preaching, the sinner himself turns to the Lord, even as Lydia demonstrated in her conversion (see Acts 16:14; cf. 2 Timothy 2:24-26). In the design of God, both the action of the preacher, in opening the eyes, and the action of the hearer, in turning to the Lord, are sovereign actions of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He fulfills the prophecy by sovereignly working in both the preacher and the sinner. Amazing! That is strong encouragement to pray for power, and then strong encouragement to preach with expectation. How can Jesus refuse to obey the voice of His Father? Gladly, most gladly, He will comply.

Furthermore, the means that the Lord Jesus uses to open the eyes of the blind is His sovereign voice in the preaching of the Gospel. When the prophet describes the Messiah as saying to those in prison, “Go forth!” and to those in prison darkness, “Show yourselves!” (Isaiah 49:9), we should see the exhortations and commands of present-day, Spirit-empowered Gospel ministry.

Oh, pray for your preachers! If even the great apostle Paul requested fellow believers to pray that “utterance” would be given to him in order to “open [his] mouth boldly” (Ephesians 6:19), then how much more should weaker preachers like myself receive prayer for the opening of our mouths, to be the same tool of Jesus in opening eyes today, so that more and more sinners may turn to the Lord and live in liberty! May the Lord Jesus Himself stir up unto more faith both His people and His preachers through the powerful prophetic picture of the Messiah sovereignly at work in us and in converts! Amen.

The Learning, Listening Life of Our Lord: Prayer as Preparation for Persecution

April 10, 2010

“The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned,
that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary:
he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned” (Isaiah 50:4).

Like the special features on your favorite DVD, the Old Testament gives the inner thoughts and habits behind the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What the Gospel gives in summary, the Old Testament often gives in brief, but gripping detail. Such are the mockeries at Jesus’ trials:

“I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair:
I hid not My face from shame and spitting” (Isaiah 50:5).

Beaten, blindfolded and slapped, with spitting and taunts of “Prophecy, Christ! Who hit You?”, Jesus was mocked by the Jewish rulers. Then, after further injustice, a sentence to be crucified, and scourging at the whipping post, Jesus was again mocked--this time by the Roman soldiers, with a crown of thorns and “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Matthew 26:67-68; 27:27-31). In all, we hear nothing from Jesus’ lips, and know nothing of His thoughts; but in the recesses of the prophetic books, we find that Jesus endured such mocking with His face “set...like flint,” hoping in the vindication of God and turning not away. *What gave Him the strength to endure so flint-faced and steadfast?*

Prayer. Not just a ritual nor a mere routine, but a daily, morning-by-morning experience of listening to God.

How about you? Are you ready to experience the persecution that is promised to everyone who will “live godly in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:12)? Will you be confident that it is truly *God* who wants you to go through such a trial? Apart from consistent, daily, listening prayer before God, it is doubtful you will have gained the trained ear of a learner able to discern the will of God in Gethsemane. After all, Jesus sweat over His cup. *Was there any other way?* Having discerned the answer, He “was not rebellious, neither turned away back” (Isaiah 50:5).

The listening life of prayer. It is the only thing the church is called upon to be *busy with* (Colossians 4:2).

More Thoughts on Isaiah 50:4

April 10, 2010

There is only one place in the Gospels where it is said that Jesus regularly prayed (Luke 5:16). Apart from this single comment--that Jesus would often slip away into the Wilderness to pray--the Gospels speak of only specific occasions of prayer: for example, at His baptism (Luke 3:21), in the early morning away from Peter’s home, while it was still dark (Mark 1:35), in the evening hours after the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:23), and on two occasions when He stayed up all night in prayer--before His calling of the Twelve (Luke 6:12) and before His arrest in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41). Often at the fringes of the day, and often alone, Jesus prayed. But what was He doing in prayer? Why did He pray? To answer these questions, we need to turn to the Old Testament.

First, Jesus was in the mindset of learning from God. Two times Isaiah compares Jesus to a disciple, a “learned” one. The verse literally begins by identifying God as “Master Jehovah,” His divine Teacher--a title that does not occur on the Servant’s lips outside this paragraph. While far from denying the omniscience of His divinity, the learning-life of Jesus highlights His true humanity, and simultaneously magnifies the omnipotence of His divinity--that He is so powerful, He can suffer ignorance and learn as a human being. Here, in the schoolroom of prayer, Jesus was consistently learning from His Father, what to say and what to do. Truly did He testify, “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge,” and “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me” (John 5:30; 7:16).

Second, Jesus was in the habit of listening to God. Far from simply “having devotions” or “doing His Bible reading,” Jesus was listening carefully to God “morning by morning.” Before the busy days began, Jesus regularly gave His ear to the Father and in return received a tongue for the weary.

A Major Message from a Minor Prophet

September 2008

“Behold, I will make you small among the nations;
You shall be greatly despised.
The pride of your heart has deceived you,
You who dwell in the clefts of the rock,
Whose habitation is high;
You who say in your heart,
‘Who will bring me down to the ground?’
Though you ascend as high as the eagle,
And though you set your nest among the stars,
From there I will bring you down,’ says the LORD.”

—Obadiah 2-4 (NKJV)

Warning: Pride deceives.

The prophet says, “The pride of your heart has deceived you.”

When we think well of ourselves, we often leave the bounds of truth and slip unawares into error, only to be awoken by the sad slap of unexpected reality.

Here was a nation nestled high in the cliffs, solidly protected from the advancement of chariots and infantry by rocky crags. Who would bring them down? Certainly none from below. But then comes a voice from above: “Though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down.” The Most High is higher. Pride has deceived once again.

Here is an old man with heart defibrillation. Many times the heart has left its rhythm but always returned. Things will turn out fine. He tolerates the warnings not to presume upon eternity, but has not read the New Testament given to him over a year ago.

Here is a young man behind the counter, declining to accept a New Testament. He goes to church, but cannot answer the crucial question on what basis he can hope as a sinner to enter heaven. His eyes are evasive. He replies, “People don’t worry about such things anymore,” or words to that effect.

Here is a middle-aged couple, whose youngest child is almost grown, whose income is set, wondering how to spend their money in pleasure for the next twenty-five years, . . . until one Friday, with the expectation perhaps of the weekend on his mind, the husband unexpectedly finds her dead by the pool.

Each of these stories is real, having occurred recently in August. The apathy towards a serious look into the way of salvation is appalling, and breaks my heart. Our lives are by-and-large comfortable and busy. The questions of eternity seem so distant, and our relative prosperity and security lead us to assume things will always be fine. Instead of getting busy repenting and seeking the mercy of the Lord in Christ, we despise His tolerance and store up for ourselves more wrath in the day of wrath. Our pride has deceived us, and I am praying for an inner awakening to reality. Will you join me in such a pursuit?

Theses from Paul's Arguments to the Church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21)

January 24, 2002

Introduction

There are two Sciences—Divine Science (“wisdom of God”) and Human Science (“wisdom of the world”).

See 1 Corinthians 1:20-21. (Further references to 1 Corinthians are just given by chapter and verse.)

Human Science

Human Science is reasoning on the basis of either observation (empiricism) and/or pure thought (idealism).

“...eye...ear...heart...” (2:9)

As man's achievement, Human Science brings glory to men (1:29; 3:21).

Divine Science does not build upon Human Science.

“...the world through its wisdom did not come to know God...” (1:21).

““Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,

And which has not entered the heart of man,

All that God has prepared for those who love Him.’

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit” (2:9-10a).

God has rejected Human Science as foolish and useless.

“The wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

For it is written, ‘He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness’;

And again, “The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless” (3:19-20).

Divine Science

Divine Science is hidden from the world.

“...we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom
which God predestined before the ages for our glory” (2:7).

Divine Science is hidden from the world in two ways:

First, God Himself has appeared in a fashion deemed weak and foolish by Human Science.

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...” (1:18a).

“For indeed Jews ask for signs and Gods search for wisdom;

But we preach Christ crucified,

To the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

But to those who are called,

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:22-24).

Second, God communicated His Science by word only.

“...we speak God's wisdom in a mystery,...

not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit,

combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” (2:7a, 13).

Therefore, Divine Science is incapable of demonstration by Human Science.

God's Destructive Purpose

God is purposely destroying Human Science.

““I will destroy the wisdom of the wise...”

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1:19-20).

God is destroying Human Science by saving people who believe a “foolish” message:

“Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God,

God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1:21).

Therefore, two things are necessary for God's purpose—*both* the message (the cross) and the method (preaching).

“...I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (2:1-2).

In addition, relying on the Holy Spirit is necessary for effectual preaching and for genuine converts.

“I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

and my message and my preaching were...in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would...rest...on the power of God” (2:4-5).

Relying on Human Science to further God’s cause makes the message ineffectual and produces false believers.

“...to preach...not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void” (1:17).

“...not in persuasive words of wisdom...so that you faith would not rest on the wisdom of men” (2:4-5).

At best, church-builders relying on Human Science will only add to the church false believers.

“Now if any man builds on the foundation with...wood, hay, straw... the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:12-13, 15).

At worst, church-builders relying on Human Science run the risk of damnation for laying a new foundation.

“If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him...” (3:17).

God’s ultimate purpose is to insure that He is glorified for the work of salvation.

“For by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1:30-31).

God’s Saving Purpose

The Holy Spirit is *absolutely* necessary to know Divine Science.

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (2:14).

Every believer receives the Holy Spirit in order to know Divine Science.

“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (2:12).

“But he who is spiritual appraises all things...” (2:15a).

Therefore, to know Divine Science, a person must *first* believe the “foolish” message of the cross.

“...through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1:21b).

Only those who are called by God will believe the “foolish” message.

“...to us who are being saved [the word of the cross] is the power of God” (1:18b).

“...to those who are the called,...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

“...by His doing you are in Christ Jesus...” (1:30a).

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth” (3:6-7).

Spiritual maturity is also necessary for understanding Divine Science.

“Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature...” (2:6a).

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; For you were not yet able to receive it” (3:1-2a).

Therefore, to know Divine Science, a person must *also* repent of Human Science and fleshly living.

“Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly” (3:2-3).

“If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise” (3:18).

Conclusion

Therefore, anyone desiring to know Divine Science should believe the word and pray for the Spirit. Moreover, anyone desiring to promote Divine Science should pray for the Spirit and preach the word.

Theses from the Scripture on Science

January 24, 2002

1. Progress is a myth.
“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity....
“So there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9).
2. Technology is not a sign of advancement.
The sons of cursed Cain were the “fathers” of culture and technology (Genesis 4:16-22).
God confused the languages to *prevent* technological advancement lest violence increase again (11:6-7).
3. The cause of death is spiritual, not material.
“Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin;
and so death spread to all men, because all sinned...” (Romans 5:12).
4. Philosophy is sinful. Science itself rebukes man’s arrogance.
“Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,
‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...
Where were you...? Do you know...? Can you...?’
Then Job answered the LORD and said,
‘...I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me....
Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 38:2; 42:3, 6).
5. Research will never discover Reason.
“Man puts an end to darkness, and to the farthest limit he searches out....
But where can wisdom be found?
God understands its way, and He knows its place” (Job 28:3, 12, 23).
6. Man’s true Reason is moral.
“And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom;
And to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28).
“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).
“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is:
Fear God, and keep His commandments....” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).
7. The Greeks said, “Know thyself;” but this is impossible because of both finitude and sinfulness.
“Man’s steps are ordained by the LORD,
How then can man understand his way?” (Proverbs 20:24).
“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?
I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways” (Jeremiah 17:9-10).
8. Research will never discover the meaning of history. Historicism is a fool’s errand.
“When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth
(even though one should never sleep day or night)
and I saw the work of God, I concluded that
man can never discover the work which has been done under the sun.
Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover;
and though the wise man should say, ‘I know,’ he cannot discover” (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).
9. Human knowledge is built on faith in testimony.
“Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

10. The Bible is God's testimony to His Son.
"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).
11. Reality is ultimately rational. Jesus is the true meaning of history.
"In the beginning was the Word....
All things came into being through Him...." (John 1:1, 3).
12. In this world, God appears different to different men.
"With the pure You show Yourself pure,
And with the crooked You show Yourself twisted.
For You save a humble people,
But haughty eyes You abase" (Psalm 18:27-28).
13. Jesus is the only way to know the invisible God.
"No one has seen God at any time;
the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (John 1:18).
14. Knowing Jesus is only by divine revelation.
"No one knows the Son except the Father;
nor does anyone know the Father except the Son,
and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27).
Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona,
because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you,
but My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17).
15. Ultimate Reason resides in the realm of Ultimate Reality—the Invisible courts of God.
"We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen;
for the things which are seen are temporal,
but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).
16. We essentially do not yet see or possess Ultimate Reality, but faith makes them real to us now.
"Faith is the possession of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).
17. Divine revelation has its own witness.
"It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth....
If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater;
For the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son" (1 John 3:6b, 9).
18. God hides His Son to Researchers and reveals Him to Babies.
"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and
intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (Matthew 11:25).
19. Liberalism has two twisted roots—unbelief (assumes something is impossible) and blindness.
"You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).
20. Humility is the path to salvation.
"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:6).
21. God is glorified in His hiddenness.
"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
But the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Proverbs 25:1).

Whose glory will you adore?

Basket Two • Theological Meditations

Theism

January 12, 2010

You have doing, I have not;
You have knowing, I have not;
You have being, I have not;
You are I AM, and I am not--
 How *foolish*, then, that I forgot!
 Forgive me, Lord; I have my spot.

All doing, knowing, and being belongs to God--not just that He is the source of all things, but that all things are mysterious done *in Him*. God did not simply create and set in place, as we make something that is of necessity separate from us. No, since God is God, nothing can truly be separate from God--distinct, yes; but separate, no. As God, He actively supplies the world with being and energy, apart from which not one iota would move or think or be.

With regard to doing: "Power belongs to God" (Psalm 62:11).

With regard to knowing: "In Your light shall we see light" (Psalm 36:9).

With regard to being: "In Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

He Himself is "Lord God Almighty" (Revelation 11:17), a "God of knowledge" and "the only wise God" and "He that teaches man knowledge" (1 Samuel 2:3; 1 Timothy 1:17; Jude 25; Psalm 94:10), the great I AM, whose being is free, sovereign, and absolutely self-existent and self-sufficient (Exodus 3:14; cf. 33:19). He is God, and we are not. As Matthew Henry once said, "The greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*, but God says absolutely...*I am that I am*" (quoted in C. J. Mahaney, *Humility*, 89).

Therefore, no matter what I do, no matter what I know, no matter what I am, my doing, knowing, and being are all done *in God*, for apart from Him nothing can move, think, or be, for "of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things" (Romans 11:36). Not that I am God, or even a part of God--He is God, and I am not--but I live, and move, and have my being *in Him*--distinct from Him, but not separate from Him.

So who would not fear Him? How foolish to act as if there were no God, let alone to say it (Psalm 14:1)! All we have is *our spot*--on the one hand, our position as creatures in Him; on the other hand, our blemish in denying Him. To all, He says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

Why Is God's World Messed Up?

October 19, 2007

One of our members once told me that when his dad was dying, the father confessed, "Son, it shouldn't be this way." He was right. The world really should not be as the world is. The world we see is not the world God originally created, nor is it the world that shall be some Day. Three big events have shaped the world we now experience.

First, God's *fiat* created the world. The word "fiat" refers to an absolute command that creates what it commands out of sheer will. In Latin, it means, "Let it be done." In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:3). In this way, God created *all* that fills the heavens and the earth, even man himself (Genesis 1:26). If this were all that there was to our world, it would be just as "very good" as the day God pronounced it so, but two other events occurred.

Second, man's *fall* brought a curse on the world. When we look at all the misery in this world and wonder how a good God could allow such to occur, we must not listen to our pride. We object because we assume that we are basically good (though imperfect), not realizing that it was on account of our father Adam's sin that God brought not

only us into the bondage of sin and death, but also the earth itself and all it contains into the bondage of futility (Genesis 3:17-19; cf. Romans 8:19-22). If Adam had not sinned, lions would still be eating grass, as they will someday (Isaiah 65:25), instead of devouring flesh. Death is indeed unnatural. Death is the result of man's sin.

Third, the great *flood* filled the world with fossils and warns us that God will one day destroy the universe with fire by the same word that initially created it (2 Peter 3:5-7). We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that most people will be saved from that fire. God only saved *eight* individuals through the flood, and Jesus said that "few" find eternal life (Matthew 7:14). That God has not yet sent the Great Fire is a sign of His patience, "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This world is not as it should be, and those who recognize that fact should own up to their sin, turn to Jesus Christ for salvation, and seek a better world. Through Him, God has promised that He will make a "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

Which world will you have? You can only have one (Mark 8:35).

Secular Education in a Noisy Universe

October 10, 2009

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge.
There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard."

--Psalm 19:1-3

Ponder this claim for a second. Day to day, night to night, you live in a noisy universe, where all around you is speaking of the nature and characteristics of God. This fact is denied in practice by both Christian and non-Christian.

On one side of the aisle, many Christian attempt proofs of God's existence, as if we must infer from present data back to a time when God's actions were more visible. No! The Bible is clear. Not only God's existence, but even some of His "invisible" characteristics are both *audible* (as in Psalm 19) and *visible* by means of His daily providence--so much so, that men are left "without excuse" for not worshipping God (Romans 1:20). If there is any trouble in men not hearing or seeing God, it is due not to a deficiency in the evidence, but rather to a deficiency in the spiritual sensory system. To stand in the midst of God's noisy universe and demand evidence of God is like a deaf man standing with his back to Niagara Falls, claiming he needs more evidence. We should not cater to man's blindness, but preach with the expectancy that God opens blind eyes.

On the other side, the non-Christian world teaches our nation's youth without hardly a mention of God. Students learn of geography, astronomy, sociology, and psychology without any reference to what the earth, the heavens, society and individuals are telling us about the glory of God. Overall, the impression is given that the universe has nothing to say about God. If He exists, He is, at best, *irrelevant* (see *Already Gone*, mentioned below). Is that education? Even though many useful details are learned, the fundamental meaning is denied, for at root everything declares the glory of God. Therefore, as a whole, secular education is a lie, for we live in a noisy universe.

Notice, the problem with secular education is not so much what is said (and there are bald-faced lies being said), but rather what is *not* said. Nothing substantial is said about God. According to the Bible, secular education is no education at all, for "the fear of the LORD is the *beginning* of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

As a pastor, I am deeply moved by this fact. Christian families send their children to twelve years of secular education, where these kids are taught for thirty hours a week that God has nothing to do with the real world. Then, when they attend church, even regularly for four hours at most each week, they are taught the Bible without any reference to the topics of school. The separation is stark. After a while, the impression is given that the Bible may be helpful as a story book for moral guidance, but it has nothing to do with the hard-core social, economical, civic, and fiscal realities of life. Is this habit right? Are we truly bringing up our children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4)?

The effects of a secular education are often devastating. According to A. W. Pink, for example, it was his secular education that overwhelmed the faith of his pious father. Though not universally the case, thanks to God's grace, Pink's story has been repeated time and again, as shown in a recent study done by Answers in Genesis (see Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It*). And why should this not be the case? In Psalm 19, the reality of an inspired word is mentioned immediately after the reality of a noisy universe. God is a vocal God, and He is speaking both in His world and in His word. To deny the one seems to prejudice us against the other, as A. W. Tozer once reasoned, "The Bible will never be a living book to us until we are convinced that God is articulate in His universe. To jump from a dead, impersonal world to a dogmatic Bible is too much for most people" (from "The Speaking Voice," in *The Pursuit of God*).

Therefore, what should we do as a church? What should I do as a pastor? First, we need to quit abiding by the intellectual rules of modern society. Moderns adhere to the lie of Immanuel Kant, that the phenomenal world of hearing and sight can teach nothing about the noumenal world of God and spiritual life. As a result, our very educational institutions keep the two worlds separate, leaving the real world to school and the spiritual world to church or to some other religion. In contrast, Psalm 19 demands that we bring the two worlds together, teaching what the noisy universe is saying about God, and illustrating our Bible exposition with "real-world" issues. Indeed, there is only one world--God's world--and it is noisy. This is the very agenda J. Gresham Machen espoused almost one hundred years ago, when, after having fought eight years of doubt against Kant, he called on the church to join knowledge and piety together in real-life study of all the arts and sciences to the glory of God (see his 1912 address, "Christianity and Culture")

Second, we need to make some weighty choices about our children's education. Even though our children may not be taught audacious lies, teaching them *any* subject in a spiritual vacuum impoverishes their understanding. They will miss so much of what a skilled Christian teacher could point out. Yes, our children can be saved without a holistic education; and yes, the Gospel is more powerful than education (God be praised!); but why should we throw an intellectual obstacle in their way to Christ, or risk the beguiling effects that entrapped men like Pink in their childhood? Secular education is a lie. The universe is not silent, but noisy. Let us, as Machen advised, "destroy the obstacle at its root." Besides, the Bible commands fathers to immerse their children in Scripture (see Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Third, we need to live lives ourselves in accordance with what the universe is telling us about God. It will do no good to give our children a thorough grounding in Christian worldview thinking, while we ourselves live secular lives according to the dictates of secular reasoning--whether socially conservative or liberal--and not according to the full range of Scripture. Why should we send our children to Christian school, when we ourselves listen to Christ-less conservative talk radio all day long, and never open our Bible? Yes, we need information, but when will we take every thought of *our lives* captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5)?

Often, I yearn for the day when we will overhaul the very categories of our education, and live our lives more in accordance with the truth. Do you hear what God is saying, in His world and in His word? We live in a very noisy universe.

Teach It All? Teach It Dull

June 10, 2005

Recently I read an article that confirmed some thoughts about avoiding boredom in education. The article, written by historian Pauline Maier, described several of her favorite books about America's antebellum years. In justifying her choice of titles, she explained:

Over the years,...I have come to suspect that comprehensiveness is a recipe for dullness: looking closely at parts of the past is often a better way to understand it than trying to master the whole story. I also prefer accounts from the time over books by historians because they speak more directly to the mind and inspire the imagination. But putting mini-histories in context and interpreting documents requires some knowledge of the period, which gets back to the comprehensiveness problem.

Three components, therefore, combine to make history interesting: "mini-histories" (a true story about something or

someone very specific in a past era), “documents” (written testimonies from that era), and some kind of grammar or catechism to give the first two components a context. If the grammar is short, it should be committed to memory before the other books are engaged.

For example, if you wanted your son or daughter to learn about America’s First Great Awakening (and we have had *three*), you should avoid the textbooks and search instead for three things:

- a short biography of George Whitefield (pronounced “Whit-field”), the “grand itinerant,” whose voice could trumpet the Gospel to a crowd of thousands (oh, for a children’s picture book of the great evangelist!);
- a copy of Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” whose picture of a spider over the flames awakened Enfield, Connecticut—or better yet, his *Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*, which describes the revival of 1735 in his own town of Northampton, Massachusetts; and
- a grammar of the Awakening, listing its key players and issues, a time-line, and a map.

Other studies in history would proceed similarly. For example, the historical study of a war would include either a biography of one of its great leaders (see, for instance, the Leaders in Action series) or a story of one of its initiatives (see Seymour Reit, *Guns for General Washington*, a work of historical fiction); a true-life testimonial (perhaps a soldier’s diary); and again, a grammar of its events, persons, and places. Even the Bible can be approached this way. Use a book of the Bible as the document, some engaging sermons from passages in that book as the mini-histories, and a grammar of the events, persons, and places, along with key verses to memorize.

Science also follows the same pattern. If you have taught from a typical science textbook, you know that most of the information is very comprehensive, demanding lots of rote memory. Unless the student has an unusual appetite for scientific facts, it is doubtful whether most of that information remains after a year. If so, why do we strive for such comprehensiveness in the first place? Moreover, if the goal of comprehensiveness itself actually removes interest, perhaps our children will learn more if we try to teach less. Like stopping a bedtime story before interest has waned, perhaps longer gains will arise from shorter goals.

So how would Professor’s Maier’s threefold approach shape a science curriculum?

First, the goal of comprehensiveness must go. If the Lord should will it, college will more than make up for present deficiencies in knowledge, taking our children from block one through reams of information. Now the goal should be “worship unto wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). As a previous article presented, a wisdom curriculum for science will contain at least these three components:

1. **Workmanship** - Obey the *laws* upheld by the Creator (e.g., the Tabernacle workers).
2. **Wit** - Use the *language* given by the Creator (e.g., Solomon and Agur).
3. **Wonder** - Honor the *limits* set by the Creator (e.g., Elihu and Job).

The last component—wonder—specifically hits hard against the goal of comprehensiveness. Such knowledge belongs only to God, who alone is wise, seeing the end from the beginning (Job 28:20-27; Romans 16:27). Just as our glory is to search out matters, His glory is to conceal matters, leading us to fear Him more (Proverbs 25:1). Hence, our wisdom is to listen to His wisdom by obeying His laws, using His language, and honoring His limits (Job 28:28). Our very ignorance is a vital part of our worship.

Second, we should seek grace to incorporate into our household routines the three components of grammar, “mini-histories,” and “documents.” Perhaps one month will consider botany. A single grammar sheet can list the key definitions, divisions, and historical personalities of botany. After going over this sheet—this “map”—and requiring its memorization and frequent review, we can then direct our children into weekly explorations of the different “branches” of botany (pardon the pun). The “mini-histories”—the snapshots—may include going to a conservatory, visiting a local nursery, or working on a farm. Indoors, the children could read the stories of key discoveries, and even some works of literature using plants—such as “Jack and the Beanstalk” (keeping in mind how the thief here is never punished). The “documents” will be hands-on activities, when the plants themselves get to speak to our

children. Let them feel the dirt in potting plants, see the city streets in looking through a leaf towards the light, and swing on a grapevine. Let them understand why people say, “I heard it from the grapevine,” or why God says that His people are like the wood of a grapevine, good only for burning (Ezekiel 15).

In everything, let us aim at worship. Let us praise God more than our children, His bounty more than our technology, and His wondrous concealment more than our discoveries.

Source: Pauline Maier, “The Young Republic 1787 to 1860,” *American Heritage*, November/December 2004, p. 32.

The WWW of Science

April 13, 2005

Academic science has always been philosophical in nature—the old name, in fact, having been “natural philosophy.” Today, because of increased anti-God assumptions in science, we are even more aware of its philosophical nature, and have begun to arm ourselves and our children with “worldview” training. In the midst of this warfare, we are tempted to forget that the goal of all science is actually worship and wisdom. Really, the goal is *worship unto wisdom*, for “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10; cf. 1:7). Once we are “full of wisdom” by God’s grace, we may receive the legacy of Stephen, who by God’s Spirit had arguments that his opponents could not resist (Acts 6:3, 10).

The Bible presents three ways in which science—a knowledge of God’s creation—promotes wisdom through worship:

1. **Workmanship** - Obey the *laws* upheld by the Creator.
2. **Wit** - Use the *language* given by the Creator.
3. **Wonder** - Honor the *limits* set by the Creator.

In each of these ways, the fear of the Lord recognizes some aspect of God’s glory in His creation and willingly submits to it. Each of these ways has direct Scriptural connections to wisdom.

For example, regarding workmanship, God gave Bezalel, Aholiab, and “all the gifted artisans” wisdom to work with many different materials for the artistic beauty of the Tabernacle (Exod 31:2-6). Successful artisans recognize that a particular part of creation carries with it its own laws as part of its own intrinsic nature. While God can at will disrupt these laws (i.e., miracles), He has placed man under the necessity of either working with these laws or working in vain. Because God has “founded the earth” and “established the heavens,” we are wise and happy only to the extent that we yield to this establishment (Proverbs 3:13-20). We cannot reestablish creation according to our desires. Fools refuse to cut with the grain. Strangely, by excelling in technology, our generation yields forced obedience to God by conforming to His laws, even though it inconsistently refuses to give Him thanks or to honor Him as God (Romans 1:21). As a result, our generation is wise about a tree and foolish about the forest.

Regarding wit, God has offered us the tangible world to aid in communication. When the Bible says that Solomon not only composed proverbs and songs, but also spoke of trees and animals (1 Kings 4:32-33), it is difficult not to conclude that Solomon’s study of the natural world contributed to his perceptiveness of the moral world. Knowledge of nature certainly aided Agur, who compared the mystery of romance to the movement of an eagle in the sky and a serpent on a rock (Proverbs 30:18-19). By reducing science to mere workmanship, we inadvertently ignore some of nature’s most characteristic features and pleasant benefits—all in the name of selfish gain. Instead of only asking what this thing *does* for us, we should also ask what it *says* to us. One way to expand our wit is search the Scriptures, especially Proverbs, for references to things in creation, noting, for example, how refined ore speaks of purity (Psalm 12:6) and yeast speaks of corruption (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Another way is to play the Proverbs Game. Start with an animal, such as a cat, and ask your children, “What is a cat known for?” Answers include quickness, curiosity, and a finicky nature—all of which form common proverbs. Other animals have their own adjectives: a loyal ____, a sly ____, and a stubborn ____. Praise be to God for His bountiful “vocabulary” in nature! Let’s worship Him by speaking His language, using science for our wit.

Finally, regarding wonder, science itself—that is, our knowledge of the natural world—should lead to humble

worship. While God is not shy about acknowledging man's abilities in science—after all, we are made in His image—He is not impressed with our arrogance. In Job 28, God poetically describes man's vain search for wisdom. Yes, man can uncover the roots of the mountains (Job 28:9), but he cannot find wisdom, for wisdom only belongs to Him who can see *everything* (Job 28:20-27). We may uncover the secrets of DNA or set our eyes on distant galaxies, but like Job, we assume too much of ourselves and God must ask us the hard questions "Can you . . . ?" and "Do you know . . . ?" until we repent in dust and ashes (Job 38-42). We may have more knowledge than previous generations, exceeding their hundreds with our millions, but what are our millions compared to God's infinity? How ironic that science has led to our pride! God save us from such arrogance, and restore to us our wonder!

Note: For a similar view, especially the distinction between "naturalist" and "scientist," see Elijah Company, *Searching for the Ancient Paths Resource Guide 2004-2005* (Crossville, TN: Elijah Company, 2004), 168-78.

Thankful for Winter

January 6, 2009

Believer, are you thankful for winter? Here in Michigan, where it is not as cold as in my native home of Minnesota, but neither is it as sunny, winter is often gray and uninviting--unless one is an avid outdoorsman. Many Michiganders are not, and some of them, like the geese, head south for the winter. For me personally, I too miss the sunshine, as well as the sunlight. It is an encouraging thought to me that the days are starting to get longer again. Comforting in itself, the word "again" reminds us that we are experiencing a cycle of seasons that God instituted and perpetuates. Winter is His invention, and is formed by many of His created "servants" that obey His ordinances: sun, wind, clouds, and snow (Psalm 119:91). During winter, what are these created messengers of the heavens saying to us (Psalm 19:1-6)? *What is winter itself saying to us?*

First, winter tells us that God is faithful. "While the earth remaineth," God told Noah, "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22). This cycle of seasons is God's promise to us, and how we take it for granted! While nations rise and fall, amidst all the changing customs and laws of man, God's created order marches with obedient precision beneath our feet, as Stephen Charnock once pointed out. We live, as Calvin once noted, within the theater of God's glory, and we take the theater for granted, because it is so orderly and predictable. Oh, when the heavens will someday shake, then men's hearts will fail them for fear (Luke 21:26); but for now, we Christians rest in the covenanted grace of the return of winter:

"Summer and winter, springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love."

Second, winter tells us that God is powerful. Tornadoes in the spring, hurricanes in the fall, and the late summer droughts that make the heavens above brass and the earth beneath iron (Deuteronomy 28:23)--all seasons have their specific terrors, but there is something ominous as well about the perils of winter. How small is a house in the raging roar of a blizzard, and how tenuous its heat in the surrounding abyss of northern cold! When God gives snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes, casting forth His ice like morsels, then "who can stand before his cold?" (Psalm 147:16-17).

Third, winter also tells us that God is good. It is a marvel to me how beautiful winter can be. For all the drab garb of bare trees and brown ground, He often drapes it all in the dazzling white of new-fallen snow! So beautiful is the scene, that one gospel compares the shining raiment of the transfigured Jesus to the white of snow (Mark 9:3). In new-fallen snow, the ground shimmers in the sunlight with tiny diamonds, which is nothing compared to the radiant prisms in the trees following an ice-storm. How amazing is the grace of God to clothe the dormant world with such radiant splendor!

And then there is the dormancy itself. "To every thing there is a season," says the Wisdom of God, "and a time to every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Winter is a season of rest. The nights are long, and the days are short; the ant is enjoying the fruit of his labors, having stored up for the winter in the summertime of activity

(Proverbs 6:6-8). As each day has a season of sleep, so the year ends and begins with the world sleeping in a season of rest. It is of God, and its timing is beautiful.

Believer, be thankful for winter. As God gives sleep to those He loves (Psalm 127:2), so embrace winter as His gift, as a season of rest. When the snow blinds your eyes in the brilliance of the sun, so see your scarlet sins washed white as snow in the blood of the Lamb (Isaiah 1:18; cf. Revelation 7:14). When the snow or bitter cold keeps you from your favored activity, remember that you are man and that He is God. And when you see the spring winds blow and the run-off flow, then know that it is God who faithfully sends His word to start the cycle of seasons again (cf. Psalm 147:18). It is time then to say once again to yourself:

“This is [our] Father’s world, the battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one.”

Worshiping God through Creation, Rather Than Worshiping Nature

June 22, 2010

“My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the LORD” (Psalm 104:34).

This past Sunday was Father’s Day, and like holidays in the past, many dads enjoyed their day with their family in the Great Outdoors, instead of worshiping the Father in heaven on the Lord’s Day with His family in church. If you were to challenge this decision, many dads would probably answer, “I do not have to go to church to worship God. I can worship Him in the woods as well as anywhere.” *How should we respond to such an assertion?*

Two answers come to mind.

First--agreement. “I agree with you. You truly can worship God in the woods, but do you? Do you really worship God, or do you worship nature itself? After all, mere enjoyment is not necessarily worship, and not all worship is directed towards God.”

There is a fine line between idolatry and true worship. Many men simply enjoy the outdoors. Some strongly desire the outdoors, and heartily take it in when they are there, being very reluctant to leave its pleasurable presence. For these avid outdoorsmen, the woods have become *the Great Outdoors* and their enjoyment has become idolatry, for all strong desire for more is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Indeed, these men are worshiping, but they are worshiping Nature itself as a god, rather than the God of all nature.

In countering this idolatry, we are not saying that the true worshiper cannot enjoy the woods or even desire to be there. The Bible has many songs, proverbs, and poetry that revel in the details of God’s physical creation. From the mysterious limits of time and space in Job 38 and 39, to the wondrous ecology of Psalm 104, the Bible is not shy to promote a detailed knowledge of God’s physical world, and even to say that God Himself enjoys the works of His creation (Psalm 104:31). What keeps this enjoyment from turning into idolatry? More specifically, how can a true worshiper of God properly enjoy the outdoors as an experience of worship?

The short answer is: *He must think.* True worship is below the surface of mere physical enjoyment. Many outdoorsmen are creatures of sense, and have little concept of drawing thoughtful lines from physical sensations to the spiritual Reality. Therefore, instead of enjoying the outdoors as human beings made in the image of God, these creatures of sense act as mere animals, gratifying their flesh with sights and sounds and tastes and smells.

According to Psalm 104, God created us to go deeper. He wants us to marvel at *Him* through what we sense in His world: “My meditation of *him* shall be sweet: I will be glad *in the LORD*” (v. 34). Instead of worshiping Nature, we must learn to worship God--and I truly mean *learn*, for this is a skill that we lost at the Fall, and now need to regain through Christ and a careful consideration of the Scriptures, which are able to restore our soul (Psalm 19:7).

For example, we must change our vocabulary. Instead of “Nature,” we should identify the outdoors as God’s “works” filled with His “possessions” (v. 24). Instead of going to the Great Outdoors, we should go to God’s world.

Further, we must identify the invisible hand of God behind every natural event and process. It is God who waters the hills and causes the grass to grow (vv. 13, 14). It is God who feeds the beasts and causes the seismic phenomena of earthquakes and volcanoes (vv. 28, 32). The world is His personal farm, where He either opens His hand to preserve life or hides His face to finish life (vv. 28-29). These events are not the product of “luck” (as if no one were there) or of “Mother Nature” (as if she were a real god), but of the one true and living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In conjunction with His Son, He sends forth His Spirit to replenish the earth time and time again (v. 30).

When in the woods, we see God’s works--His actions--on display. Therefore, to worship Him, we must think on Him, and identify what we see as what He does. Mere thoughtless enjoyment tends to idolatry.

Second--a challenge. “If you really are worshiping God in the woods, then you will also find time to go to church, for the glory of God is seen more brightly in His people and especially in His Son, Jesus Christ.”

If stars and oaks and beetles amaze me, how much more should the human being! And if I should be able to see the wisdom and power of God in physical objects, how much more should I see His character in humans, who have been made in His image--especially humans being remade into His image through the grace of God in Christ. Finally, if I delight in the glory of God in His works, I will also delight in His glory as seen in His word, which alone speaks of His Son, who is Himself the very “brightness of his glory” (Hebrews 1:3). Do you see? True worshipers will worship God wherever His glory is found, but especially where His glory shines the brightest--in church.

Why not make this next Lord’s Day a full Father’s Day by worshiping the God and Father of Jesus Christ in church?

The Danger of Being an Evangelical Mystic

July 20, 2012

“One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple” (Psalm 27:4).

At first glance, being an *evangelical mystic* in religion seems as incongruous as being an environmental conservative in politics, or an Amish automaker in business. To be a mystic historically means to seek union with God through contemplation, often without the help of propositional revelation. Often the goal is a direct knowledge of God, the so-called “beatific vision.” In contrast, to be an evangelical historically means to be born again, after a strong sense of sin, through faith in the crucified Christ, as revealed in the holy Scriptures. In practice, both the evangelical and the mystic emphasize personal experience and a living relationship with God. Here is where the two categories overlap. Therefore, to the extent the mystic relies on the revealed truth of the Bible for contemplation and on the living Mediator for access to God, to that extent he may be classified an evangelical mystic.

Two names come to mind. The first is Scottish pastor David McIntyre, author of *The Hidden Life of Prayer* (1891). The second is American pastor A. W. Tozer, author of *The Knowledge of the Holy* and *The Pursuit of God* (1948). Both men professed faith in the evangelical doctrines of justification by means of the cross, yet both quoted from earlier mystics outside the evangelical tradition. To Tozer, the American church of the 1940s needed such strong medicine as Nicolas of Cusa, for in their theological uniformity, as fruitful as southern wiregrass, the pursuit of God Himself had been lost—and surely, to some degree, he was correct. At about the same time, both Carl F. H. Henry and Francis Schaeffer were also deeply dissatisfied—and for Schaeffer, the dissatisfaction was also with himself. Therefore, as a call to know God more personally and more deeply, the pursuit of God is certainly appealing.

There is a danger, however. In reading *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, for example, one is struck with the absence of corporate prayer. Now this absence is understandable in one sense, for the topic of the book is ostensibly *private* prayer—the *hidden* life of prayer—not the group prayers of the church. Still, an emphasis is an emphasis. One can become so focused on the individual pursuit of God in prayer, that the lives of other Christians can become less and less important, with more and more time spent alone, in solitary contemplation and prayer.

Into this tendency, Tozer himself seemed to have fallen. He spent so much time alone in prayer, in the holy corner of his basement, that he apparently neglected the needs of his family—his wife, six boys, and one girl. While one could argue from the words of Jesus that loving Christ means hating family, still it must also be said that times of having to choose between the two are rare enough to allow plenty of time for family. Indeed, the apostle Paul told us that those who are married cannot just please the Lord, but must also please the wife at home (1 Corinthians 7:32-33). In other words, God Himself expects from us our divided attention. In contrast, Tozer's biographer called him a "married monk," and upon his death, his wife commented wryly that he loved Jesus more than her.

Much can and should be gained from Tozer's writings, the results of his pursuit of God—and it is certainly not the intention here to condemn a man who has been used for much good to many souls. However, we need to ask ourselves: *Is the life of an evangelical mystic the pursuit of God that He desires?* Certainly, there are times to seek God alone, as Jesus often did, but is this pursuit of God *alone* to become the main activity of our lives? Two passages lead to a negative answer—Isaiah 58 and Psalm 27:4.

In the first passage, God chastises His people, even though he identifies them as those who "seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways," and as those who "take delight in approaching God" (v. 2). In short, He chastises them for practicing a selfish fast. They denied themselves food, apparently as a means for worship, but in doing so harmed and oppressed their neighbor. This, then, was a *selfish* form of self-denial, in all irony. Instead of privately denying themselves food, God desired from them a fast in which the yoke of oppression was broken, and the hungry were fed. In other words, true self-denial puts the liberty and well-being of others before oneself—even before some of our own religious pursuits. In reading about this, it is hard not to hear God's dissatisfaction with an evangelical mystic who spends time in prayer to the perpetual neglect of his family.

In the second passage, the verse quoted above, we would seem to have justification for the private pursuit of God—to be in His temple forever, for revelation and contemplation. Surely this is the drift of this passage, and in light of the psalm itself, it is interesting that it occurs in the midst of a tremendous outward threat. More than once in the Psalms, the idea of being hidden in God's presence occurs in the midst of outer strife (e.g. Psalm 31:20). Even Psalm 23 strikes this note in the second stanza capped by two similar sounding Hebrew words (Psalm 23:5, עֵרֶךְ and Psalm 23:6, אֵרֶךְ). From these observations, it seems that the Psalmist is chiefly lauding the beauty and security of communion with God in prayer in contrast to the outer hostility of human persecutors. This, of course, is the hope of heaven, and it can be experienced today through the high priesthood of Christ on our behalf.

Therefore, at first glance, it would seem that Psalm 27:4 is an excellent proof text for the pursuit of God in private. However good that private pursuit is as one aspect of our lives, *and it is good*, we need to probe further and ask: *Where today is the temple of God, where His glory may be seen?* Interestingly, there are two temples on earth mentioned in the New Testament—the temple of the individual, and the temple of the church (1 Corinthians 6:19; 3:9). While it is certainly advantageous for us to retreat regularly into the inner temple, for private communion with God, it is also our privilege to retreat regularly into the outer temple of the church, to commune with God as a group, and to pursue His glory together. Truly, we see His glory on display in the church, just as God intended for His wisdom to be shown there before the angels in heaven (Ephesians 3:10).

Therefore, to pursue God rightly in our age means to pursue a sight of His glory in both His inner and outer temples. If I were to say that I delight in the knowledge of God and pursue Him only in the inner temple, I would be a liar, for I would be despising the knowledge of God in one temple, while claiming to love that same knowledge in another temple. Truly, according to John, God's love is displayed in the church when we love each other (1 John 4:12); therefore, we pursue God well in the church when we pursue loving, personal relationship with one another.

For those of us who love the thrill of new insights into God's ways, and new thoughts about God's attributes, this warning may come as a challenge. Is it the thought about God or God Himself that delights us? If it is God, we will love to see His glory displayed in all things, both in thought and in real life. In fact, to the extent we truly love to see God more immediately, we will delight to see His glory manifested in lives on earth, both in our own life and in the lives of others. Is this not the goal of the mystic, to see the glory of God? Well then, let us pursue this glory together and in real life, even as it is often more richly satisfying to experience a reality than merely to understand it.

Source: James R. Adair, "A. W. Tozer: Twentieth Century Prophet," *Power for Living* (January 19, 2012): 2-7. The biographer cited above is David J. Fant (ibid., p. 4).

A Quick List of Theological Terms

August 27, 2008

Theological Terms about God

Attributes - personal characteristics of the great and good God
Eternal - God has no beginning nor end, but dwells outside time
Glory - worth—intrinsic weight (Heb.) or shown brilliance (Gr.)
Grace - free favor, depending solely on the will of the giver
Justice - rendering verdicts that result in giving what is deserved
Holy - God is in a class all by Himself (opposite: common)
Immutable - unchangeable: God's character is ever the same
Lovingkindness - loyal love (Heb. *chesed*; e.g. Ruth to Naomi)
Mercy - showing pity on the needy (e.g. forgiveness to the guilty)
Omniscience - God knows all things, both real and hypothetical
Omnipotent - God can do all things except deny Himself
Omnipresent - God is everywhere (though centered in Heaven)
Righteousness - that which accords with what is true
Trinity - God is one Being, subsisting in three Persons
Truth - when the representation accords with reality itself
Vengeance - rendering to each according to his deeds (cf. repay)
Wrath - lit. anger; representing personal punishment from God

Theological Terms about History

Angel - created spirits (with bodies?), who are God's messengers
Antichrist - the coming apostate world ruler
Canon - the list of books recognized to be inspired (the Bible)
Concurrence - divine and human elements coincide under divine superintendence (e.g. inspiration, providence, incarnation)
Creation - God's work alone in making new things by His word
Gospel - the good news that God has fulfilled His promises in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ
*The Gospel says, "The righteous will live by his faith."
Heaven - place where God dwells outside of time ("third heaven")
Hell - place of endless, conscious torment for the wicked
Incarnation - when the Word became man: fully God, fully man
Inerrancy - God's word is without error (entirely truthful)
Infallibility - God's word is without fail (entirely powerful)
Inspiration - the process of producing written prophecy
Law - God's standards of what is right, based on His character
*The Law says, "The man who does them will live by them."
Millennium - the coming thousand-year reign of Christ on earth
Paraclete - Gr. word meaning "advocate" (cf. helper, comforter)
Parousia - Gr. word for a person's visible presence (cf. advent)
Predestination - God eternally pre-appointed each detail of reality
Prophecy - when God communicates His words through a man
Providence - God preserves and governs all things on His plan
Rapture - Christians are "caught up" to Christ, when He returns
Revelation - God revealed Himself by His works, word, and Word
 General Revelation - all men see the Creator via providence
 Special Revelation - some men hear of the Savior via the word
 Progressive Revelation - God revealed Himself more over time
Satan - a fallen angel (cherub?), leader of fallen angels (demons)
Session - Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God the Father

Theological Terms about Salvation

Adoption - given the status and privileges as sons of God
Atonement - making up for sin through a payment (often in blood)
Baptism - Greek word meaning “immersion”
Calling - God gives faith to individuals through the general Gospel
Conversion - turning from sin to God
Election - God unconditionally chose who would be saved
Eternal Security - no true believer will be lost by the Shepherd
Faith - receiving a word or person as true
Glorification - final transformation into the full likeness of Christ
Imputation - reckoning something to someone (e.g. sin to Christ)
Intercession - as our High Priest, Jesus prays for us in Heaven
Justification - courtroom term: reckoned righteous (legal status)
Once Saved, Always Saved - true Baptist slogan
 *Careful: Of those who fall, were they truly “once saved”?
Ordinances - baptism (initiation) and communion (fellowship)
 These have authority by direct command, not by necessity.
Original Sin - the imputation of Adam’s sin to every son of Adam
 *Since Adam sinned for all, then all sinned in Adam.
Perseverance - all Christians must endure to the end to be saved
 *The intercession of Christ guarantees the grace to persevere.
Presentation - for each Christian to appear blameless before Christ
Propitiation - turning away God’s wrath through a sacrificial gift
Reconciliation - making peace (friends) with one’s enemy
Redemption - setting free at the payment of a price (ransom)
Regeneration - receiving spiritual (eternal) life (cf. “born again”)
Repentance - a deep-seated change-of-mindset, evidenced in fruit
Sacramentalism - the false belief that the ordinances confer grace
Sanctification - temple term: being made holy
 Initial Sanctification - becoming a “saint” at conversion
 Progressive Sanctification - becoming holy in all areas of life
Sin - any lack of conformity to God’s standards in nature or deed
Total Depravity - nothing truly good remains in our fallen nature
 *Man is “totally” sinful qualitatively, not quantitatively.
Works Salvation - the false belief that we can do the Law and live

The Incarnation and a Tricky Theologian

November 28, 2009

“...who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power...” (Hebrews 1:3).

In November, I preached a sermon on Calvinism and Arminianism from John chapter six, entitled, “If I Were a Tricky Theologian.” Among my recent sermons, this one has perhaps generated the most interest. In short, the point of the sermon was that I could quote half the Bible’s data, and make you think that I was giving the whole picture. Worse, I could quote half the Bible’s data, and then make wrong logical inferences, and lead you to a conclusion that is contrary to the other half of the Bible’s data. If I did so, I would be a *tricky theologian*.

This tendency to draw wrong inferences is perhaps most easily seen in the Incarnation, which is the grand fact that God the Son added humanity to His divinity, forever uniting human nature with divine nature in one divine Person. Regarding the Incarnation, there are verses that speak of Christ’s ignorance--not just that He had to learn as other children do (Luke 2:52), but even that He did not know the hour of His return (Mark 13:32). To a tricky theologian, it would not be difficult to infer that since God knows all things, and since Jesus did not know all things, Jesus cannot be God. Beware of such inferences, O son of man! It was just such inferences that got Job and his friends

into such trouble before the Lord. Where is the mystery of the Incarnation, if our little mind can wrap itself around this grand reality? Should we not expect our mind to be overawed by the Reality of God?

Before responding, it should be noted, as Benjamin Warfield did years ago, that Jesus honored Himself at the same time that He confessed His ignorance. In saying, “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (Mark 13:32), Jesus did not classify Himself with “man”, but placed Himself higher than the angels. This by itself is significant. Moreover, in saying that Jesus did not know something, we must also reckon with the verses that flat-out say that Jesus knows all things (John 16:30; 21:17), which is an ability the same evangelist elsewhere ascribes to God (1 John 3:20). If someone were to object against using John to explain Mark, then let it be noted from Mark’s gospel that Jesus “perceived in his spirit” what other men were reasoning (Mark 2:8), and that on the same occasion Jesus asserted His authority to forgive sins, which belongs properly to God alone (2:7, 10). Something is very mysterious about Jesus. That is the point. Those who try to unravel the mystery end up in heresy.

Regarding Jesus’ ignorance, let it be remembered that in becoming human, God the Son *added* humanity to His divinity (Philippians 2:7; John 1:14). To His omniscience (in His divine nature), the Son added ignorance (in His human nature). As a result, the one divine Person--the “Word”, as John calls Him--could simultaneously experience omniscience and ignorance, each in its proper nature. If we object and say that this is impossible, let us remember the message of Christmas: “With God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37). Let me ask, *Do you really believe God can do anything?* If you do, then is it far-fetched to believe that through His human nature God the Son can add the ability to suffer not only ignorance, but even death itself? This is at the core of our faith. We believe that Jesus of Nazareth, a real human being, is in truth *Lord*, which is the name of God Himself (Romans 10:9, 13). Only those led by the Holy Spirit can affirm this truth (1 Corinthians 12:3; cf. Matthew 16:17). Indeed, as Paul confessed, “Great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16).

Therefore, let it be firmly established, that inferences are misleading in dealing with the interrelationship of the divine and the human in the Incarnation of the Son, the inspiration of the Bible, and the sovereignty of God in the salvation of the sinner. In each interrelationship, there is a real divine aspect, a real human aspect, and a divine superintendence that ultimately gives God all the credit for everything: Jesus is God, the Bible is God’s word, and salvation is God’s work. In each instance, it is way too easy to quote half the data, draw a simple inference, and end up contradicting the other half of the data or the divine superintendence. Can I reconcile all the data? No, but neither can I explain the Incarnation. It is a fact that I adore; and exploration must never exceed adoration.

In dealing with the salvation of the sinner, Calvinist Christians tend toward hyper-Calvinism whenever the sovereignty of God is used to deny the reality of human faith, the desire of God to save individual sinners, and the present ability of sinners to believe when the word of Christ is heard. On the other hand, Arminian Christians tend toward Pelagianism whenever the responsibility of man is used to deny the bondage of the will to sin, the Satanic blindness of the heart, and the inability of man’s will to believe apart from the supernatural calling of God. In reality, we must affirm all the data, and guard against drawing false inferences.

Next Christmas, when you see a very realistic replica of the baby Jesus in a nativity scene, ponder the wonder of the Incarnation, and think to yourself, as Martin Luther did so many years ago, *That Baby was still holding the Universe together by the word of His power*. Believer, this same Christ now holds your life.

God Is Sovereign and Sincere in His Gospel Invitation

November 28, 2009

Let this be a cardinal rule in theology: We can only know God truly through Jesus Christ. This point is made clear near the beginning of John’s Gospel, when he wrote, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). In considering the Calvinist and Arminian debate over the sovereignty of God in salvation, I am convinced that much of our misunderstanding stems from viewing this debate apart from the Incarnation, which is the cornerstone to true theology. In unwitting pride, we make wrong inferences, never realizing how much our footsteps are straying off the path and trampling down the beautiful mysteries of God. Personally, I did not realize this until God humbled me and then used Martin Luther to point me back to Christ.

In the *Bondage of the Will*, Luther explained the difference between the hidden God and the revealed God--a difference that I now understand in the following way. With the hidden God, we have no direct contact. He is too infinite for our finite minds to know. In John's language, "No man hath seen God" (John 1:18a). However, we do have mediated knowledge of this mysterious God through the Son, who became human, and has now "declared him" (John 1:18b). In a sense, the infinite God has been translated into real human terms through the Only-Begotten, who is both fully divine and fully human. When we see Jesus, we see God the Father in human terms (cf. John 14:9). The revealed God has now explained the hidden God. We may not understand *how* this happened, but we can understand the *fact* that it happened. "The Word became flesh" is a very clear statement (John 1:14).

Whenever this fact of the Incarnation is ignored, theology turns into philosophy. For example, it is tempting to explain the sovereignty of God in salvation by directly looking at the eternal decrees of God. Since God chose some sinners to salvation "from the beginning" (2 Thessalonians 2:13), that is, "before the foundation of the world" and "before the world began" (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9), it is tempting to think that God has no sincere desire to save each sinner who hears the Gospel. We may think, *What if that sinner is not one of the elect? If God has not chosen him, then does God really want him to be saved?* Please note: These questions view God monolithically, as if there were no Trinity, and no need for the knowledge of God the Father to be mediated through God the Son. In other words, this "God" is the god of philosophy, and not the God of the Bible.

How do I really know God's heart for a sinner? Only through Christ. If I, however, try to look at God the Father directly, and not through Christ, I inadvertently turn the loving doctrine of predestination into cold fatalism. Personally, I am a firm believer in both predestination and unconditional election; but I do not want to view these doctrines independently of Christ. Admittedly, the logical bent in me at times fights against this mystery, and I am tempted to fall into the trap described above, but it is the witness of the Gospels to the living, breathing, interacting Christ that brings me back. Let me close by giving you one instance that fascinates me.

When Jesus confronted the rich young ruler, He used the Law to counteract the man's pride (see Mark 10:17-27). Why Jesus did not use the Gospel is a sermon for another day; for our purposes here, please note that Jesus is said to have "loved" this blind legalist (10:21). The word "loved" here is the verb form of *agape*, the strong word for Christian love in the New Testament. *Was the rich, young ruler elect?* Probably not. Based on both his sad reaction and Jesus' subsequent comments, it is doubtful that the man ever turned to Christ in repentance and faith. Regardless of what happened to him, the text does not say, and that is the point. Jesus loved a sinner, whom Jesus invited to follow Him. Jesus was *sincere* in His invitation. This is a translation of God to me in human terms. Therefore, any view of the sovereignty of God in salvation that denies the sincerity of God's heart in the Gospel invitation is heretical, being the wrong inference from a philosophical attempt to know the hidden God directly.

Jesus sincerely desires sinners to be saved. When the Gospel is given, the offer is sincere. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that he repent and live (Ezekiel 18:23, 32). Jesus is both desirous and able to save him (cf. Matthew 8:2-3). This fact does not mean that God is not sovereign, or that election is not real. Jesus also spoke of "the elect" and of the fact that, for those blessed of the Father, the kingdom had been "prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 24:22, 24, 31; 25:34). Truly, without the Father's blessing, it is impossible to know the Son as God (Matthew 16:17; 11:25-27). Conversely, we would not know the Father except through the Son (Matthew 11:27). Come to Jesus Christ, and find out who God really is. This is true theology. This is the Gospel.

What If I Am Not Elect?

December 1, 2009

Once the sovereignty of God in salvation is acknowledged as true, it is not uncommon for a soul to fearfully wonder, *What if I am not elect? What if God did not choose me for salvation from the before the foundation of the world? Am I doomed?* In response to these fears, having personally tasted of them myself, let me be perfectly frank: They are of the devil, who wishes to blind your mind to the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6). You cannot look at the face of Jesus Christ and come away with such fears. As seen in an earlier post, we only know God truly as He is explained to us in the person and work of His incarnate Son Jesus Christ (John 1:18). Therefore, we need to ask, *How did Jesus respond to sinners in need?* Two instances illustrate

how to consider the doctrine of election in light of the revelation of God in Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

First, uncertainty did not keep the leper from coming to Jesus. The leper came, worshipped, and told Jesus, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean” (Matthew 8:2). In other words, “Lord, I know You are able to save me, if You want to.” Fearful sinner, what an analogy of your condition! Having come to Jesus, you know that God is able to save you, but you doubt that He really wants to, especially in light of election. Listen to the Gospel. This is the revelation of God to you in the face of Christ: “I will; be thou clean” (Matthew 8:3). Jesus *is* willing. He wants to save you. He desired to make the leper clean; He loved the rich young ruler; He had compassion on the crowds, and wept over the coming destruction of Jerusalem and her children. All these snapshots give a true portrait of the character of God Himself, translated to us in human terms. As Joseph Hart wrote many years ago:

“Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity joined with pow’r;
He is able, He is able, He is willing; doubt no more.”

Interestingly, this insight into the willing heart of God to save us is at the core of true faith. According to the book of Hebrews, “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). In coming to God, I must not only believe that He is *able* to save me, but that He *will* save me. If I ask for wisdom, which represents the summation of born-again character, I should believe and not doubt that God will give it, for He “giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not” (James 1:5; cf. 3:17). That is God’s heart, and it is a sin to doubt it, notwithstanding the doctrine of sovereign election (cf. James 1:6-8).

Second, election did not keep the Canaanite woman from seeking deliverance for her daughter. At first, Jesus ignored her, telling His disciples, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). Here she was, face to face with the reality of God’s sovereign election. Having chosen the Jews, she, as a Gentile, seemed to be ineligible for His blessing. This logic, however, did not stop her, for when Jesus answered her by saying, “It is not [fitting] to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs,” she astutely responded, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Instead of reprimanding her, Jesus commended her and granted her request, saying, “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt” (Matthew 15:26-28).

Do you hear this woman’s faith? Faced with a limitation due to the sovereign plan of God, she neither denied that plan (“I am not a dog!”) nor did she give up (“Jesus did not come for the dogs; therefore, I had better not bother Him.”), but rather agreed with Christ and believed His heart to be bigger than that limitation (“I am a dog; but even dogs get crumbs!”). By analogy, God will not excuse anyone for unbelief based on the fear of not being elect. Unbelief is a sin. Period. We know the heart of God based on Jesus--if you come to Him, He is both able and desirous to save you (Matthew 8:1-3). Moreover, in imitation of the woman, I would advise you to use the sovereignty of God to your advantage: “Lord, I agree. You are sovereign in salvation, bestowing mercy on whom You will; therefore, since You are absolutely free in bestowing mercy on sinners, freely bestow Your mercy on me! Save me!” Based on the Gospel--the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ--He will. Period.

Fearful sinner, let me remind you of your limitations. Election is none of your business. You are a creature of Time; but election is clearly something of Eternity. You cannot understand election directly, apart from Christ. The saved were chosen solely “in Christ,” just as they are now mysteriously seated in the heavenly places now in Christ (Ephesians 1:4; 2:5-6). If you try to understand election directly, you will fall into heresy, denying the heart of the Gospel, just as those who try to explain the Incarnation end up in heresy. A mystery is a mystery. To borrow an analogy from the Reformers themselves, quit trying to look around the back of God to read His sovereign book, which cannot be understood directly, though you break your neck in trying. Look at the face of Christ. There is the revelation of God to you in terms that you can understand. Come to Christ, believe in Him, and may it be done to you according to your faith.

In light of this discussion, you may wonder, *So why then did God reveal to us the doctrine of election?* According to the New Testament, there are at least two reasons. First, God uses the doctrine of election to humble the proud, who think that their own will or effort will attain heaven, contrary to God’s sovereign mercy (Romans 9:16; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31). God alone gets the glory for salvation (Ephesians 1:4-6). Second, God uses the doctrine of

election to comfort the saved, who realize that their eternal security rests ultimately not on the power of their freewill to keep hold of God, but on the unchanging will of God to keep hold of them in Christ (Romans 8:30). To use an old analogy, the door of salvation has written above it, "Whosoever wills may come." Once inside, we who are saved look back at the door and see written above it, "Elect from the foundation of the world." God wants His beloved children to know that He has always loved them in Christ and will love them forever. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

What If I Lack the Ability to Come to Christ?

December 4, 2009

"Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water" (Matthew 14:28).

When I was first wrestling with the sovereignty of God in salvation, my mind objected, *If You, Lord, have already chosen some to salvation, what is the use of evangelism?* Again, as seen in an earlier post, this objection is the logic of a tricky theologian, drawing a wrong inference from a true statement; yet it was very real to me, for at the time I was on a mission trip for the very purpose of evangelism. Conversely, we might add, *If a sinner hears of election and of his inability to do good or even to believe in Christ apart from the sovereign power of God, will not that information discourage him from repentance and faith?* These are genuine objections, and both can be answered through the word of God that reveals His ways and His thoughts--ways much higher than our ways, and thoughts much higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). Having considered in the last post the supposed obstacle of election to believing in Christ for salvation, let me now consider the supposed obstacle of total depravity. In everything, we hope to affirm all sides of the truth.

According to the Scriptures, in our natural condition, we were "dead in trespasses and sins," and "alienated and enemies" of God in our minds, having a will lacking the ability to submit to God's law or to please God (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 1:21; Romans 8:7-8). None of us were righteous; none of us understood God or sought Him; and none of us did good--not even one of us (Romans 3:10-12). As a result, we ran from God's light, lest we should be exposed (John 1:19-20). This is the doctrine of *total depravity*--not that any particular sinner is as bad as he could be, but that sin has so pervaded and dominated each sinner, that the entire soul is enslaved to sin (cf. John 8:34; Romans 6:16).

Then along comes the authoritative invitation: "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). *Who will respond?* In light of total depravity, we are tempted to infer that none will respond. The deaf will not hear the Shepherd's voice; the blind will not see the Savior crucified; and the dead will not come to Him for life. Logically, *how can they?*

Oh, the glory of the Gospel ministry! Like Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, as George Whitefield once pointed out, a Gospel preacher stands at the tomb of the soul and commands the dead sinner to arise and come to Christ. The word itself brings the life, even as James said, we are begotten of God "with the word of truth" (James 1:18). Let me illustrate this truth from the Gospel of Matthew, using the Rich Young Ruler and the apostle Peter.

Regarding the Rich Young Ruler, here was a true slave of sin. Coming to Jesus with a pertinent question of eternal life, he nonetheless showed his blindness in calling Jesus "good", as if goodness were common among men, and then in stating that he himself had kept several of the Ten Commandments from his youth (Matthew 19:16, 20). In response, Jesus zeroed in on the man's chief, besetting sin of covetousness (the Tenth Commandment) and told him, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (19:21). Undone, the man went away grieved, for he was very rich.

Let me ask a question: *Could this rich man sell all and follow Jesus?* In one sense, as a slave of sin, blind to the glory of God, he lacked all moral ability as a sinner to obey, even though he possessed the natural ability as a human to make arrangements and move his feet. Jesus recognized this moral inability when he told his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (19:24). Contrary to all claims about some small, camel-sized gate in Jerusalem, Jesus was using hyperbole to drive home an impossibility, even as His disciples understood, exclaiming, "Who then can be saved?" (19:25). Left to ourselves, we lack all moral ability to respond to a Gospel invitation. If everything depended on man's freewill, there would

be no Christians today, for none would respond. We love our sin too much.

Thankfully, that is not all the power that is available. Jesus countered the disciples' despair: "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (19:26). With men, it is impossible to stand at the tomb of Lazarus, and to command the dead man to come out. Dead men do not obey invitations, let alone walk. However, when God sovereignty calls a sinner through the Gospel message, He creates what He calls (cf. Romans 4:17). Even though the rich man did not respond, he was held accountable for his unresponsiveness, for the word of Christ held all the power he needed for obedience, if only his pride had not sinfully kept him from seeing the unique identity of Christ. This crucial factor of rightly identifying Christ is illustrated in the rich man's contrast to the apostle Peter.

It had been a hard night at the oars, with Peter and the rest of the disciples straining to reach the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Sometime after three in the morning, Jesus came out to them, walking on the sea. Frightening them, Jesus then reassured them that it was He Himself, to which Peter responded, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water" (Matthew 14:28). Now wait a minute. Men do not walk on water. Men cannot walk on water. *What is Peter asking Jesus to do?* This interchange is such a great picture of the Christian life. Faced with the impossibility of leaving our sin and walking out to Jesus on the water of repentance and faith, something impossible for humans in their own strength to do, the believing sinner nonetheless calls to Jesus and says, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You." And He does, and the command itself has the power, "Come!"

The chief difference between Peter and the rich man is in the identity of Christ. To the rich man, Jesus was just a "Good Teacher"; therefore, all the power had to come from the man himself, which was impossible. To Peter, Jesus was more than a teacher; He had supernatural authority. In the words of Augustine, Peter's attitude was, "Command what You will, and give what You command" (*Confessions*, Book X).

How about you? What command has been impossible for you to obey? Are you looking to yourself for the power to obey? Look to Jesus alone. Believe that He will hold you up as you go out to Him. Ponder the wonder that the word gives life; and then realize your guilt if you do not step out of the boat. It is not simply that you are disobeying Jesus; worse, you are denying that Jesus is the Christ, the sovereign Son of God, whose words are spirit and life (John 6:63). Believe, and obey.

The Bottom Line - God Is Sovereign in Salvation

December 8, 2009

"But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you" (Romans 6:17).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"--so begins John's Gospel (John 1:1). Before time, the Word was, and the Word was divine. In time, this same Word added humanity to His divinity: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). One divine Person, having divine nature, added human nature. Please note: It was not the divine *nature* that added human nature, but the divine *Person* added human nature. Over both natures presides one divine Person--the Word, the second Person of the holy Trinity.

In debates over Calvinism and Arminianism, which has been the discussion of the last several posts, it is tempting to describe each side as correct and then to conclude with a statement about mystery and not to probe further. This option is especially tempting in postmodern times, when men act as if truth and non-truth can coexist, contrary to the Lord's apostle, who wrote, "No lie is of the truth" (1 John 2:21). Granted, there comes a point when probing must yield to humble adoration. Moreover, wrong inferences can lead to heretical conclusions that destroy the delicate balance between the divine and human aspects of salvation. Both of these points still stand in previous posts, in hope of urging more worship, more evangelism, and more conversions. However, having guarded the mystery between the divine and human aspects, it still remains to be said that God is sovereign in salvation *in such a way that there is no human counterpart*. To use the analogy of the Incarnation, there are two natures, which must be kept in constant balance and in mysterious union, but over both natures presides one divine Person, who has no human person as counterpart. The Word, the divine Person, took on human nature, and now superintends both His divine nature and His human nature in the adorable majesty of the Incarnation.

Regarding the sovereignty of God in salvation, consider the verse given above as an example of the human aspect, the divine aspect, and the divine superintendence. On the human side, the Roman Christians at their conversion exercised their own human will (“from the heart”) and their own natural human freedom (“ye have obeyed”). Their conversion was no sham, but real obedience from real human decision. This natural human freedom, however, was not complete moral freedom, for they are also said to have been in slavery (“servants of sin”). It is this moral slavery that makes the power of God necessary in conversion. Therefore, on the divine side, we should not be surprised to hear that these Roman Christians at their conversion were *handed over* to the Gospel (“that form of doctrine”). Honestly, the King James Version befuddles me here, for as far as I know there is no textual variant that supports its translation that what was “delivered” was the Gospel, not the people. In the Greek, it is the Romans themselves who are handed over, which is the same word used of Judas betraying Jesus. This handing-over is divine calling. Thus there is both a divine aspect and a human aspect in conversion. Against both of these aspects in salvation stands the superintendence of God: *Who do we thank for our conversion?* Do we thank our free-will? No. “God be thanked.” He is sovereign in salvation.

In my own experience, I have been consistently pressed by these realities. On the one hand, I am fully convinced that no one can truly turn to Christ in saving faith who has not yet seen His glory in the Gospel. We must “behold” the Son before we can “believe” in the Son (John 6:40, NASB). This vision of Christ requires a supernatural, internal revelation of Christ that only the Sovereign Father can give by His Spirit. It was true of Peter (Matthew 16:17; cf. 11:25-27); it was true of Paul (Galatians 1:16); and it is true of each one of us Christians. The revelation of the Son expelled the Satanic blindness of our minds with the same cosmic force of the initial creation, when the Sovereign God commanded, “Let there be light,” and there was light (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6; cf. Genesis 1:3).

As a result, in my own soul, I have cried out to the Lord God, “Show me Your Son through Your word by Your Spirit!” What a glory that such a supernatural light is real, and is available for everyone who comes to God in humble faith! God gives grace to the humble, and will give the Holy Spirit to everyone who asks Him in faith (James 4:6; Luke 11:13; cf. James 1:6-8). This promise sustained John Newton, the African blasphemer and later author of “Amazing Grace,” in his search for salvation while he was nearly shipwrecked at sea and searching the New Testament daily. In the words of James, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraided not; *and it shall be given him*” (James 1:5; cf. 3:17).

It is our pride that keeps us from asking--or from asking rightly in humble faith. Pride, in fact, disables a man from believing (John 5:44; cf. Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:21). So there we stand, in need of sovereign grace to see the Savior, and presented with precious promises that encourage us to ask in confidence, but we are stuck in our blind pride. Who will strike the first blow and begin the process? Will Lazarus first reach out to Jesus, or Jesus first call to Lazarus? Will creation first say to God, “Create me,” or must the divine Dread Sovereign first say, “Let there be!”? Do you see? For all the delicate balance between the divine and human aspects, at the end of the day, it is not we who seek for God, but it is He who is “found of them that sought [Him] not” (Romans 3:11; Isaiah 65:1; cf. Romans 10:20). It is all of the Lord!

Therefore, we thank God for not only our salvation, but even for our conversion itself. Our faith was “given” to us (Philippians 1:29; cf. possibly Ephesians 2:8-9). Someone may have seeded us with the Gospel, and another may have watered, but it was *God* who gave the increase; the others were simply “ministers by whom [we] believed, even as the Lord gave to every man” (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). It is “of him” that we are in Christ Jesus, so that no flesh can boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:29-30). We hated the light and would not come to the light lest our deeds be exposed; but now our deeds are “wrought in God” (John 1:20-21). Salvation is of God--*all of salvation*. If our hearts have difficulty granting this truth, then our hearts have difficulty with letting God be God; for in the final analysis, there would be no creation at all if God had not sovereignly decided to create the universe, nor would there be faith at all, unless God had not sovereignly decided to create a divine and supernatural light in each of us (2 Corinthians 4:6). Creation is the prerogative of God, and is, in part, what identifies Him as God--and consequently what identifies us as well: “Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and *not we ourselves*; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3; cf. Ephesians 2:8-10). “So then,” I conclude in words borrowed from the apostle Paul, “it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showed mercy” (Romans 9:16).

Christian, as you contemplate the miracle of the Incarnation this Christmas season, please remember as well the miracle of Christian conversion. In His sovereign good pleasure, God spoke into your darkness, dispelling your

deadening pride and revealing His Son to you, so that you could freely believe in Him unto everlasting life. May God be forever praised and thanked! “Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).

Basket Three • Gospel Exhortations

Back to Basics

January 2009

When the year is yet fresh, it is time to breathe deep, re-evaluate our priorities, and *get back to basics*. And what can be more basic than the most famous verse of the Bible, John 3:16—the Gospel of John, chapter three, verse sixteen?

“For God so **loved** the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever **believeth** in him should not **perish**, but have everlasting life.”

Based on the bold words above (and borrowing an outline from John Piper), let me point out three basics of life:

1. Your **Dilemma**: You are perishing.

Each birth-day is a reminder of your coming death-day; but unlike your birth-day, your death-day is unknown.

Are you ready?

To many, preparing for death means finishing tasks that they hope to do before life is done. This is certainly part of it, and often a benefit to those left behind, but it certainly not enough. If you perish, you perish. Is there a net to catch you when you die? Do you know for certain that underneath are the everlasting arms? Or are you banking on the Grand Assumption that somehow everything will turn out fine in the end? So many people put more thought into the safety of their money than the safety of their soul!

2. God’s **Design**: He loved this world and sent His Son.

Death is serious. More serious than AIDS, cancer, and heart disease is death itself. Should all disease be done tomorrow, death remains, for death does not have a physical cause, but a legal cause. In fact, no one technically dies of “natural causes” for death has been imposed upon us due to our guilt. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Therefore, for the sting of death to be removed, the true cause of death must be faced. That is why Jesus came.

Please note: Death is a legal necessity because we have broken God’s Law. Therefore, in order for the demands of the Law to be met, we need a substitute to die in our place for our guilt. To be a true substitute, this “Scapegoat” must have no guilt and possess equal or surpassing value. But who of us is without sin? A sinner cannot die for a sinner; therefore, the Savior had to be *sent* into this world from outside of this world. That is why we have the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Moreover, even if one of us were without sin, we could only redeem one other human. Where can we find a life so valuable, that the exchange of that life is enough to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29)? The life of God is that valuable! That is why God sent us *His Son*—His “only begotten Son.”

In the Cross, the divine Son died in the place of sinful man, and thereby met the full demands of the Law. Death is no longer a legal necessity. Perishing can be avoided in Christ. So how does this benefit come to you?

3. Your **Duty**: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.

Many people believe things *about* Jesus, but they do not believe *in* Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to have confidence in Him, to rely on Him, to bank upon Him. Such faith begins when we see our need of salvation, and trust Him alone for this great gift. Such faith is then shown to be real in the trials of life. *Do you have true, saving faith?* For example, when you face major decisions in life, does His truth formulate your core principles for action? Do you wait on Him in prayer, confident that He will meet your needs in His timing and in His way? When you feel shame over moral failure, do you reject the temptation to fill your sense of empty self-esteem with reminders of where you have succeeded, or how the circumstances justified your behavior, or at least lessened its guilt? Does the Cross of Christ alone satisfy the demands of your unbending conscience? Is His substitution death your *only* plea for entrance into heaven?

Or do you even know about these things? If not, please come to church. Hear the word about Christ! The Bible says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). *Is it not time to once again get back to the basics?*

You Need a Double Christ

October 12, 2009

You need both an inner Christ and an outer Christ. The outer Christ was the hallmark of the Reformation, when Martin Luther wrote that we need be Christ to one another. The inner Christ was the hallmark of the Great Awakening, when George Whitefield asserted the necessity of the new birth. Both are necessary to true Christianity; both are necessary for salvation; and both are biblical. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul.

Regarding the outer Christ, Paul wrote, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not make provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Romans 13:14). This verse was the great text that God used to save Augustine, who had been agonizing over his unwillingness to leave sexual sin for a life of purity in Christ. Technically, putting on Christ does not refer to conversion, but to the life of holiness that must follow true conversion. If we have truly heard Christ and been taught by Him, as the truth itself is in Jesus, we will put off the Old Man (Adam) and put on the New Man (Christ) (Ephesians 4:20-24). Christ Himself will be our wardrobe.

Even broader, if we are *in Christ*, having been immersed in Him through faith, the death-blows deserved by our sin have landed on His back. His death in our place has satisfied the demands of God's Law for our punishment. We are justified in Him. Furthermore, His reward for obedience has become our unmerited reward, for we are carried in Him to the very right hand of God on high. We will be glorified in Him. Christ Himself has become our righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). We are *in Christ*.

Regarding the inner Christ, Paul wrote once in exasperation, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). Unless Christ is formed in us, we have no hope of heaven, for the same apostle testified elsewhere that "Christ in you" is "the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). If we do not have the Spirit of Christ--the Spirit who alone is the internal source of "love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22-23), that is, the source of *spiritual life*--if we do not have this Spirit dwelling within us, then we are not His, and He is not ours (Romans 8:9). Christ must be *in us*.

Let me ask you two questions from Puritan William Guthrie, whose book *The Christian's Great Interest* sought to answer questions about personal salvation:

What has Christ done for you?

What has Christ done in you?

Do you have the outer Christ--the Christ of the Cross and the exaltation, the Christ of personal holiness that others can see and feel as fellow members of His church? Do you have the inner Christ--the Christ of the New Birth, the Christ of the renewed mind and heart by the Holy Spirit of God? These questions bring the whole matter of salvation down to the point of a pin: *Do you have Christ?* You must be in Him, and He must be in you. It is really that simple. With truth, the apostle John wrote, "This is the record, that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; and he who does not have the Son does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe on the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13).

Being Born Again Is Not Our Decision

April 2009

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

—John 3:3 (NKJV)

Mark it as a fact. Jesus was very clear. If you are not born again, you are not going to heaven.

Two concepts are involved. **One:** Birth. This is an instantaneous entrance into life. Technically, the word refers to *begetting*, which we call conception. It is the Father who begets us into life, and those who have been so begotten have a new power over sin, for “His seed remains in him” (1 John 3:9). **Two:** One must be born (or begotten) again. Just as we each have had a physical conception-day, so also we must have a spiritual conception-day. Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

But how do we obtain such a conception and birth? Given the utter necessity of having such an experience, is there any question so pressing for the present as this one? If we die without rebirth, we cannot “see” the kingdom of God nor “enter” it (John 3:3, 5). *How do we get it?*

It is at this point that many of the churches and so-called churches part company. Some have claimed the waters of baptism as the place of rebirth, citing John 3:5 (“born of water and the Spirit”) and Titus 3:5 (“the washing of regeneration”). Others have claimed the willpower of man, as if a man is born again by repentance itself. The famous (and heretical) evangelist Charles Finney used to press the echo of the Law in Ezekiel 18:31, “Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.”

Though it is tempting to answer these claims here, it is perhaps better simply to let John explain John. Near the beginning of his gospel, the apostle John introduces us to the topic of rebirth:

“He [the Son] came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13, NKJV).

Please note: John is very clear how a person is *not* born again. He is not born again by “blood,” that is, through human birth and heredity. No one is a Christian simply because he was born to Christian parents. Again, we must have a spiritual conception. The life of *God* must enter us. Moreover, a person is not born again by “the will of the flesh,” nor by “the will of man.” Two times the will is nixed. Not only can parents not place a baby in the font and decide for the child, but neither can the child himself—at any age. Listen: *A person is not born again by a decision of the human will.* To become God’s child is a “right” that must be “given” to us at some point in our earthly journey or we will not go to heaven.

How is that precious right given? Not through heredity, not through human choice, but through receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. The word “receive” can refer to welcoming a stranger into one’s home. The Jews rejected Jesus, but “as many as received Him, to them [Jesus] gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). This occurred through faith (“to those who believe in His name”), and it occurred to each one who received Him (“as many as”).

How about you? Do you hope in your baptism that you are born again? Do you hope in your decision? Beware. It is subtle, but deadly. Many claim, “I am a born-again Christian,” and mean little more than saying, “I have decided to follow Christ and I would never do those kind of sins.” Blindly, they assure themselves of their ability to keep the Law and to keep themselves saved, when in reality they had no more choice over spiritual conception than they did over their own physical conception. Both are a conferred gift.

To be born again, we need Jesus Himself to give us this right. Therefore, the key is welcoming Jesus into our lives—the *real* Jesus, described by the Father Himself in the pages of the Bible; and the *whole* Jesus, both Lord and Savior, the Boss of my thoughts and ways, and the Sacrifice for my sins on the cross. Every person who through faith receives this living Jesus is born again mysteriously by the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. “Of His own will,” the apostle James wrote, “He brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18; cf. 1 Peter 1:23).

Dangers of Decision-Based Evangelism

March 2009

“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field,
do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.”

—Song of Songs 3:5 (NKJV)

Romantic love cannot be forced. There is something almost magical, when, as one Puritan put it, God pitches the heart of a man upon a woman. In Proverbs, the mystery of a man with a maid is likened to the movement of an eagle in the air, a serpent on a rock, and a ship in the midst of the sea—smooth, graceful, and leaving no trace—things that are “too wonderful for me, . . . which I do not understand” (Proverbs 30:18-19). In the verse given above, the daughters of Jerusalem are charged on oath, not to “stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Song of Songs 3:5). Relationships cannot be rushed. Premature moves cause pain and problems; therefore, patience must be pursued until “nature” has run its course. All this we often affirm in *this kind* of relationship, yet with regard to Christ, we somehow often act as if a person merely needs to make a decision and the relationship is set. Is this really so? Why should this vertical relationship be so mechanical, so different in quality than our horizontal relationship?

In light of these thoughts, consider these three assertions on evangelism and counseling others about salvation.

First, it is not a mere decision that saves us, but faith expressing itself in words. Yes, the apostle Paul affirmed, “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved,” but he added, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?” (Romans 10:13-14). Saving faith must precede saving prayer. Too often, I fear, sinners are prematurely told to pray, when they do not yet have a clear notion about the Person of the prayer, nor the reason for the prayer. We tend to overemphasize the sinner’s prayer. The Bible, in contrast, emphasizes faith as the key means of salvation (e.g. Romans 1:17; Ephesians 2:8; cf. Matthew 9:22).

Second, faith results from truth. The sinner must have sufficient truth in order to believe. Again, Paul asked, “How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:15; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Though at times a sinner responds to the very first hearing with saving faith, more often than not, it takes many hearings before Jesus is sufficiently seen for saving faith. Jesus encountered many Jews who believed what they had heard about Jesus, but who nonetheless still did not “know the truth” about Him. Their faith was not *saving* faith yet. To such “believers,” Jesus once promised, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32). Please note:

1. These “believers” were not yet “free” of their sins (cf. John 8:34). Not all faith is saving faith.
2. The faith of these “believers” still lacked a sufficient knowledge of “the truth.”
3. Jesus is not shy to question the genuineness of these “believers,” but defines a true disciple by perseverance.
4. Implied in Jesus’ words is both a process of time and a promise: If you stay in My words, you will be saved!

Do you see the need for caution? So often, at the first positive response to our Gospel message, we are ready to pronounce the person a Christian and to guarantee him his place in heaven; yet when we ask him to explain his faith, he cannot answer our questions and we are forced to coax him along with cues. Beware! Ignorance is a bad sign, for Jesus said the *truth* sets a man free. If a man does not know the truth, he needs to be encouraged to *continue* learning, not reassured that his soul is now safe.

Third, we should never force a decision. According to Jesus, a person who truly knows the gift of God and the Giver *will* ask Him for eternal life, and He will give it (John 4:10). This is so reassuring for us. We focus so much on the exhortation, which has its place (as seen in Pentecost, Acts 2:40); in reality, however, it would be better for us to focus on making Christ known in the fullness of His identity and of His gift—to make known His person and His work, which, by implication, includes a true knowledge of man’s sin and misery.

The next time God grants you an opportunity to speak about His Son—perhaps with your children, relative, coworker, or neighbor—keep in mind the nature of relationship. Our job is to present the word about Jesus, praying for God to stir up and arouse love as He pleases. God bless you in this pursuit.

Letter to a Professing Neighbor

February 19, 2008

Dear Neighbor,

I am glad that you receive this newsletter, so that I can address you personally without you feeling the pressure to respond. This is one of the beauties of letters, and perhaps one reason why God Himself spoke to us through a Book. A book or a letter allows us to ponder, to pray, and to deal with God alone, by ourselves. This is very fitting, for ultimately, each of us must answer to Jesus alone.

So while I have your attention, I want to let you in on a particular burden I bear for others. Having grown up in church myself, even memorizing chapters of the Bible in my teens, I know that it is very possible for a person to have an intellectual knowledge about God and His Bible, without really knowing Him or His Son. To some, this situation is too embarrassing to admit. To others, it is not even seen. Yet I am convinced that many are in that strange predicament of knowing a lot about Jesus without really knowing Jesus.

For example, when I was a teen, my prayers were very dutiful, but not spontaneous, full of faith and full of joy. I consistently felt guilty for my sins, which I continued to commit regularly, even hours after having confessed the last time. My attitude was very moody, going through high swings when things went well and very low swings when things did not. Inside, I held deep anger against someone who hurt me, and took secret pleasure in accomplishments—assuming a humble demeanor, but taking great offence when I was not chosen for the starting role. I also strongly desired to fit in, yet felt constrained by my Christian profession to listen to “Christian” heavy metal music and not wear sleeveless tee-shirts.

Now your story is going to be different, for we are all enslaved to “*various* lusts and pleasures” (Titus 3:3); but I can tell you as honest fact, that for all my knowledge of the Bible and secret sinning, the Bible became personally different to me when the Lord humbled me and made me start from scratch, begging Him to know with certainty that it was from Him and that I truly belonged to Him.

Listen, please—no matter what your title or status is to others outside, *do you hear the voice of Jesus Christ addressing you personally when you read His word?* Is that book *alive* to you, or is it just a textbook? Worse, do you even *know* what the Book says? Honestly. I am concerned, for Jesus said so pointedly, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples *indeed*. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32). That word “indeed” tells us that it is not wrong for us to wonder whether we are *indeed* a Christian. In fact, the Bible has two letters, where getting that question settled is the whole point of the letter (2 Peter and 1 John). Even apart from those letters, if we do not *know* the truth, it is certain that we are not yet free from our sins, for it is *the truth* that makes us free.

And just to top it off: Jesus spoke that word to “Jews who believed Him” (John 8:31). Like I was in my teens, these Jews knew that Jesus was no fraud; but they did not yet *know* the truth, and consequently, they were still a slave to their sins and bound for hell.

If you suspect that this may be true of you, I encourage you to read *for yourself* the Gospel of John. As an aide, I have included an introduction that I recently wrote for someone. If you have any questions, please call me at (517) 448-7329. God forbid that any of us should be shocked at the last Day—knowing about Jesus, but not really knowing Jesus.

Sincerely,

Bob Snyder
Pastor, Open Door Bible Church

What Is the Meaning of “Christ”?

November 7, 2009

Do you believe in Christ? To answer that question well, you must not only know *who* He is, but also *what* He is. Interestingly, the word “Christ” is technically not a name. Granted, to our ears, “Jesus Christ” sounds like a first and last name. It is not. The word “Christ” is not a name, but a title. Jesus is His name, and Christ is His official title. We could reverse the order (as the New Testament sometimes does) and call Him Christ Jesus, which would be more fitting to our ears--like President Jones, Coach Johnson, or Principal Johnstone. Now that we know that Christ is a title, let us explore what that title means.

Have you ever seen the inauguration of the President into office? The ceremony is solemn, complete with a Bible and an oath before the Chief Justice of the United States. In that moment, we recognize that the individual with his hand on the Bible has entered into a unique role, with a unique title--President--regardless of his given name from birth. Similarly, long before Jesus was born, the Jews had a special ceremony for setting apart an individual for a unique role of leadership. Someone, often a prophet, would *anoint* the head of that special individual by pouring olive oil upon his head. In that moment, God Himself set the individual apart for leadership. From that moment on, the individual could be called “the LORD’s Anointed” (see, for example, 1 Samuel 24:10; 26:11; cf. 10:1; 15:17; 2 Samuel 1:14). In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the title “Anointed One” is *Messiah*. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the title “Anointed One” is *Christ*.

Therefore, when we say that Jesus is *the Christ*, we are saying that He is the Anointed One, the One specially set apart by God for a particular role of leadership. What is that role? Apart from one exception, all anointed individuals were either a king or a priest. For example, both Saul and David were anointed king over Israel by God through the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 10:1; 15:17; 16:13; 2 Samuel 12:7). Similarly, the high priest was also anointed (Exodus 29:7; Numbers 35:25), as were other priests (Exodus 30:30). The one exception is the anointing of Elisha the prophet (1 Kings 19:16). Which role did Jesus assume as the Anointed One? Prophet? Priest? King?

According to the Psalm 2, written one thousand years before Jesus’ birth, the Lord’s “Anointed” would be God’s king, placed upon His “holy hill of Zion” (Psalm 2:2, 6). At first glance, it would appear that the Anointed One is simply a king; a closer look, however, reveals that He might be more than a king, for He is set upon God’s *holy* hill. Does that mean that He is also a priest, having special access to the holy place? It may not. The kings of Judah were strictly forbidden to act like priests, as King Uzziah later found out to his shame (see 2 Corinthians 26:16-21). Moreover, Psalm 48:1 speaks of the whole city of Jerusalem as “the mountain of [God’s] holiness.” If Psalm 2 were the only reference to the coming Anointed One, we would probably conclude that he would simply be a king.

Interestingly, Psalm 2 is not the only *messianic psalm*. In Psalm 16, the Anointed One is called the “Holy One,” which likens Him to the priestly tribe of Levi (see Deuteronomy 33:8, and note that the Holy One of Psalm 16 has the Lord as His allotment, just as the Levites did). Psalm 110 actually calls Him “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4). Significantly, the Anointed One is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, whose name literally means “king of righteousness” and whose occupation included both priesthood and kingship (Genesis 14:18). Therefore, the coming Anointed One would be both king and priest, and possibly even a prophet, according to the implications of Isaiah 61:1.

Again, let me ask, *do you believe in Christ?* Now you know what I am asking: *Do you believe in Jesus as your King and as your Priest?* If you believe in Jesus as your king, He then represents God the Father to you. You have submitted to His authority and have called Him “Lord,” letting your mind and your will be shaped by all that He says in His word. Moreover, if you believe in Jesus as your priest, He then represents you to the Father. Your sins have demanded your death, but He died in your place and now offers His life to the Father as your substitute. He is your “Savior”. (Of course, if you deny that God had wrath toward sin, you definitely do not believe in Jesus as the *Christ*, for if there were no wrath to propitiate, there would be no need at all for a priest or a sacrifice!) Do you see? To believe in Christ is more than simply acknowledging that He existed. He lives and is anointed for these two roles. Do you believe in Him as your *king* and as your *priest*? If not, you do not believe in Christ.

Since the days of Melchizedek, no one has ever been said to be both king and priest. There have been many anointed ones, but none that assumed both offices. Jesus is unique. He alone unites the two offices in one person, as Zechariah prophesied (Zechariah 6:9-13). There is no other representative of God to man--no president, no pope,

no prophet Mohammed or Joseph Smith. Jesus alone is king. Moreover, there is no other representative of man to God--no priest, no saint, no mother of Jesus. Jesus alone is priest. In a word, Jesus alone is "the one mediator between God and men" (1 Timothy 2:5). All others are impostors. Again, do you believe that Jesus is *the Christ*? Do you believe in Christ? If you do, you have the promise that your sins are forgiven by His blood, and that you too, with every other believer, have been made "kings and priests unto God and His Father," to the glory of God (Revelation 1:6). In Him, and in Him alone, you truly are a "*Christ-ian*" (as it were), an anointed one (cf. 1 John 2:20, 27).

Submission Is Not Our Mission

May 26, 2010

"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7, NKJV).

Christianity is not a religion of submission. Though Christianity includes submission (as the verse above indicates), submission is not its main virtue nor its main objective. The apostles are clear: faith is the foundational virtue, and love is the main objective (e.g. Ephesians 1:15; 2 Peter 1:5-7; 1 John 3:23). Even in the verse above, which is a great promise for all those harassed by the devil (he can actually leave!), submission to God is only the first step, and resisting the devil involves being "steadfast in the faith" (1 Peter 5:9). Mere submission is not enough.

Grasping this fact about Christianity is vitally important for differentiating it from other religions of total commitment. Take the Muslims, for example. By its very nature, Islam means "submission," and a Muslim is one who has submitted. The very posture of Islamic prayer, kneeling prostrate with one's face to the ground, is so diametrically opposed to the standard posture of biblical prayer—arms outstretched and eyes raised to heaven, even while on one's knees. Why is there such a difference? In Islam, heaven is attained by sheer obedience to the will of Allah; in Christianity, heaven is attained by the sheer grace of our loving God through faith in His Son, who carried our guilt on the cross. The first is a religion of works; the latter is a religion of grace; and both works and grace cannot *simultaneously* be the basis for approaching God. As Paul, an ex-Pharisee, testified, "If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).

Similarly, the beauty of Christian faith and love stands in contrast to the dark realities of modern secular religions, whether fascism or communism, both of which demand total commitment, if not to a god, then at least to a cause. Under the Nazis, for example, some Germans had come to believe that submission to the State was so virtuous, they often lived lives of civility at home, while their desk job served Nazi butchery, as Erwin Lutzer pointed out, citing Ravi Zacharias. Similarly, in Romania after the war, one pastor was stunned to hear a Russian soldier say that he would believe in God if that is what his commanding officer told him to do. In both situations, something basic to humanness was drastically missing.

Listen, we were made in the image of God, different than animals. Among our pets, mere submission is enough; but submission is not enough among human beings. God made us like Himself, to think through situations and to feel their moral weight, not merely to take orders and thereby never grow in our humanness. In Christ, a man is renewed in the spirit of his mind, and thereby attains true humanness (Ephesians 4:23-24; cf. Colossians 3:10). Even the leading of the Holy Spirit is not contrary to our personality, but is its very enhancement in holiness. When the devil possesses a soul, the soul is displaced; but when the Holy Spirit fills a soul, the soul is set free.

Christian, this helps to explain a great deal of frustration when we face a difficult decision. "Wouldn't it be nice," we think to ourselves, "if Jesus just told me what to do!" Though at times being told what to do can also be frustrating as well, as in the military or at school or on the job, it is at least simple—we just do what we are told. Why does our Lord often remain silent? Is it not true, we need trials of faith in order to grow (James 1:2-4)? If He just told us what to do, how would we grow in wisdom (James 1:5)? Therefore, He lets us wrestle in prayer with His word until by His Spirit we get the answer, as a human being should.

The same is true for faith and love. When faced with a dilemma, how much do we *believe* that God will work for our good and for His glory? Having taken His cross to heart, are we ready to believe that God will, with Christ, "freely give us all things" (Romans 8:32)? Do we ask? Ready or not, Jesus is the same today as when He used to say, "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matthew 9:29). Therefore, we should not be surprised, if He should

ask us, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (Matthew 20:32)—or, with regard to love, if He should leave decisions about time and money in our hands, saying, “Let each one give as he purposes in his heart” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

“That’s so unnerving! Jesus, *just tell me what to do*. Do You want me to visit my neighbor today? Do You want me to believe You for a new job? Do You want me to give \$30 or \$50 to this cause? Please, just tell me.”

So often He refuses. Christianity is a religion of maturity, of true humanity—not a religion of mere submission.

Who Is a Goat?

April 24, 2013

Do the goats have big teeth, with long fangs and clawed paws?
No. The goats are not wolves. In fact, the goats are quite harmless.

Do the goats have secret agendas, with sly plans and smooth tongues?
No. The goats are not foxes. Again, the goats are quite harmless.

But if the goats are so harmless, why are they assigned their portion in the “eternal fire” under “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:41, 46)? Why are they punished so painfully and unendingly?

According to Jesus, it is not due to anything that the goats did.

Now certainly, we would understand the situation better, if the goats had *done* things worthy of death. Murder, adultery, theft—these are deeds worthy of hell, and certainly they are, as Jesus Himself tells us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21ff). In the judgment, Jesus will say to many, “Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23). There, it is simple. If we do lawless deeds, we are barred from the kingdom of heaven, and banished into outer darkness. Only those doing the will of the Father enter in (v. 23)—and thankfully, the empowering to do His will is a gift of grace, given to every true believer through the blood of the eternal covenant (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Again, let’s be clear. If you do bad things, you go to a bad place. But the goats did nothing. Wolves act violently. Foxes speak deceitfully. But the goats—they do nothing.

It is this sin of *omission* that will catch many by surprise someday.

Can you hear the goats talking?

“Oh, he never hurt anyone!”

“She would never hurt a flea!”

Goats—all of them. (Incidentally, true love often hurts, but it never wrongs.)

Can you hear Jesus talking?

“Then He will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

“Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’

“Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41-46).

The will of God must be *done*, but it is what the goats leave undone that will someday undo them.

Confession of Sin Is Not a Payment for Sin

January 19, 2007

“All I need to do is confess my sin and ask for forgiveness,” was the reply. The class listened. Normally algebra class dealt with xyz and coordinate planes, but this day the students were particularly vulgar, to the point that the teacher had to ask them whether they were really going to Heaven or not. How did they know? It was a *Christian* school. And the answer gave no comfort.

Confession is cheap. Sins demand payment. “What can I do to make it up to you?” we ask. We know this by innate conscience, yet somehow we *imagine* that God operates on a different principle—the “forgiveness” principle of confess, ask, and receive. But is this really so? Even if confession were the magic number for forgiveness, do we know *all* our sins? If not, can we then *confess* all our sins? What about those “secret” sins that escape our view (Psalm 19:12)? According to the Bible, these also demand payment. All sin demands payment.

Payment poses a problem—a *big* problem. If the sin were simply stealing, the Jews were taught that on a human level, the thief repaid in full and added a fifth for damages. Fair enough. But that wasn’t all. A goat had to be violently killed and burned as guilt offering to God. The Bible is clear: The wages of sin is death. Someone has to die, for payment can only be made with a life, and the life is in the blood. Blood must be shed. Therefore, for over one thousand years before Jesus came, the Jews were taught graphically, with sights and smells and bleating victims, that sin demands the payment of a life—either the guilty man or a substitute.

At first, this seems like a relief: An animal for my neck. But this was not the end of the story. If the sin committed were more serious than stealing, then a more valuable life had to be taken. Similarly, if the sin were committed by more than one person, then a more valuable life had to be taken. Consequently, if the sin were murder, no animal was valuable enough. The murderer himself had to be executed. Blood, blood, blood can only pay for sin, sin, sin. This entire system of animal sacrifices taught this lesson, but in actuality removed no eternal guilt before God. Why? *An animal life is not as valuable as a human life*. Therefore, an animal is truly no substitute before God; and, unless a true substitute can be found, the sinner must pay for his sin in eternal death, called Hell.

So where could a true substitute be found? If I tried to die in your place, my application would be revoked, for I have my own sin to pay for. Even if we found a perfect man, one perfect man could only be the substitute for one sinner. Since more sins demanded a more valuable life, and also since more sinners demanded a more valuable life, where was a life to found that so valuable as to be the substitute for the entire world?

Walking along the Jordan River one day, Jesus heard the baptizer call out, “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). A perfect Man, yes. But even more, Jesus was God in the flesh. His divine life is so valuable, His *one* death on the Cross paid for all the sins of those who believe in Him, whether they ever become aware of these individual sins and confess them, or not.

How do *you* handle the innate urge to make up for your sins? Do you pay that debt with a day of guilty feelings, an extra effort at doing better next time, or more diligent prayers? Don’t be fooled. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin” (Hebrews 9:22). Look! Open your eyes! Only the blood of Jesus can make up for your sins and pay the debt you owe to God. Look to Him and live!

Source: Leviticus 4-6; Hebrews 9-10

Is Confession of Sin Enough to God to Heaven?

September 11, 2010

Text: Hosea 14, “Return to the Lord with Repentance and Faith”

Based on a sermon preached on August 26, 2007 at Open Door Bible Church, Hudson, Michigan

Two disturbing opinions about the way of salvation are very common:

1. When I commit a sin, I ask God to forgive me; therefore, I will go to Heaven.
2. When I commit a sin, I confess it; therefore, I will go to Heaven.

Both of these views contain an element of truth, but if we merely ask or confess, we are still lost. Why?

1. We never know all the sins that we commit, so how can we confess them? (Psalm 19:12; Leviticus 4:13).
2. The Bible says clearly that he who confesses and forsakes his sin will find pity (Proverbs 28:13).
3. Really, we return to the Lord by means of repentance and faith (e.g. Isaiah 55:7).

If I repent and believe on the inside, I will—and must—ask on the outside (John 4:10; Romans 10:10); but not everyone who asks on the outside has repented or believed on the inside. The cart is often in front of the horse!

The results of merely asking are very dangerous, since merely asking will not result in true change. The one merely asking will either think he is a Christian while repeatedly sinning the same sin—as I did for eight years, sinning and feeling bad (until my conscience was satisfied) and then sinning again—or else he will give up on the whole charade and openly return to his mud pit (2 Peter 2:20-22). Either way, the result is the same: eternal destruction (cf. Matthew 7:21-23).

Baptist pastor Andrew Fuller gave these evidences of unrepented sin (given in his *Collected Works*, 3:624-25):

1. If I still persist in sin, I have not repented, because repentance involves forsaking my sin. According to 2 Corinthians 7:10, godly sorrow leads to repentance without regret.
2. If I refrain out of mere prudence, I have not repented, for I am acting in selfishness.
3. If I lack daily communion with God, which involves regular confession of sin, I also have not repented. We sin each day; therefore, those who do not regularly confess their sins must not notice them. Over time, these sins accumulate, until only the large, unusual sins get detected and confessed. According to Scripture, a real believer habitually confesses his sins (1 John 1:9).
4. If I with pleasure remember or retell my past sins, I recommit them and have not truly repented. Those who have genuinely repented are ashamed of their past sins (Romans 6:21).

Based on Psalm 32, Fuller warned, “There is such a thing as the conscience being habitually burdened with guilt, and the spirit depressed with long-continued dejection and yet the soul not be brought to a thorough contrition” (3:625). Remember, the evidence of salvation is not conviction of sin, but repentance (e.g. Zaccheus, Luke 19:1-10)! Again, Fuller warned that through remorse and depression “the guilt of our consciences may wear away by degrees, instead of being washed away by an application to the blood of Christ” (ibid.).

To demonstrate how extremely deceptive this behavior is, consider Judas Iscariot (Matthew 27:3-5). Judas may not have intended harm. Perhaps he thought that Jesus would be found innocent and released; but when Jesus was condemned, Judas was “remorseful”—he felt terrible about his action. Judas then confessed his sin openly to his peers. He also returned the gain he had received through his wicked deed. Then, in deep remorse and self-hatred, he hanged himself! Listen, this man’s behavior was not a sham. He really felt bad for his sin and confessed it in sincerity, yet he did not go to Heaven! Judas is truly the “son of perdition” (John 17:12). If Judas could be that close to Jesus for that long and then act so sincerely and openly and radically in consequence of his sin, what prevents such a reality from occurring right here in our midst?

How should we then deal with our sin, if mere confession or asking for forgiveness does not avail? Puritan pastor and theologian John Owen once noted that those burdened with guilt often seek relief in self-appointed ways of punishment. They either devise an extraordinary sacrifice, or they multiply ordinary duties to an extreme. One example of this relief is Roman Catholic penance, which consists of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Judas exhibited all three of these Catholic conditions of forgiveness and it did him no good. All such self-appointed

punishments do no good, for God is not looking for such costly offerings (Micah 6:6-7). Moreover, it is arrogant and dishonoring to God, for the dying patient is acting as if he were the doctor.

So what is the Lord's very own prescription for returning to Him for healing and life?

I. Return to the Lord (Hosea 14:1). Many wicked men have confessed their sins, but not to God. For example, Pharaoh confessed to Moses (Exodus 10:16); Saul confessed to David (1 Samuel 26:21); and Judas, to the priest and elders (Matthew 27:4); but who will confess their sins to God? We must realize that sin is first and primarily an affront against God, not man; yet we feel much more need to confess when our sins are found out by men, than if done in secret. Listen, when David committed adultery and then murdered to cover it up, he still confessed that against God "only" he had sinned (Ps 51:4). Deal with God!

II. Bring with you words (Hosea 14:2). This astounds me: "words"! Words are the cheapest thing on earth. Please note: Again, God is not looking for heroic acts or costly sacrifices, but for you. To bring words obviously implies not empty words, but sincere words. He wants you. I must confess, in the past I have had trouble with rote sinner's prayers as if it were works-salvation, but here is something altogether amazing: God gives us His very own sinner's prayer! What God Himself prescribes as a "sinner's prayer" tells us a lot about His view of repentance:

1. Repentance is complete, that is, it does not leave any area of my life out of view ("all," Hosea 14:2). If we really repent, we want to be holy in "all" our behavior (1 Peter 1:15).

2. Repentance is final ("anymore," Hosea 14:3). Assyria and Egypt (the source of horses) were the saviors Israel had often looked to. Now, in repentance they say that they are done with such idols. Are you? An idol is anything or anyone, real or unreal, that you depend upon for living. Only God is the source of life and we must look to Him alone for life. In our delusion, we often think that we can serve both God and an idol. Even if we are convinced that the idol is bad, we often do not burn our bridges to it; rather, we keep the idol in a closet out of view, . . . and inevitably return to it later. No! If we will return to the Lord in real repentance, it must be complete and final!

3. Repentance also possesses faith in God's mercy (Hosea 14:3). The reason they repented resulted from a view of God's fatherly, adoptive mercy. Law and judgment will not produce real repentance, but God's kindness does (Romans 2:4). Until you see the mercy of the Lord in the face of Christ, you will never repent.

Consider then the merciful kindness of the Gospel in this chapter:

1. God promises that He will heal you (Hosea 14:4). He will heal not just your sins, but the very "turnings" themselves that result in the acts of sin (v. 4). But you say, "I do not deserve this grace. What must I do to earn it?" No! He is not looking for heroic deeds to merit His grace, for He will love you "freely" (v. 4). On what basis? His anger is turned away (v. 4)—and today we know the reason why: the Cross. When Jesus died in our place, He turned God's anger away from us (Romans 3:21-26). In the Cross, God's justice is satisfied—every sin is fully punished with death, and we are freed! So look to the Cross. See the mercy of God. Know this love and believe it (1 John 4:9-10, 16).

2. God promises that He will give you life, as the dew refreshes the earth (Hosea 14:5). So many mistakenly think of revival as a cataclysmic event—a bang! In reality, revival comes secretly and incrementally and intimately over time, as the dew. Yes, Pentecost was real, but Pentecost was for power to serve God (cf. Acts 1:8). Those early disciples were just as close to God before Pentecost as they were afterward. Real spiritual growth is the result of the dew of the Spirit, who slowly works within us, causing us to become stable, beautiful, and fragrant like Lebanon (Hosea 14:5, 6, 7).

How long then will you hesitate between two opinions? If God is God, serve Him, and be done with idols! (Hosea 14:8; cf. 1 Kings 18:21). Your fruit will come from Him (Hosea 14:8). Or is there anything wrong in the ways of God? Tell me, you who are wise: Has He demanded too much? Has He not demonstrated His mercy enough, or not waited long enough? No. The "ways of the LORD" are upright; the righteous will walk in them, but rebels will stumble (Hosea 14:9). This final verse tells us that this message was not solely for them then, but also for us now. We must return and live.

Forearmed with One Verse

May 26, 2010

Martin Luther asserted to the effect that one man armed with one verse of Scripture, rightly interpreted, is stronger than all human authority put together. *Will you be that one man?* In this area, as in all other areas, the “weakness” of God is stronger than the strength of man (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25). “Let God be true, but every man a liar,” cries one apostle; and “the witness of God is greater,” cries another (Romans 3:4; 1 John 5:9). He who sees all things speaks the truth on any one thing; therefore, let me give you one verse to arm you for a flight to heaven.

“The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Note the size of this verse--God above and death beneath, sin behind and eternity before, stretching beyond your mental vision. *What will the outcome be for you?* Now note the contrasts--wages and gift, death and life, sin and God. Such size, such significance, packed in such a small verse! *What does it mean?*

First, if you are relying on what you *deserve* to go to heaven, you are doomed. Our wages are what we earn, what we deserve. Anyone who demands that God give him what he deserves (in the ultimate sense) should wince at the blow coming his way. Our sin has earned us death. Amazingly, how few connect the dots between the universal fact of death and the universal fact of sin! An epidemic is in the land--everyone is dying--and yet who is searching for the universal cause? Surely the cause must be as universal as the effect. Since all men are sinners, all men deserve to die, as sentenced by God the Judge. Interestingly, death is not ultimately the result of any physical cause, no matter what our opinion may be on the national health care debate; death is ultimately the result of a moral cause--sin. Death is the judicial punishment that we have earned for disobeying our Maker.

Therefore, if you hope to enter heaven, you need to embark on a journey to receive a gift. Receiving eternal life as a pure gift is not natural to our thinking. Often I ask people, “If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ what would you say?” This question is not to make people feel bad, as if it were a quiz, but rather to help them start thinking on what really matters in the long run. Often the answer begins with a personal assertion, such as “I did this” or “I didn’t do that” or “I tried to do this” or even “I asked forgiveness for that,” showing that the person is probably trusting in himself to earn enough points (or to remove enough demerits) to get into heaven as a wage. Grace does not work that way (Romans 4:4-5). Grace demands that the Giver be free to give or not to give. Therefore, since eternal life is a gift of grace, you must seek out the Giver to receive it. And the Giver is a Person. This requires relationship.

To me, this one observation is the most delectable detail about this little verse. The gift of eternal life is “in” a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ! Mind you, not merely an historical person, like George Washington, but an historical-and-now-living Person, who by virtue of both His resurrection from the dead and His divine nature can hear you and answer you right now. This one fact is marvelous in itself. Many speak of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. *Do you have one?* When is the last time you pondered the significance of Jesus as Man seated at the right hand of God? Do you take His book in your hand and ask Him to teach you, as He used to teach men and women at His feet in Israel? Will you not begin to seek Him out, to get to know Him as your Lord, to welcome Him into your life as your Savior? Eternal life is “in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Does a Christian Need to Ask God for Forgiveness After Sinning? (Part One)

February 3, 2010

“In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14).

Here is the rub. Suppose you are a Christian. You sin, and then repent. Should you ask God to forgive you? According to the Scriptures, the forgiveness of sins is something you already have through the blood of Christ. If you have it, should you ask for it? Do you *need* to ask for it? What does the Bible say?

Before answering, let me first note that our true faith is shown in our day-to-day inner conversation. One illuminating question for discovering a person’s true view of the Gospel is to ask, “What do you do after you sin?” In posing the question like that, all of a sudden we are out of the classroom and into the streets of real life, where

Jesus Himself talked with real people about real needs. So...what *do* you do when you sin? If you are a Christian, what *should* you do?

Let me give you four pictures from the New Testament to help explain the answer. (In this installment, we will only be able to cover the first picture.) May God give me the grace to explain it clearly.

First, there is the courtroom imagery of the apostle Paul. According to this official representative of Christ, God is the Judge, and we have been sentenced for sin. Only two options are before us: He can either condemn us or He can justify us. If He condemns us, we suffer the wages of sin, which is death. If He justifies us, we enjoy the rewards of righteousness, which is life. Which will it be?

In our own selves, the matter has already been settled. He must condemn us, and in fact has already condemned us in our father Adam, for we all have sinned (Romans 5:12-21). That is why we all die. It matters not how good we appear in the eyes of others; before God, we have no boast (Romans 4:2). Our only hope is found in a Substitute dying in our place. Since Jesus died in the place of sinners, God can now “justify the ungodly” who believe in His Son (Romans 4:5). Literally, God judicially declares us righteous the moment we truly believe in Christ. At that moment, He reckons Christ’s death on the cross as our death, and He reckons His righteous standing before the Law as our standing (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the only way of salvation. Among believers, Paul wrote, “There is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22-24). In other words, we are “justified by His blood” (Romans 5:9; cf. Isaiah 53:11).

As a result, the believing sinner (a.k.a. “Christian”) is justified forever, and shall never be condemned (Romans 8:1; cf. John 5:24). He has peace with God (Romans 5:1), and will certainly be glorified someday (Romans 8:30).

In my opinion, justification may be the missing truth in the forgiveness question. Forgiveness pertains to sins, but justification pertains to sin. Forgiveness is piecemeal, but justification is permanent. Forgiveness happens again and again, but justification happens once in life, at the moment our heart believes in Christ Jesus as Priest and King (Romans 10:10). Thereafter, we have a permanent status with God--the label “righteous” in Christ--a status that does not improve when we have an obedient day as a Christian, nor diminish if we have a disobedient day.

Granted, because we are reckoned righteous *now*, in this life, we are rewarded in Christ with the life-giving Spirit, by whom we are killing off sin and making overall progress in holiness (Romans 8:13-14). Yes, we still sin, and will do so until we die; but being led by the Spirit, we do see progress, for we truly are alive in Christ (Romans 7:14 - 8:4).

My main point is: If you are a genuine Christian, your status before God is no longer dependent upon your performance, but on your union with Christ. Justification is through faith, because it depends not on your effort, but on what Somebody Else did for you. Therefore, justification is not dependent on whether you remember to ask forgiveness for the sins you commit daily. Heaven is no longer hanging in the balance.

So...should you ask for forgiveness? Lord willing, next time, we will consider 1 John 1:9. Until then, grace to you!

Does a Christian Need to Ask God for Forgiveness After Sinning? (Part Two)

February 11, 2010

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

For many Christians, this verse is an invitation verse, inviting sinners to confess their sins in order to receive the forgiveness of sins. Cut and dried.

Interestingly, this verse is taken out of context. In its original habitat, this verse is the second of three positive marks that identify a true believer. He is one who confesses his sins. As such a one, he is also one who continually receives the forgiveness of sins. Nowhere in the context does John affirm that confession is the direct item-per-item

cause of forgiveness. John instead gives an inference.

An “if-then” statement can work in two main ways, either in a cause-and-effect relationship (“if this happens, then this will happen”) or in an inferential relationship (“if this is true, then this also is true”). For the statement, “If I stay out in the rain without my coat,” the follow-up statement “then I will catch cold” would be cause-and-effect, while the statement “then I am a fool” would be inferential. In its context, 1 John 1:9 is an inferential “if-then” statement.

For proof, consider the negative marks, which are all inferential “if-then” statements:

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth” (1:6).

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1:8).

“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1:10).

Moreover, the first and second positive marks are also inferential “if-then” statements:

“If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1:7).

“If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins” (2:1-2).

Regarding the first test, does walking in the light *cause* fellowship or cleansing? In the third test, does random sinning *cause* Jesus to be an Advocate? Granted, there is an fitting relationship between the “if” and the “then” statements, but in both tests John affirms that the “then” statements about fellowship and advocacy are items that true Christians already *have*. Similarly, in the second test, the forgiveness and cleansing of sins is something true Christians already have, given the faithfulness and righteousness of God (based on the Cross). These tests are inferential “if-then” statements.

In addition to the context, it should also be noted that the verse itself reads different in the original Greek than it appears in English. The verb “confess” is present tense in the Greek, indicating a habitual action, rather than a one-time occurrence. In other words, a true Christian is someone who confesses his sin regularly--to God, of course; and to others as appropriate, which is the point of this passage (cf. Jas. 5:16). Confession is a mark of a Christian, as is an open lifestyle (1:7, to “walk in the light”). In contrast, denying either the action or the guilt of the action is a mark of hypocrisy (1:8, 10).

Therefore, based on 1 John 1:9, does a Christian need to ask God for forgiveness after sinning?

If the verse were a cause-and-effect “if-then” statement, the answer would certainly be “Yes”. Many seem to live under such an impression, thinking that salvation may be in jeopardy if a sin is forgotten and not confessed. This leads to a works-salvation that is based on the faithfulness of man more than the faithfulness of God. Truthfully, it is doubtful whether ever sin can even be known, let alone remembered and confessed. “Who can understand his errors?” asked the Psalmist. No one. If salvation depended on a person confessing every sin, none would enter heaven. And even for those sins that are known, 1 John 1:9 only states that it is the habit of the true Christian to agree with God about such matters: “Yes, Lord, I have sinned and have incurred guilt.” As for God, He faithfully and righteously continues to forgive the true Christian and to cleanse him from “all unrighteousness,” whether known or unknown. After all, He alone can cleanse from *all unrighteousness*, since He is “greater than our heart and knows all things” (1 John 3:20). Is your hope in His ability to cleanse, or in your ability to confess? If the latter, it is time to rely solely on the Advocate alone, Jesus Christ, not only for *initial* salvation, but also for *enduring* salvation. Then, with John Newton, confess two things: “That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” Hallelujah!

Does a Christian Need to Ask God for Forgiveness After Sinning? (Part Three)

April 10, 2010

“Jesus saith to him, ‘He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all’” (John 13:10).

In typical fashion, John presents us with a bold statement followed by an apparent contradiction, just as he did earlier in saying, “No man receives his testimony,” and in adding, “He that has received his testimony...” (John

3:32-33). Here, in one sentence, we have Jesus telling Peter that his feet need washing, though he is clean *every whit*. How can that be? What is Jesus saying to Peter? To us?

To understand the significance of this foot-washing scene for the confession question, we need to back up a bit and catch the literary context. John frames the scene with repeated reminders that Jesus is going to the Father via the Cross. His hour has come. With that in mind, we should see this foot-washing as a picture of soul-washing. Jesus serves here in the Upper Room as He will soon serve later on the Outer Hill--voluntarily bearing our guilt as the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). It is a beautiful picture and one that the disciples did not yet understand (John 13:7).

In coming to Peter, Jesus is at first rejected as the Servant:
“*Lord, do You wash my feet?...You shall never wash my feet*” (John 13:6, 8).

In response, Jesus tells Peter:
“If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (John 13:8).

Like Newton’s third law, Peter then reacts with the opposite extreme:
“Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head” (John 13:9).

Let us pause right here, Christian, to catch the analogy. The dirt on our feet represents the daily sin that every Christian accumulates in walking through life. The washing of our feet represents the blood of Jesus consistently cleansing us from all sin and from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7, 9). In Jesus’ day, the feet were washed before the meal was served; therefore, this consistent spiritual cleansing is a condition of daily fellowship with Jesus at the table--of close interaction with Him as friend-to-Friend (cf. Revelation 3:20).

In contrast to having our feet washed, having our body washed represents a change of status. (We call this change “salvation”.) Before God, each person is either clean or unclean. In Jewish law, the ritually unclean were kept outside the camp, as symbolized by the lepers who cried out, “Unclean, unclean!” In spiritual terms, the unclean are unjustified sinners, who are cast into the outer darkness of hell (cf. Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:14-15). To enter heaven, we all must first be cleansed. We must be “washed,...sanctified,...[and] justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). Symbolically, this permanent change of status is represented by baptism—and act administered once for a believer, and never repeated (cf. Hebrews 10:22). We are clean *forever*.

Paradoxically, Jesus was telling Peter that a clean person can have dirty feet (John 13:10; cf. 15:3). This statement applies to all of us Christians. One mark of a Christian is that we still sin and still need the continual Priesthood of Christ (1 John 1:10 - 2:2). Like Peter, we too are clean in status before God; but due to daily sin, we have dirty feet. Therefore, in order to have a good meal with Jesus--to fellowship closely and as friend-to-Friend--we need to have our feet washed regularly, to have the blood of our Priest cleanse us from all sin and from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7, 9). As seen in our last entry, our confession does not *cause* this priestly action in a one-to-one fashion, but regular confession is complementary to continual cleansing. We regularly confess, and He continually cleanses. Blessed salvation! Blessed Savior! God be praised!

Does a Christian Need to Ask God for Forgiveness After Sinning? (Part Four)

March 13, 2010

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Should a Christian ask forgiveness for his sins? Yes. Must he do so in order to be forgiven? Not necessarily.

According to Jesus, we should regularly ask forgiveness for our sins--perhaps just as regular as asking for daily bread. In doing so, the request is general. It does not itemize sins in order for them to be forgiven. Sure, if a sin is known, we should confess it, just as we make mention of specific needs beyond our daily bread; but please note, it is not wrong to pray a “blanket prayer” for forgiveness. Conversely, it is not necessary to itemize sins for forgiveness. According to the word of God, there is sin within us that remains unknown to us (Psalm 40:12; 139:23-24; cf. Jeremiah 17:9). God alone knows the heart. “Who can understand his errors?” asks the psalmist rhetorically; therefore, the follow-up request is general: “Cleanse me from secret faults” (Psalm 19:12).

In asking forgiveness, we Christians should keep in mind two things. First, we ask on the basis of a permanent relationship with God as our Father. Just as in Christ, our status as “righteous” and as “clean” does not dissipate when our daily sin-count fluctuates, so also God ever remains our Father in Christ, and we address Him as such in order to receive the forgiveness of sins.

Second, the forgiveness of sins is something that Jesus purchased in bulk for us on the Cross. In Him, “we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14). Therefore, when we ask for forgiveness, we are asking for a benefit to be applied that Christ already purchased on our behalf. Since we already *have* it, we are sure to receive it every time we ask--and even when we fail to ask.

Interestingly, this constant application of the blood of Christ to our souls falls under the doctrine of Christ’s intercession for us in heaven. As our ever-living Priest, He is able to save us “to the uttermost” because He ever lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). According to this Scripture, our full salvation in the future depends upon this constant intercession in the present. Though we have been justified by Christ’s death, we should not forget that “we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:9-10).

Justification occurred at one moment in time; but our sinning has continued beyond that point. How is it that we are not condemned for this subsequent behavior? According to Paul, it is based upon the risen Christ’s intercession for us at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34). God justified us (verse 33); therefore, on that basis, Christ continues to intercede for us. In John’s terminology, Christ Jesus is our Advocate, whose blood continues to cleanse us (present tense) from “all sin” (1 John 1:7; 2:1-2). In a sense, we are clean not only due to our initial cleansing (justification), but also due to continual cleansing, despite our daily contact with filth.

Therefore, a Christian should readily ask the Father for forgiveness, fully expecting to receive it due to the intercession of Christ in heaven. Having such a High Priest, we should ask “boldly,” for due to Him the throne of God has become a “throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:14-16). True, we should not abuse this forgiveness--and no true Christian will persistently, due to regeneration (1 John 3:9; cf. 2:1a)--but neither should we minimize its importance, thinking that uncertainty regarding forgiveness will keep people in check. Quite the opposite. The Bible says that *grace* trains us to “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:12). It is those who have a certain hope of heaven that purify themselves, even as He is pure (1 John 3:3). And since they are still purifying themselves, there must yet be some remnant of filth needing forgiveness. Praise God for forgiveness! We can *ask*--and we *should* ask--and we shall *receive*, through the intercession of Jesus Christ, our Advocate, our High Priest. To Him be the glory! And through Him, to God the Father! Amen.

’Tis the Season?

December 2008

Of all the ironies of life, ones that concern money may near the top of the list. For example, while listening to the radio or reading a newspaper, it is fully acceptable to find daily shows or sections devoted solely to financial matters, yet to hear one sermon on money in the church is often deemed an immediate turn-off. Yet, when the red-letter verses of the Bible are tallied up—that is, the verses that Jesus directly spoke—about *fifteen percent* of them concern money and possessions. More than heaven or hell, faith or prayer, the topic of finances appears most often on the lips of Jesus—about one out of every seven words. Imagine hearing one out of every seven sermons on money!

Why did Jesus spend so much time talking about money and we desire to hear so little of it in church? For one, Jesus certainly did not talk about money because He was seeking it for Himself. Jesus needed no money in an absolute sense, nor did He covet what belonged to another. On one occasion, He fasted forty days without food. On another occasion, in order to avoid unnecessary offence, He paid a tax that He did not owe by instructing Peter to find the coin in a fish! The rub, of course, is that Jesus is not standing in the pulpit next Sunday, and that some leaders of today too often (it should be admitted with sadness) let their personal finances and not love of others drive their presentations on money. This was true of false teachers in the Bible’s day (e.g. Luke 16:14; 2 Peter 2:1-3) and it is still true today. The serpent in the weeds is known by his greed. That said, it still does not explain why Jesus focused so much on money and why we are so averse to hearing about it.

According to author Randy Alcorn, whose book *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* supplied some of the facts for this newsletter, Jesus focused on money matters because it was a quick index of the heart. When greedy Zacchaeus announced that he would give half his possessions to the poor and repay all whom he had cheated fourfold, Jesus declared him a saved man (Luke 19:1-10). Earlier, when a rich, young ruler asked how to get to heaven, claiming next that he had kept God's commandments, Jesus in love touched on one big hang-up—greed—by asking him to sell all his possessions and give to the poor, and then to follow Him. The man went away grieved, for he owned much and would not part with it (Luke 18:18-23; Mark 10:17-22). These two stories alone should move our hearts, for we all know what it is like to hold on tight to what we have, and also to be amazed by those who can give so freely. Jesus was right. Our checkbook tells us more than our bank account. It tells us about our heart, either where it is now or where it will be, for as Jesus Himself said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34, NKJV).

This Christmas season, as you hear the news about the retail sales or ponder the drop in gas prices or react to CEO scandals and major corporate bailouts, do not miss how much our culture and even our very lives revolve around money. Why then should you be ignorant on what the Bible says about such an important topic? I invite you to join us for a series of sermons on money, this vital sign of the heart. It may seem ironic to talk about money at Christmas time, but everyone else is, and Jesus Himself talked on money often. Why shouldn't His church?

The Cup of Communion, and the Intercession of Jesus Christ

July 5, 2010

"But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).

Do you remember how galling it was to see your brother finish picking his row of beans, only to drink lemonade under the shade as you continued to sweat out your row? Granted, he had finished his row, and deserved to relax. Moreover, your thoughts were not free of selfishness, but rather envied his cool conditions. Sin reigned on both sides, but still...*is there not something missing on the part of your brother?*

According to the Scriptures, "Wine...maketh glad the heart of man" (Psalm 104:15). The cup that Jesus offered is a cup of celebration, an occasion to rejoice. Given the fact that it represents the blood of Christ, we might be tempted to grieve, in light of His violent death; however, Jesus described the cup as "my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Instead of emphasizing the death in itself, Jesus emphasized its significance for us--the true, spiritual liberation of our souls from our sins. In that light, He hands us the cup again and again in communion, in effect saying, "Rejoice! Your sins are gone! In love, I have done this for you."

In contrast to our celebration, Jesus denies Himself the privilege of celebration until we are all with Him in His Father's kingdom: "I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). How amazing! If anyone had the right to sit down and enjoy the fruits of His labor, it was Jesus. Having done all that the Father commanded Him to do, His row of beans was picked; and sitting at the right hand of the Father, He has every right to enjoy the fullness of joy in His Father's presence (cf. Psalm 16:11). He wants to. He will. But for now, He foregoes, and chooses rather to bear our sicknesses and carry our pains in intercessory prayer, as He continues to "be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15).

Do you see the contrast? Do you see the love? Instead of basking in His glory, Jesus is laboring with us in prayer, and fighting our battles with us as if He were still here on earth. Foregoing the joyful cup, He continues to go out again and again into the fields of life to bring us the cup of joy in the remembrance of His cross. While not allowing Himself the joy, He desires and even commands us to take the joy again and again, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25). We need the refreshment, and He is glad to give it.

It is just as the hymn writer testified, "For me He died, for me He lives; and everlasting life and light He freely gives." Both! Neither in His death, nor now in His life, is He living for Himself. As He died for us, so now He

lives for us, to make intercession for us, until the Day when we all join Him for the celebration in the Kingdom. Then He will drink the cup *new* with us--and oh, what a joyful taste that will be for Him. All glory to Jesus, and to the Father in Him! Amen.

At the Right Hand of God

October 2, 2009

“You will show me the path of life;
in Your presence is fullness of joy;
at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

—Psalm 16:11

This verse does not speak of believers in general going to heaven--at least, not directly. Yes, the path of life is truly the path to Life, with a capital L. Yes, the fullness of joy and the pleasures forevermore refer to the joys of heaven that are infinite in size (“fullness”) and infinite in time (“forevermore”). And yes, it is the presence of God that is the source of this infinite joy and pleasure. The real zinger is the reference to God’s right hand. According to Jesus, to sit at the right hand of a king is a prerogative reserved for One (Matthew 20:23). In other words, this joyful verse refers to the experience of One.

In the context of Psalm 16:11, that One is the “Holy One,” whom God raised from the dead before His flesh saw corruption (Psalm 16:10). According to Deuteronomy 33:8, this title “Holy One” refers to a priest, someone who has special access to God in His holy temple. Later in the Psalms, we see that this special One is both a King and a Priest, who sits at the right hand of God, and who will someday dominate all His enemies, including death (Psalm 110:1, 4; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Combined, these prophetic psalms refer to Jesus Christ, the Lord, who rose from the dead to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 12:2).

In Him, and in Him alone, individual believers will someday sit at the right hand of God (Revelation 3:21). The right hand is the prerogative of Jesus alone; but God be praised, every believer in Christ is united to Him forever! In fact, if we are true believers in Christ, we are so united to Him, and our future is so certain, that even now God “has raised us up together [with Christ], and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). No wonder Paul tells us, “If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1)! Even more, we should set our affections there, as Christ Himself set His affections in God (Colossians 3:2; Psalm 16:2). That is our future. Christ is our future. He is our feast and maintains our portion (Psalm 16:5).

Even more, for believers who have died, the right hand of God is both their future and their *present* condition, for as Paul says, “to be absent from the body” means “to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). And where is the Lord? At the right hand of His Father--with *fullness* of joy, and pleasures *forevermore*. No wonder Paul said that death is *gain*, that “to depart, and to be with Christ . . . is far better” (Philippians 1:21, 23)! To depart and be with Christ is to join Him at the right hand of God, a place that He alone deserves as the Holy One, but also a place to which He graciously invites us as our Savior. To Him and to His Father be the glory forever!

Where Does the Believing Soul Go after Death?

November 19, 2009

Yesterday, I had two people ask me independently about the state of believing souls after death. This is not the first time this topic has been brought up, and I suspect it will not be the last. Interestingly, it is a topic that the apostle Paul himself addressed, and on which he did not want believers to remain ignorant (1 Thessalonians 4:13). It is a vital Gospel topic--worthy of our attention, and full of strong comfort. Therefore, may the Lord add grace to our believing hearts as we consider together the question of Christians who have died.

It seems that many have perhaps been fooled by the New Testament description of the believing dead as those who have “fallen asleep” (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:18, 20). To some, it appears that the believing soul rests here on earth in peace, having fallen into a deep sleep until the Day of Resurrection. For one cultish group I know in our area, this

soul-sleep constitutes a major doctrinal point in their party platform. To be fair, if the term “asleep” was all the data we possessed, so-called soul-sleep would seem justified. Thankfully, our comforting God has given us more information on our departed brothers, and I am happy to report that they fare much better than we do. I invite you to listen with me to the revealed data from our heavenly Father.

First, the Lord teaches us to regard our soul as the core of our being, and to view our body as our dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). Currently, we live in a tent, for it must soon be dissolved at death. Someday, we will dwell in a “house which is from heaven,” a resurrected body that will last for eternity. Even though there is some debate whether the believing soul between death and the resurrection has a temporary body or is temporarily “unclothed” (as Paul terms it), it makes no difference for our discussion here, for the main point is that the *real you* is the soul inside your body. Where your soul goes, you go. That is the point. (In this article, I take “soul” and “spirit” as theologically interchanging terms.)

Second, building on that observation, the Lord contrasts being “absent from the body” with being “present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6, 8). Please note: Upon death, the believer is *absent from the body*. He is not here. He is no longer in his tent, but has departed the scene (cf. Genesis 35:18). Incidentally, in describing death, traditional Christian liturgies use the term “departed”, in keeping with God’s revelation, rather than “deceased” or having “passed away”, both of which could imply that the person no longer exists. Words matter, especially in the area of comfort. Therefore, let us mimic the comforting words of our comforting Father.

Third, if someone should object that Paul did not explicitly write that being absent from the body automatically means that a soul is present with the Lord (even though this inference is definitely implied and is echoed in the contrast of 2 Corinthians 5:9), another passage puts the issue beyond doubt. In writing to the Philippians, the apostle Paul was hard-pressed to choose whether he should live or die (Philippians 1:19ff). To many of us, that is amazing. Given a choice between living or dying, most of us would easily choose living. In choosing such, we exhibit our great need to grow in faith, for we would be choosing the least desirable option. Paul clearly believed that “to die is gain” (1:21). As he explained, he had “a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (1:23). Again, death is a departure. The believing soul does not remain here. Moreover, death is a departure to “be with Christ”, something that is not just “better” than remaining here, but “far better”. Therefore, any view of the afterlife that is not “gain” or “far better” is not biblical. To think that in death, a believer simply sleeps the years away, instead of enjoying relationship and worship in the presence of Jesus, is to deny him not only the bliss of heaven, but even the lesser enjoyments of earth--something that is definitely not a “gain” or “far better”.

Fourth, in answering the question directly about the souls “which are asleep,” the apostle Paul clearly located them in heaven. He wrote: “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (1 Thessalonians 4:15). How can God bring those souls to earth *with Jesus* at His coming, unless those souls have already been enjoying the presence of Jesus in heaven?

Fifth, the previous verse also shows us that Jesus is the exemplar on this journey of the afterlife. Whatever happened to His soul after death is what happens to the believer’s soul after death. *Therefore, what happened to Jesus at death?* When He was about to die, Jesus prayed, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). His human spirit--so mysteriously united to His divine person in the hypostatic union of the Incarnation--was committed to the loving hands of His Father, just as His body was about to be taken down by the loving hands of men. Specifically, where was Jesus after death? At the very least, we know He went to Paradise that same day, as He had earlier told the thief (Luke 23:43). There is also indication that before His resurrection, Jesus may have both proclaimed His victory to disobedient angelic spirits, and also brought Old Testament saints to heaven (1 Peter 3:19; Ephesians 4:8-10)--details that are admittedly difficult, but thankfully for our discussion here, not absolutely essential to be understood fully. (Please note: Jesus did not go to hell to suffer for our sins, as corrupt additions to the Apostle’s Creed seem to imply, for His words “It is finished” signaled the accomplishment of the Father’s work for Him to suffer before glorification; cf. John 17:4-5; 19:30). At any rate, the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus being active and conscious after His death, rather than sleeping in the tomb. So also, we see in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and in the Revelation of Jesus to John, souls “asleep” in Jesus are actually conscious and conversing, definitely not sleeping on earth (Luke 16:19-31; Revelation 6:9-11).

But if this is so, someone may still be wondering, *why does the New Testament so often describe departed believers as sleeping?* As with the “Abba, Father” prayer (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6), the “asleep” language

may be an echo of our Lord's very own speech, when He told the crowds at Jairus' house that the twelve-year-old girl was "not dead, but sleepeth" (Mark 5:39). Jesus knew the physiological state of the girl. She was definitely dead, yet He described her as sleeping, inferring that He would raise her up; therefore, the crowds should stop weeping. Please note: The contrast in Jesus' language is not between sleeping after death or being awake after death, but between being dead or being asleep. In other words, the Christian language of "sleep" is in contrast to death itself. Christians are not really dead. The resurrection is so certain, and their current state in heaven so alive, that it is improper in one sense to refer to them as dead. Let us rather call them *asleep*, or *departed*--but not *dead*. I like that language! Words count, and words comfort! Praise God for the life-giving words of the Prince of Life! May these words comfort you, believer. Amen.

P.S. When I came home and told my wife Jinna what I had just posted, she immediately began quoting the Baptist catechism, which reads, "Q. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? A. the souls of believers are at death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection." God be praised for a strong tradition in the church and a discerning wife in the home!

The Kings Respond to the Word

February 9, 2013

More than one prophecy in the Old Testament points to the response of kings to the word of the Lord. For example:

"All the kings of the earth will give thanks to You, O LORD,
when they have heard the words of Your mouth.
And they will sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD" (Psalm 138:4-5).

"Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One,
to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the Servant of rulers,
'Kings will see and arise, princes will also bow down,
because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You'" (Isaiah 49:7).

"Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;
for what had not been told them they will see,
and what they had not heard they will understand" (Isaiah 52:15).

In our political climate, it seems nearly impossible that today's world rulers will voluntarily honor and even *sing* of the Lord. They resemble the rebels of Psalm 2 more than those giving homage in Psalm 72.

How then will these prophecies be fulfilled?

At first glance, such prophecies would seem to demand a Millennium, when the Lord Jesus reigns on earth as King of Kings (cf. Revelation 20:1-4). This interpretation would push the fulfillment of these prophecies into even our future, whether we understand them in a postmillennial way, after the gospel has overcome and transformed the world's cultures, or in a premillennial way, when Jesus forcibly subdued the nations and they give feigned obedience to Him out of fear (cf. Psalm 66:3-4). Certainly there is a day coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11; cf. Isaiah 45:23). Are we to understand these prophecies in this futuristic way?

In neither passage does it appear that the kings are forced to confess the Lord. They seem to respond sincerely. Moreover, they respond not to a show of force, but to a message. They have "heard" a message from God about His suffering Servant. Going farther, it is very significant that these prophecies describe their *initial* response to the word. In both passages, there is an explicit temporal element, marking the time of the kings' actions. In other words, whenever the kings of the earth *first* hear the word of God, they will respond with stunned silence—as Job did to God's barrage of data (Job 40:4)—and then give thanks, confessing the Lord as God and singing of His ways, just as the bards of old sung of heroic men. In the poetry of Isaiah, the living and abiding word of God will be the

breath of the Lord that wilts these princely regimes away (Isaiah 40:6-8, 23-24; cf. 1 Peter 1:24-25).

If this is the correct understanding, we can look to the past for the partial fulfillment of these prophecies. For example, it is very common for the leaders of a tribal people to accept the gospel, whenever the word is first presented to them. We see hints of this phenomenon in the book of Acts, for example, when Paul preaches to Sergius Paulus on Cyprus or heals Publius on the island of Malta—or even conversely, when Herod Antipas is put to death for his pride after persecuting the church. Moreover, we see this conquest occur eventually in the history of Rome, when the emperors finally embraced and confessed the Christian religion, even though they may not have been born again. Later in Europe, the tribes also embraced Christianity, whether we look at Alfred the Great among the Anglo-Saxons or the father of Leif the Lucky among the Vikings. According to Acts, this political conquest is part of the word *prevailing* (to use Luke's term). The messenger may perish, but the word continues to spread—just as Paul the prisoner preached the gospel “unhindered” in the very capital of the empire, which is Luke's final word (Acts 28:31).

This view of the prophecies as marking the initial wave of the gospel is also supported by Paul's understanding of Isaiah 52:15 as a reference to *frontier missions* (see Romans 15:21). Accordingly, no guarantee is given that the kings of the earth will *continue* to confess Christ indefinitely. In fact, the career of Jesus Himself would indicate that the arc of popularity in a culture wanes as time goes on—a pattern that has been repeated in culture after culture since the beginning of the church. Just as idolatry is removed through the initial conquest of the gospel—a fact in which Athanasius loved to boast—so also the religion of antichrist follows in its wake. In other words, while the gospel causes the nations to forsake their gods for the one true and living God and for His Son Jesus Christ, eventually this worship of the Trinity is rejected and replaced by a secularized religion of the state, in accordance with the prophecies about the coming antichrist (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 John 2:18ff). At that point, it is not the power of the word, but the rod of iron that will subdue these rebellious kings (Psalm 2:9). (As a side note, remember that the kings in Psalm 2 are already aware of the Lord's Anointed and are chafing under His reign, just as the Pharaohs of Egypt eventually forgot about Joseph and began to oppress his people. That Acts 4 attributes the fulfillment of Psalm 2 to Pilate and Herod does not limit the fulfillment to just those kings, especially since Christ is still being persecuted in His church all over the world.)

What a neat concept to consider—an historical display of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, right there in our history books and in our current missionary endeavors in the Lord! Surely these tales of conquest need to be retold and relished—may the Lord grant it! As part of His reward, Jesus gains the strong of the earth as spoil to divide out as He pleases (Isaiah 53:12). No one is exempt from the sovereign sway of Jesus. May His name be great from the rising of the sun and to the going down of the same, and may all the kings of the earth bow down before Him (Psalm 72:11)! Amen.

Get Up, and Walk Often in Heaven

February 1, 2011

“Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee” (Genesis 13:17).

As Abraham lifted his feet and walked through his land,
As Abraham lifted his eyes and the starry host scanned,
So you too, Christian, walk and now scan all that God plans to give you in Christ, the Seed of Abraham.

So often we think that we are too busy to enjoy life, and too poor to do anything about it. And yet how much would it cost us, as Christians, to walk through the heaven of heavens, and to survey our eternal inheritance in Christ Jesus? How much time would it take for us to count the blessings tied to a promise? For all the time we devote to worrying, surely there must be some time to savor the favor of God! Silly creatures, aren't we?

Richard Baxter, the Puritan pastor, used to spend one half hour every day thinking on nothing but heaven. Having recovered from a near-death experience, his first book was on heaven, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. It is the contention of Randy Alcorn, a current-day author of a book on heaven, that Christians do not view heaven as a real enough place, and thus we tend to live earth-centered. In a sense, we need a Copernican revolution around the Son! Could it be that we do not view heaven as real simply because we have not walked around it enough in our minds?

One way to do this is through prayer. Fifteen years ago, I was introduced to real prayer through an older man in the congregation who used to grab the pastor's hand and my hand with his big hands and then start praying with mention of God as Creator, and as wise and faithful and gracious. It was then that I began to realize how rushed my prayers were, as if I entered the house of God with little more than a nod and rushed right into the kitchen to hound His fridge. Stop! Look God in the face. Examine each attribute that comes to mind and recount it to Him with concrete example. Then look around at each room, at all the promises, before sitting down at His table for a meal. Is this not the way of the Host?

Another way to do this is through a good sermon, or through a good book. Recently, Spurgeon's *All of Grace* was feeding my soul with delicious gospel food. For example, did you know, Christian, that your righteousness is more secure than if Adam had never sinned? Having been justified by the blood of Christ, you are now reckoned righteous by imputation, forever. In contrast, if you stood righteous before God through sinless performance, there would always be the chance, ever so hypothetical, that you could fall. Is not the grace of God amazing?

Finally, so much of it comes down to what we choose to look at. We all have downtime in the day, in which we choose to ponder on something. How much sweeter would our lives be, if we purposely used our commute to think through the promises of God! If we walked the length and breadth of the land of God.

Not only the land of God. Someday we will live in the City of God with God. Hear well the exhortation of the psalmist:

"Let Mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgments.
Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof.
Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following.
For this God is our God forever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death" (Psalm 48:11-14).

Living in the Womb of Eternity

July 10, 2010

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man,
the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

In reading Richard Wurmbrand's book *Tortured for Christ*, I came across an interesting argument that a Christian used against the atheism of a communist oppressor. If man were just matter, as the communists claimed, why then do his thoughts and character continue to develop in life, even as his body grows weaker and decays? Surely, man is being prepared for something more than this life.

As an analogy, the Christian cited a baby in the womb. His little world is all that he has known, but if he were thoughtful enough, he could wonder why legs and arms were developing with no apparent use, and why lungs were developing in the midst of a watery world. Surely, the baby in the womb is developing limbs and lungs for another world.

Christian, from the Scripture cited above, it is very apparent that we have *by nature* no clue what awaits us in heaven with Christ. Neither empirical research with the eye and ear, nor philosophical speculation with the heart, can penetrate into the mind of God to see what He has prepared for us who love Him. As the baby in the womb, we may think that this existence is normal, and that a future existence outside will pretty much resemble this one inside--except that it will be to the fullest degree, and without any sin or pain. In reality, we live in a cramped and dark world, developing our spiritual limbs and lungs for the World to Come, which Jesus called "The Regeneration," the New Birth (Matthew 19:28).

And like the baby in the womb, the only certain knowledge we have of a greater and better reality is the voice from without. For the baby, it is the voice of his mother. For us, it is the word of God, speaking to us by the Holy Spirit from deep within the mind of God Himself. Right after saying how both inductive and deductive research fail to ascertain the good things to come, Paul asserts:

“But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.... Now we have received...the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches; comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:10-13).

In the womb of Eternity. That is where we live.

How long, we ask, until the birth? All creation groans with birth pangs.

Basket Four • Ministry Experiments

Humble Pride and the Christian Tradition

November 7, 2009

As Christians, we are quite familiar with denominational labels, but are they proper? Is it right to identify other Christians as “Lutheran” or “Wesleyan,” when such labels are absent from the Bible, and carry the name of mere men? Is it right to identify other Christians as “Evangelical” or “Fundamentalist,” when such labels can give the impression that somehow we are not all on the same team? In other words, do labels do more harm than good? In this essay, I describe my own approach to denominational labels, using the concept of *humble pride*.

Labels come from movements, and movements come from men; therefore, the question of labels is inextricably tied to the role of influential men in the Christian tradition. *How should we feel towards these men that God used so mightily?* If we are proud of them, are we thereby diminishing our worship of God? If we forget them, are we displaying our ingratitude? Even more, if we are ashamed of them, are we indicating a secret desire to start our own movement, to make a name for ourselves? We must have some attitude towards these men, especially those of our own denomination. What should our attitude be?

Thankfully, as in all matters of Christian spirituality, the apostles have supplied the principles we need. In correcting the unhealthy pride of the Corinthians, Paul left us the following three principles for the role of humble pride in maintaining the Christian tradition.

First, we should eschew all self-labels, but not necessarily all labels. In some sense, labels are unavoidable. The early Christians were called “Christians” presumably by outsiders, perhaps in much the same way that early adherents to believer-baptism in England were called “Anabaptists” or “Baptists” (cf. Acts 11:26). To the extent that such labels speak the truth, especially a theological truth, we should accept them without shame or a fuss. Peter counseled, “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf” (1 Peter 4:16). For our discussion here, the pertinent question is: How do we internally and verbally label ourselves? That is our *self-label*.

The Corinthians were a divided church with many self-labels. Some were saying, “I am of Paul,” while others were claiming Apollos or Peter or even Christ, interestingly enough (1 Corinthians 1:12). In response, Paul challenged them, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1:13). There is only one Christ, and there is only one church; therefore, there should be no divisions in the church due to self-labels. After all, it was not a fundamentalist who died for us, nor were we baptized as a Baptist, but as a Christian. We are all Christians, and our boast should be in Christ alone (1:31).

Granted, the situation today varies somewhat from the situation then. For example, as R. C. Sproul once pointed out, our current labels often express substantial theological differences, in contrast to the doctrinal unity of the apostles. If we truly wish to remove all labels and to identify ourselves as simply Christian, then, *in order to be truthful*, we should strive to be better united in doctrine. It may be that some of the divisions in Corinth had stemmed from a misrepresentation of the various apostles’ doctrines, for Paul first told them to be of “the same mind” and “the same judgment”—statements that may refer to doctrine and not strictly to attitude (1:10). Even so, it is the *last* label that warns us that more than doctrine is involved here. *How could it be wrong to say, “I am of Christ”?* Obviously, if I put forth any other name, I deny the fundamental priority of Christ, and open myself up to a possible identification with another man’s sin (see Matthew 23:8-10, 29-31); but what is wrong with claiming Christ?

The problem is not with the words “of Christ,” but with the words “I am.” Instead of saying, “We are of Christ,” the singular pronoun distances other brothers, as if this *ego* has more spirituality than other egos. It is an ironic quirk of church history that groups separating themselves as being merely “Christian” end up becoming a new denomination. The solution to disunity will never be the self-assertion of a new label, even if that label is Christ Himself. We should accept the label that we have already received in the Christian tradition. We should not try to assert that we are *this* or that we are *not that*, in contradistinction to other Christian groups, for in so doing we become the “This” denomination or the “Not-That” denomination. All such self-assertions are foolish. Self-made titles are a quick

road to pride (Matthew 23:8-12). In contrast, if we accept the label we currently have, it will grow more and more invisible in time, as long as our good deeds keep pace with the glory of Christ's cause (1 Peter 2:12). Eventually, the label may fade away and be dropped altogether.

Second, we should recognize that all Christian leaders belong to us. In addressing the issue of disunity, Paul urged the Corinthians: "Let no one glory in men. For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). In other words, Martin Luther belongs just as much to me as to the Lutherans; John Wesley belongs just as much to me as to the Wesleysans.

According to Paul, recognition of this universal ownership is necessary to counteract the wrongful boasting in men that leads to disunity. Instead of boasting in one man, in obvious rivalry to Christ and in contrast to the recognition of all Christians, we should embrace the entire Body of Christ as our own. Furthermore, instead of boasting in no man, which in essence means that we adhere to ourselves alone in blind pride, we should recognize that Christ gave men to us as gifts, refusing to furnish us with all the grace-gifts we need (Ephesians 4:7ff). In truth, we belong to them, and they belong to us. Unhealthy pride is eradicated through interdependence. It makes so much sense. How can there be a party spirit without exclusive ownership? A Christian teacher is no more the sole possession of one group than a community park is the sole property of one citizen.

In practical terms, preachers should regularly read outside their particular denominational tradition, and then express the greater unity of the church through quotations from that reading. Granted, theological differences should be noted; but if the teacher was a Christian, quote him as a brother. Furthermore, in today's context, fundamentalists should reckon evangelical leaders as their own, and evangelicals should reckon fundamentalist leaders as their own. The old should recognize the young, and the young should recognize the old. We are one in Christ, so let us glory in our mutual possession of diverse denominational traditions within the one Christian tradition.

Third, we should also recognize that there is a time to boast in Christian leaders. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul told them, "You have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as you also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus" (2 Corinthians 1:14). Paul was their boast, and he wrote to give them opportunity to glory in him in order to "answer them which glory in appearance, and not in heart" (5:12). At first, this may appear to contradict Paul's first letter, for he had urged the Corinthians not to boast in men. It is only an appearance. In the first letter, Paul had attacked the personal pride that hid behind the self-labels; here in the second letter, Paul argued for taking pride in true Christian leaders as *symbols of Christ*. To be ashamed of a true Gospel preacher is parallel to being ashamed of the Gospel itself (2 Timothy 1:8; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20). Therefore, when a Christian leader is being attacked for the faith, we should stand with him and own his name, regardless of his denominational label; for in so doing, we boast in Christ Himself (e.g. 2 Timothy 1:16-17). This injunction is especially obligatory towards those who have led us, who fathered us in the faith, even if we should now disagree with them on certain particulars (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15).

This boasting is the *humble pride* God favors. It is pride, because we are boasting in Christ, through unashamedly identifying with His servants. It is humble, because we are not boasting in ourselves, nor in our denomination's leaders alone, but in all the servants of Christ, who Himself gave them to us. May the Name of Christ be praised, and may His church attain to greater unity through the diffusion of humble pride! Amen.

What College Football Can Teach the Church

October 27, 2010

"The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8).

The legendary coach was done. After forty-one years at the University of Chicago, leading the Maroons to seven Big Ten championships in football, most recently in 1924, coach Amos Alonzo Stagg stepped down, due to forced retirement at the age of seventy. Known for his purist practices, and serving a school that did not provide easy "jobs" to athletes, the school had been struggling to compete, not only in the Big Ten with private Northwestern and with some of the state schools, but also with Notre Dame as a Chicago attraction. Once regarded as fielding the "Monsters of the Midway," the University of Chicago eventually dropped football altogether, following one last

burst of mediocre glory with Heisman Trophy halfback Jay Berwenger in the mid-thirties.

To many alumni and armchair critics, the decision was an outrage. One alumnus sent his son to Northwestern, complaining, “Red-blooded young men and women demand a well-balanced environment for study.” Others blamed the new coach. Still another blamed the school’s young president, Robert Hutchins, who allegedly stated that football related to education like bullfighting to agriculture. Though Hutchins did not coin this saying, it did reflect his attitude. Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* a year before the gridiron ceased, Hutchins asserted:

Since the primary task of colleges and universities is the development of the mind, young people who are more interested in their bodies than their minds, should not go to college.

Curriculum at Chicago reflected this commitment. Revamped in 1931, two years into Hutchins’ presidency but laid out beforehand, the curriculum made the undergraduate program resemble a graduate program, with no easy majors and physical education courses that helped athletes. As a result, enrollment dropped. At one time, Chicago was the largest school in the Big Ten; now, its thousand could hardly compete with the more than ten thousand at Minnesota, Michigan, and Ohio State. Therefore, on December 21, 1939, football ended at the University of Chicago.

Now imagine with me First Church of the Gridiron. Former members recall the glory days of high attendance. Sermons, Sunday School, softball, and soaring solos all met with the enthusiasm of numbers. Tough rules were ignored, and touchy subjects floored, allowing more and more people to crowd the arena. Then one year, leadership began to return to the original script. Playing by the rules lost some recruits, and even some members. Justifying each aspect of ministry by the overall goal of the church lost some more, as some of the platform got trimmed and programs got cut—not that these items were bad in and of themselves; they just did not fit the purpose of church. As in benevolence, so also in activities, the church should not be burdened with what families should do (cf. 1 Timothy 5:3-4, 16). The church is for worship and discipleship, which is not the same thing as glossy platforms and classy programs. It is relationship based on truth—relationship first with God, and then with His children.

Interestingly, the University of Chicago has since become famous for larger things than football. In the postwar years, some of the brightest conservative thinkers taught there, including the bibliophile Mortimer Adler, southern rhetorician Richard Weaver, and economist Milton Friedman. Though not Christian, these men represent thinking more conducive to Christianity than the acidic writings of former professor Shailer Mathews, who led the academic attack against the fundamentalists during the later heyday of Chicago football. Ironically, when the university loved football, it was in the hands of liberal Christianity, having been started with Rockefeller money; when the university repented of football, its stature as a conservative secular university grew. Even more ironically, during the war, the abandoned football stadium became the site for the world’s first controlled nuclear chain reaction, an event that culminated in the end of World War II. Sometimes an institution moves forward by turning back to the basics.

At Open Door Bible Church, we have been encouraged by a sister church to rethink the purpose of church from the original script. This is a slow process that actually began in spring 2008, and has yet to be completed. If you know the Lord, please pray for us as we seek a vision from Christ for His church, and then seek grace to implement the changes. Some things may end; some alumni may be alarmed; but if we get back to the core of what a church is for, who knows what opportunities God has for us in the cosmic war of Jesus Christ! God give us grace! Amen.

Source: John Sayle Watterson, *College Football* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 191-96.

Daily

October 2008

Imagine with me. The church stayed in one place together. The early church of Jerusalem stayed in the house of the Upper Room—about one hundred and twenty believers, men and women (Acts 1:13-14, 15). Even if this word applied only to the Eleven, which is very possible, and not to the “women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and . . . His brothers” (1:14), still—*eleven men staying together in the same house! A holy fraternity!* Sometimes it is easy to forget that for about three years, Jesus traveled around Palestine, almost non-stop, with these same men, perhaps most of whom had a wife (1 Cor. 9:5; e.g. Peter, Mk. 1:30). The camaraderie! The fellowship! Such a tight-knit friendship! “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1).

Then, beyond the housing, there was the teaching. “I was daily,” said Jesus, “with you in the temple teaching” (Mk. 1:49; cf. Lk. 19:47). Daily, the Bread from Heaven fed His flock on the richness of fulfilled Scripture. Daily, the apostles also fed His sheep, first “in the temple, and in every house” (Acts 5:42), and then it seems in whatever quarters they could secure, in whatever city to which they were led, as implied in the school of Tyrannus, where Paul taught the Ephesian disciples daily (Acts 19:9). Even the Berean Jews, in double-checking the apostle Paul, “searched the Scriptures daily” (Acts 17:11). Daily food! “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mt. 6:11; cf. 4:4).

And then there was the prayer—constant, devoted prayer (Acts 1:14)—in addition to “the daily distribution” of food to needy widows (Acts 6:1). All this was daily! No wonder the New Testament contains such little mention of Sabbath-keeping. Who needs to enforce meeting one day a week, when the church meets *daily*?

Now, imagine with me the sweetness of this situation. Yes, it is strange—so different from our context that we are tempted to feel guilty over the disparity, but I asking you to resist any feelings of guilt and just to enjoy the sight. Wow, what a time to be a Christian! How such a situation puts a whole new light on the phrase “church family”!

Now what can be done here in Hudson to savor such sweetness in our own lives?

First, let us think how fitting daily church would be. Is it not odd that we *expect* a sports teams to practice daily (rather than weekly), yet find it strange to hear of a church meeting daily? Today, the skillful coordination of body in sports takes precedent over the skillful coordination of souls in relationships. Why could it not be the opposite?

Further, we *expect* schools to operate daily, teaching the three R’s of modern education, yet find it strange for Christians to meet daily to learn the three R’s of revealed religion—Ruin, Redemption, and Regeneration! In China, Hudson Taylor not only conducted a public meeting per night, but afterwards taught the converts a spiritual lesson from the Old Testament, read a chapter from *Pilgrim’s Progress* or some helpful book, and then concluded with a practical lesson from the New Testament—and this was all in addition to Sunday, which had its own special services!

What’s my point? Again, not guilt, but a dream, even a seed planted. What if we saw each other more often? Oh, how our love would kindle quicker and our concern deepen! Oh, how easy it would be to encourage each other, to pray for each other, to enjoy each other! Hospitality provides one avenue for this dream, but so do more meetings. It is *both* “in the temple” (meetings) and “in every house” (hospitality). *Daily*. What a beautiful word!

Therefore, I also invite you to pray with me towards this ideal. At first we may not think we need it. With mobility, we can do more things. With radio and television, we can hear top-notch preachers. With our own Bibles and study helps, we can learn right there in our living room. But, I ask, where is the daily encouragement from a friend? “*Exhort one another daily*,” the Bible says, “while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Again, “Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but *exhorting one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). One strong goal of church is daily encouragement. We are not there, but we can dream, we can pray, and we can move by grace in that direction. Amen

An Undetected Opportunity to Tap September 2009

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47, NKJV).

What an opportunity! It has often come to my mind, but without a clear practical solution, “How can we imitate the early church’s practice of meeting together *daily*?” In our modern culture of regulated workdays, time in the car, and 24/7 activities, it has seemed nigh impossible to envision God’s people being together each day. Now I see a new opportunity arising! Let me explain.

On the one hand, it is clear that enjoying regular community does require some space in our lives for “hanging out,” along with the flexibility to drop what we are doing in order to talk or to enjoy a meal together. We are relational beings, and part of that relational aspect is face-to-face communication, relished so much in Scripture as the goal of eternity (1 Corinthians 13:12). This goal will never go away, nor should it. Lately, my family has enjoyed a taste of that face-to-face interaction with those who have been preparing the float for this month’s parade. It has been good.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the early church did more than simply “hang out” together. Not only did the early church share meals with each other “from house to house,” they also continued *daily* in the temple. To us, that sounds like meeting together each day for “church”, complete with an order of service and a polished sermon. Not exactly. According to other references in Acts, the early church met daily in the temple for the primary purpose of receiving instruction from the apostles (see Acts 2:42; 5:17-21). The apostles continued the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself, who weeks earlier had been teaching the people by day in the temple (Luke 21:37-38). Comparing the ministry of Jesus with the ministry of the apostles shows us that lots of *daily instruction* in the word of God was commonplace. This is what Jesus commended at Bethany, when Mary chose the better part that Martha could not take away (Luke 10:38-42). This is also what the apostle Paul practiced in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:9-10). It is a theme in Luke’s writings, and one that the Holy Spirit does not want us to miss. Daily instruction in the word of God is an element of healthy Christianity.

That is where the Internet comes in. What an opportunity! Do you see? By means of the Internet, a pastor like myself can instruct you daily in the word of God, but at your convenience. Instead of meeting you early in the morning before heading to the fields, as George Whitefield did in England during the Evangelical Revival, I can greet you each day on your Blackberry, laptop, or home computer. Moreover, by making use of a blog, my teaching is just as public as the apostles’ teaching in the temple. Anyone in Hudson can listen in and learn about the saving message of Jesus Christ. Finally, if that were not enough, those who are interested can use Facebook to check in with each other each day for up-to-the-minute updates on each other’s lives.

I know what some of you are thinking. The Internet interests you as much as golf---nice for some, but not your bag. In truth, I am fine with that, but I do want you to know that I used to feel much the same way, and had to be convinced through a friend of the value of the Internet for relationships. The Internet is a relational tool, more like a telephone than a television. As with all relationships, we must be careful about strangers and about not fraternizing with the wrong crowd, but we should not necessarily let the abuse of a tool keep us from using it responsibly. Even the threat of an intrusive government (alias Big Brother) should not necessarily keep us from this means of communication, though it may remind us of our Safe Haven above. In this evil age, we seek not to save our lives, but to spend and be spent for others. The Internet is simply another means to do so, and I choose to use it and I invite you to join me.

Therefore, if you have interest in communicating daily by means of the Internet, add our church’s new website (at “opendoorhudson.org”) to your automatic tab openers, or let me know that you would like to be a friend through Facebook. We could even open up an Open Door Bible Church “fan” page. (Do I have a volunteer?) Together, we can learn what community in the twenty-first century looks like. God bless you all.

Regular Attendance Is Not True Membership

There once was a man who had many sons and daughters.

The oldest son was very dutiful in attending all the official family gatherings. Punctual to a fault, he always arrived with just the right gift, just the right smile, and just the right words. Congenial yet efficient, he also left on time to pursue his other activities throughout the week.

The youngest son, on the other hand, did not always arrive on time, but he did pursue his father’s heart throughout the week. In fact, the youngest viewed his relationship with his dad and with his siblings as a family thing more than as an appointment to keep or an event to attend. As a result, he actually knew his family members well—much to his father’s pleasure—remembering their names and bearing their burdens on his heart throughout the week.

In the end, the youngest knew the meaning of “one another”, while the oldest remained simply “one”.

Regular Attendance Is Not Active Membership

September 2009

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house,
they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.
And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

—Acts 2:46-47 (NKJV)

Something is greatly missing in our Christian experience, and I think many of us realize it but are afraid to admit it. We have a vague notion that somehow the trappings of what we call “church” are simply not the real deal. We can faithfully attend on Sunday mornings, sing all the songs and pay attention to the sermon, but still feel that something is missing. Then, as we read of the account of the early church, as listed in the two verses above, we can wonder whether they even “attended church” *at all* in their day. Let us ponder that thought together for a bit.

Two types of location are mentioned in the text: temple and house. In the past, I have interpreted these locations as symbolic for the two kinds of groups in church. On the one hand, we meet Sunday mornings at church as a big group for worship that is word-based, Christ-centered, and God-focused. That is the “temple” experience. On the other hand, we meet in small groups for hospitable fellowship, opening sharing, and mutual prayer. That is the “house to house” experience. Is that the paradigm given here?

Some of what I described is true. It is obvious that their time was split between the big group of the “temple” and the smaller groups of “house to house”. Even so, was the “temple” time what we would call church? That is the key question. Yes, as seen in later chapters of Acts, these early Christians “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” during their “temple” time (cf. Acts 2:42; 5:17-21), but it is also appears from these later descriptions that this “temple” time was not an organized “order of service” (i.e. program), with set songs, specials, and sermon outline. The apostles seem to have simply carried on the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself, who just weeks earlier had been teaching the people by day in the temple (Luke 21:37-38). Comparing the ministry of Jesus with the ministry of the apostles shows us that lots of *daily instruction* in the word of God was commonplace. This is what Jesus commended at Bethany, when Mary chose the better part that Martha could not take away (Luke 10:38-42). This is also what the apostle Paul practiced in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:9-10). All of these examples are from the writings of Luke, who apparently wants us to notice this element of authentic Christian ministry.

Therefore, based on these observations, I conclude that what we call “church” is actually not in the record of the New Testament, but is actually more attuned to the Old Testament temple worship, with Levitical singers and programmed ritual. Given the history of Christianity, this makes sense. Roman Catholicism, the traditional religion of Western Christianity, is Old Testament religion in Christian clothing, complete with altars, priests, sacrifices, sacraments (e.g. baptism replacing circumcision), liturgy, and a temple (the so-called “church”). Interestingly, different groups of Protestants shed varying amounts of this Old Testament religion. Some retain almost all of it, while others have rid themselves of almost all of these so-called “vestiges of popery”. How many, though, have shed the *worship service*? How many Protestant groups have regained the feel of the early church, where Christians met *daily* for instruction and fellowship, being both visible to their local community (the “temple” time) and also intimate in their own sense of community (the “house to house” time)?

Let me be frank. If all your Christianity consists in is regularly attending church on Sunday mornings, you are *not* an active member of the church for two reasons. First, it is the one-another commands of the New Testament that turn “church” into a real community of believers. Those commands can only be fulfilled through regular personal interaction with one another. Second, the Sunday morning “worship service” is not actually a *Christian* service. Even though that time can accomplish good things and incorporate some elements of authentic Christianity, the form itself is actually part of the Old Testament structure. Real Christianity consists in real community, and it occurs daily. For myself, I am tired of being evaluated by the quality of our Sunday-morning service, complete with all the trappings. That is not church anyways. Nothing in the New Testament is platform-oriented, orchestrated and staged.

This message is more than something to ponder. We are in desperate need of real community—of joint endeavor, of mutual concern, of a visible presence in our town, and of daily interaction, even “hanging out” together more often. What will it take to get that done? At least this much I know: It will take more than Sunday-morning attendance.

Sunday Morning Only
July 2009

“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17, NKJV).

In width and breadth, Christian fellowship is greater than Christian worship. In other words, the one-another commands are wider and broader than the Sunday-morning commands. True, it is in the Sunday-morning commands that we often experience the height of devotion and the depth of conviction, but it is in the one-another commands that we express the validity of these heights and depths. How can we love God when we do not love His people? How can we love the Head when we do not love the body? This is living a lie, for the Bible reasons plainly, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20).

Therefore, consider the following list of one-another commands (see the note below):

- Have **family-affection** toward one another in brotherly love, giving **preference** to one another (Romans 12:10).
 - Be of the **same attitude** toward one another (Romans 12:16).
 - No longer judge one another, but **defer** to each other’s sensibilities (Romans 14:13).
 - **Accept** one another as Christ has accepted you (Romans 15:7).
 - **Greet** one another with all propriety (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20).
 - **Wait** for one another at the Lord’s table (1 Corinthians 11:33).
 - Shunning divisions, **care** for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
 - **Serve** one another in love (Galatians 5:13).
 - **Bear** one another’s burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:3).
 - **Forbear** with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2; cf. Colossians 3:13).
 - Be **kind** to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving** one another as God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).
 - **Speak** to one another using spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).
 - **Submit** to one another in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:21).
 - Be **humble** towards one another, regarding one another as more important (Philippians 2:3; cf. 1 Peter 5:5).
 - **Teach** and **admonish** one another with spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16; cf. Romans 15:14).
 - Increase and **abound in love** for one another (1 Thessalonians 3:12; cf. 4:10).
 - **Comfort** and **encourage** one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; cf. Hebrews 3:13; 10:25).
 - **Build up** one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
 - Live in **peace** with one another (1 Thessalonians 5:13).
 - **Pursue** at all times the good of one another (1 Thessalonians 5:15).
 - **Consider** one another as to how to stir each other up to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).
 - **Confess** your sins to one another and **pray** for one another (James 5:16).
 - Fervently **love** one another from the heart (1 Peter 1:22; cf. 1 John 4:7).
 - Be **hospitable** to one another without complaint (1 Peter 4:9).
 - **Employ** your spiritual gift in **serving** one another (1 Peter 4:10).
- #

Please note that these commands are *reciprocal*—we do these things for others, and they in turn do these things for us. We cannot fulfill these commands in isolation, but only in community—through active involvement in each other’s lives. Should we die outside of community, having given just *one hour* per week to worship, but having kept the remaining *one hundred sixty-seven hours* from fellowship, will the Lord look kindly upon us? Granted, some fellowship can occur on Sunday mornings too, but to what extent? Do we not need *more* “one-another” in our lives?

Start today. Comfort a saint. Confess your sins. Meet a need. Serve a meal. Bear some burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). In other words, do not be a lawbreaker in Christ’s kingdom. Obey His one-another commands, or quit calling Him “Lord” (Luke 6:46). It is that simple. Justification is our legal preparation for death and judgment, but sanctification is our active preparation. Jesus said, “That servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Luke 12:47). How better to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21). Start today.

Note: The list above mainly echoes the NKJV, and is based on a list given in Curtis C. Thomas, *Life in the Body of Christ: Privileges and Responsibilities in the Local Church* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 176-78.

Renovating a Gospel Hymn

April 13, 2011

Fanny Crosby, Ira Sankey, P. P. Bliss—names now fading even to older Christians, but once familiar as composers of the so-called “gospel hymn”. Composed for mass production and quick consumption, these hymns from the late 1800s often lack theological substance. At times, the distinct impression is given that a little ditty and chorus jingle were composed first, with verses added later as fill-in, having poetry more fit for greeting cards than for worship. There are exceptions, but as a rule, the gospel hymns were meant to drive home one point, often at the end of an evangelistic sermon, with a tune and word repetition that required no prior hearing and yet lingered in one’s mind when the meeting was done. Truly, for its aim, the gospel hymn succeeded.

What use are these gospel hymns today? In words, they are weak; in style, often stilted. Can the mothballs be blown off and luster restored?

According to the Psalms and the prophets, good material should be reused and revamped for a new context. Based on this precedence, we should renovate the best and leave the rest. *How?*

Two options present themselves. First and most commonly done, we could take the old words and match them to a new tune. Thankfully, this is being successfully done today—though often to older and better lyrics than the gospel hymns—but it requires quite some skill in music, which I personally lack (though Martin Luther would chide me for this lack).

Second, it is also possible to take some quality choruses—the strength of the gospel hymn—and put better verses to them. The result still sounds old, even if played with some gusto, but to a more traditional congregation, who enjoys these hymns and knows them well (too well to grab their attention!), the new words provoke new thoughts about God without taxing their musical skills.

As an example, last Sunday we sang this renovation of P. P. Bliss’s gospel hymn “The Light of the World Is Jesus”:

The whole world was bound in the darkness of sin;

The Light of the world is Jesus;

Like sunrise at morning His glory broke in,

The Light of the world is Jesus.

Chorus:

Come to the Light, so bright and so free;

Strongly the Light did shine upon me;

Once I was blind, but now I can see;

The Light of the world is Jesus.

Born blind, we find hope in God’s powerful Son,

The Light of the world is Jesus;

He bids us to wash in the pool of “Sent One”,

The Light of the world is Jesus.

We walk in the Sun that dispels every doubt,

The Light of the world is Jesus;

No darkness within, and no stumbling without,

The Light of the world is Jesus.

In heaven the lights of this world are not known,

The Light of the world is Jesus;

The light is the Lamb and the One on the throne;

The Light of the world is Jesus.

Several changes have been made. In the chorus, the word “sweetly” is replaced with “strongly”, as a word better befitting God’s new creation; the chorus also dropped the archaic “thee” and thus needed a new rhyme (“free”). Sometimes in old hymns, the rhyming is too tied to “thee” and “thou” to allow such a change, but here it was easy.

In the verses, Bliss’s basic pattern was kept in place: historical light (past), personal light, personal light, historical light (future), but the personal verses were kept testimonial throughout. In verse one, “lost” was replaced with “bound” (see Isaiah 49:9), to make the darkness due to prison, and the noonday sunlight was replaced with the morning sunrise, to match the touching image of Zacharias’ prayer (Luke 1:78-79). The second and third verses were switched, with the theology of John 9 and the pool of Siloam (meaning “Sent One”) used first, and the great truth of John 8:12 used second, combined with 1 John 2:10. The original text sounded too conditional for such a great fact. (Note: According to John 9:4-5, the “light of the world” is a phrase for the sun, which makes a neat play on words with “Son”. Also, quotation marks are now added to “Sent One” to show that it is a title for the pool.) Finally, the last verse has a better rhyme and also a subtle hint that *all human light* shall be nullified in the infinite light to come.

Granted, this is still a gospel hymn. It cannot be used often, but for one-time use in a service focusing on the Light of the World, it can blend in well with some contemporary music, and leave a message for the soul to feed upon.

If you have found this exercise in hymn renovation helpful, please let me know. It would be a pleasure to provide more examples and *better* examples. There is still gold in “them thar’ hills”!

Baptism before Communion

October 16, 2009

Introduction

Should a church request that only baptized believers partake of the Lord’s Table? This question has arisen periodically at our church in response to comments made from the pulpit before communion. You may have been one of those who has asked this question, perhaps due to personal reasons or perhaps out of a desire not to offend or to hurt genuine believers. In answering this question, I will seek to be sensitive to good desires, and to make my case without denying the greater unity that exists in the body of Christ. Let us first consider the question in its larger context before considering biblical reasons for making such a request.

The Larger Context for Baptism and Communion

First, regarding the greater unity of Christians, it is a fact that almost all denominations place baptism before communion. Granted, they may disagree on how “baptism” is defined and over who should be baptized; but placing baptism before communion is just ordinary Christianity. Interestingly, among those who sprinkle infants, it is not uncommon that first communion must follow confirmation, when the individual confirms for himself what his parents did for him as an infant. Even here, communion follows an individual’s public confession. Therefore, tradition favors requesting baptism before communion, and even though tradition is not our ultimate authority, it can show us that a position that appears novel may not actually be novel, and it can also caution us against being too novel ourselves, as if the word of God originated from us or came only to us (1 Corinthians 14:36). In this matter, as in others, Paul’s words are appropriate, “But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God” (11:16).

Second, regarding our desires for the good of others, we do need to be sensitive regarding personal beliefs in Christ, and to not “lord over” another’s faith (2 Corinthians 1:24; cf. 1 Peter 5:3). One of the ways I seek to do this as a pastor is not to impose my belief about the definition of “baptism” on visitors. If a visitor is genuinely a believer, but was sprinkled as an infant and then confirmed this “baptism” as his own, I choose to eat with him at the Lord’s Table. In this, I respectfully disagree with closed communion. However, regarding those of us who reckon this church to be our church home, we must follow a tighter standard, for we are to “walk by the same rule” and “mind the same thing,” according to the maturity “whereto we have already attained” (Philippians 3:16). As a church, we believe baptism is by immersion and for believers; therefore, we insist on this baptism for church membership, of which communion is a visible symbol. By way of analogy, in my home, I hold my own children to the household

rules, but cut some slack for visiting children.

Third, regarding priorities, it is true that both baptism and communion are not as important as Christ and salvation. As with all such matters of church order, we must be careful not to make majors out of minors. Conversely, we must be careful not to make *nothing* out of minors. Just because baptism itself is not a matter of heaven or hell does not mean that baptism is no matter at all. Jesus said that one of the ways we show our love to Him is in keeping His commandments (John 14:15). Though some commandments are not as important as others, we should cultivate our love to Christ in seeking to obey all His commandments in their proper order. Perhaps for this reason, Jesus testified, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

Church order has its proper place, as Paul told the Corinthians, “Let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Paul’s rationale was simple: “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (14:33). Church order is not an extra-credit project. It is a matter of obedience, and it reflects the orderly character of our God. Furthermore, church order is for edification (14:26). In other words, holding to matters of church order will benefit others, if done properly and with the right spirit. Personally, I have seen how requesting baptism before communion has led another individual to face the question of the genuineness of his own salvation. As John Calvin once wrote, proper church order safeguards the church’s message and worship (*On the Reformation of the Church*; cf. Titus 1:5, 10). So, even though neither baptism nor communion are themselves the great things of salvation, they do symbolize those great things, and have often been used to help individuals regarding those great things. In other words, requesting baptism before communion is the loving thing to do—loving to Christ and to others.

The Biblical Reasons for Baptism before Communion

In answering whether only baptized believers should come to the Table, we cannot simply quote the Bible. There is no command, “Thou shalt not take communion without baptism.” Lacking a prohibition is not uncommon. As John Piper commented in a sermon I once heard, the Holy Spirit often does not tell us directly what to do because He wants us to *grow* in our discernment (1 Corinthians 14:20). In this case, there appears to have been no reason for the apostles to have asked such a question because in their day baptism routinely followed conversion *immediately*. The book of Acts quickly bears this out (e.g. Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13, 36-38; 9:17-18; 10:47-48; 16:14-15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). In fact, we find Peter *ordering* Cornelius’ household to be baptized (10:48). We also find Ananias chiding Paul, “Why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:15). Moreover, Paul assumes that the recipients of his letters have been baptized (e.g. Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13 in light of 10:1-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12). To be a Christian in the early days meant to be a baptized person. Baptism was a convert’s first public act of obedience to Jesus Christ. Therefore, why should we expect the New Testament to answer *our* question directly? Which apostle would have considered the unheard case of an *unbaptized* believer wanting to partake of the Lord’s Table?

The only exception may be a communion service where a person is converted during the service. This scenario is not as far-fetched as it may first appear, for communion offers a wonderful opportunity to preach the Gospel. According to Paul, communion is like a visual sermon, for as often as we do it, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Moreover, communion has an element of invitation, as when Jesus bid the disciples, “Take, eat” (Matthew 26:26). In communion, as Luther noted, we have the Gospel in short form. In taking the bread and the cup, it is as if we are taking Christ Himself to ourselves (see John 4:10 and 6:27, 51). Therefore, since Jesus offers Himself freely to sinners, it is tempting to offer the bread and cup freely to sinners as well. Given this rationale, it is not surprising that Solomon Stoddard of Puritan Massachusetts turned communion into evangelistic outreach, allowing unbelievers to eat of the Table. (Strangely, even these unbelievers had already been “baptized”—as infants!)

As stated earlier, we must be careful about innovation. Stoddard’s zeal was commendable, but his innovation was firmly rejected by other pastors. Communion is a family meal. Jesus first instituted it in private among His disciples. While we do not have to do so privately, or imitate Augustine and other church fathers, who asked unbelievers to leave the room before communion, we must insist that only believers eat of the Table. Not to do so is to encourage men and women to eat and drink judgment to themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29). Moreover, if unbelievers were to eat of the Table, how would it remain a symbol of our union in Christ (10:16-17)? Therefore,

leaving Stoddard's innovation aside, we arrive back at the original question: *Should a church request that only baptized believers partake of the Lord's Table?*

Let me offer three reasons why *unbaptized believers* should not eat at the Table:

First, the Great Commission teaches that a new disciple should first be baptized, and then be taught to do *all* that Christ commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism is the first act of obedience; communion falls under the "all things."

Second, baptism resembles the ritual washing needed to attend a ritual meal. According to Scripture, we have a spiritual altar, from which unbelievers have "no right" to eat (Hebrews 13:10). At communion, we spiritually feast upon Christ, who was offered once for us on the Cross (9:25-28). Unlike the Catholic Mass, which *offers* Christ repeatedly to God, we spiritually *take* a once-crucified Christ to ourselves, symbolized by the bread and the cup. In order to approach this altar, we must have had our conscience cleansed *internally* by faith, and our bodies washed *externally* in baptism (10:22). In essence, we resemble the Old Testament priests, who first had to be washed before they could touch the holy food as holy men (e.g. Exodus 29:4; 40:12; Leviticus 8:6).

Third, requesting baptism before communion makes the two rituals harmonious and consistent. Baptism is the symbol of *initiation* into Christ; communion is the symbol of *continuation* in Christ. Baptism occurs once; communion, repeatedly. In the nature of things, initiation occurs before continuation; therefore, baptism should occur before communion. It is only fitting. Furthermore, if baptism is not important enough to be requested, because it is a ritual, then neither is denying someone communion an important matter, for it also is a ritual. Conversely, if the rituals are important, then let them both occur and in their proper order. We should direct new converts to obey Christ in seeking baptism (e.g. Acts 2:38-39).

Ultimately, everything should be done in love (1 Corinthians 16:14). Does requesting baptism before communion encourage love towards Christ and love towards a brother or an outsider? I leave this for your own judgment to weigh. As a pastor, I am convinced that it does. May Christ bless His church through the ordinances He instituted! Amen.

Are You Weary, Pastor? An Idea for You!

August 2011

In late May, a pastor told me that he was running on ten percent. *Is that how you, pastor, are feeling right now?* Others I knew had been contemplating quitting. *Have you thought this lately?* As for myself, discouragement and stress were regular temptations and often victors. We needed help!

In praying about these men two weeks later, my mind was led to have a pastor's conference for our local ministers. *Why not?* Why should we travel great lengths to be refreshed by the ministry of the word, only to come back more tired and overloaded due to travel, expenditures, and delayed duties? In having a local conference, we could avoid the problems and yet reap the blessings. The only catch was how *not* to overload a local schedule.

The solution came through a lesson learned at Redeemer Bible Church in Minnetonka, Minnesota. They held a pastor's conference but invited their own folks to attend as well. Therefore, in sending out invitations here, local pastors were encouraged to cancel their Sunday evening and Wednesday evening services (to lighten their loads), and then to invite their church families to join them for worship at the conference Sunday through Wednesday. Even this plan was presented to pastors with the proviso that it must lighten the load and not increase it.

The result was wonderful! Over a dozen pastors participated throughout the week. We met for prayer at 4:30 p.m., then had a superb dinner for us and our wives at 5:30 p.m. (thank you, ladies!), and then met each night at 7:00 p.m. for messages on the Messianic Psalms—and oh, did our brother and friend Tom Pryde do a great job leading us in singing and focusing us on trusting and treasuring Christ. Thank You, thank You, Lord! It was truly a season of refreshment. God answered prayer.

If you did not get a chance to join us or to catch all the messages, they have since been posted on SermonAudio.com

(see the link on this website). If you are a pastor, and think you would like to do this simple little pastor's conference for the fellow ministers in your area, please contact Tom Pryde through his Sermons in Song website. Grace to you as you pursue a heart of loving, overflowing worship to our great King and High Priest, Jesus Christ!

A Pastor Can Learn from Stay-at-Home Moms

October 25, 2009

Though it is often said of the sheep, a pastor also can think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence--not that he may desire a new flock of sheep, but perhaps time away to be more than just a *shepherd*. After all, does he not have talents? Are there not opportunities for him to debate with the men of the village, to fight some battles down on the front, or to lead the local Shepherds Union at the next convention? Surely the sheep will be fine for a time without *constant shepherding*.

Countering this allure of the extra-curricular, one Scottish minister of the last century plainly wrote:

Too many ministers find other things to do, either because they do not like the pastoral ministry, and find it too hard, or because it creates too many problems working with people, or because they have gone cold and dead on it and it doesn't cut much ice, and they are discouraged.

As a result, instead of working hard to feed the sheep well with the word, these delinquent pastors get immersed in politics, or social causes, or denominational leadership, or speaking and writing endeavors--all of which leaves the sheep themselves unable to do those very tasks. Now that fifty years has passed since William Still made these observations, we hear that Scotland lacks ministers and sound churches and even church attendance--the possible damage of delinquent shepherding in a previous generation. Woe to the shepherd who leaves America in such a position! Sheep need attention. Unless the sheep are fattened, William Still noted, they are not ready "for the kill" as living sacrifices to Christ (see William Still, *The Work of the Pastor*, pp. 100-03).

In pondering these thoughts, and feeling the pull to more "significant" ministry of a wider sphere, my mind is reminded of the stay-at-home mom. Here she is, perhaps college educated and poised for a secular career, caring for babies and wrapping the orb of her business activities around the good of the family, as Proverbs 31 so elegantly portrays. Though the world sneers at her monotonous life, she holds the hope that molding these little ones in the power of Christ will reap benefits to the world at large greater than her single endeavors could achieve. Were these little ones already grown, she would be applauded as a shaper of men; but they are not grown, and she is not applauded, at least on earth. She must seek to please God alone, and trust that He will make the love invested shine both in time and in eternity.

Paul also knew the similarities between a mother and a minister. To the Thessalonians, who were new babes in Christ, Paul wrote, "We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children; so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because you were dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). "Little children," Christ called us--even "little ones." The ministry has always cared for "children."

And what do you think Jesus did in coming to us? The eternal Word of the Father, the Creator of the ends of the Universe, became man and dwelt on one speck with "little ones" who did not receive Him, except for a few. He could have been anywhere, but He was here, with us, so that we might someday grow up and reign with Him. Like a stay-at-home mom; like a stay-at-church pastor; like a true shepherd in the open country, Jesus "shall feed his flock . . . He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isaiah 40:11; aptly quoted by William Still). All praise to Him, the truly loving One!

Does Your Church Preach the Word?

November 10, 2009

Last night, a friend of mine asked, "How do you know when a church is preaching the word?" That is a good question. How do we know? After all, the command is clear--"preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2)--but what does it

look like? Bringing it home, how do you know if *your church* is preaching the word? This is a question every Christian should ask. If the church we attend is not preaching the word, then, as Mark Dever warns, our very presence is encouraging the continuation of an unfaithful ministry. That is a weighty responsibility. Therefore, how do we know?

Contextually, the command to “preach the word” is surrounded by several marks of a faithful ministry--marks such as verbal reproof, patient instruction, and evangelism (4:2, 5). Rather than look at individual marks such as these, I want to concentrate on some global matters, found in the rest of the letter, pertaining to the preaching of the word.

First, a faithful ministry of the word ***aims at longevity***. In this letter, Paul’s immediate aim is to arouse Timothy out of timidity, so that he will not only join with Paul in suffering for Gospel, but also entrust this word to faithful men, who will then be able to teach others also (1:6-8; 2:2). This word “entrust” reminds us of the preciousness of the word, and of its *apparently* precarious beginnings. Paul is in prison. His race is nearly finished. Who will bring the word to the next generation? If Timothy fails, how will the generation after him run with the word? Do you see Paul’s aim? Therefore, in great earnestness, Paul exhorts Timothy to guard through the Spirit “that good thing which was committed unto thee” (1:14).

Listen, a faithful ministry of the word looks beyond this present Sunday. There may be few in the pew today, but will there be a faithful preacher in the pulpit tomorrow? In the case of the apostle Paul, all in Asia had deserted him (1:15) and no one had stood by him at his trial (4:16). He himself had a small following, in contrast to the “itching ears” to come (4:3), yet his concern was not with himself but with *the next three generations*--Timothy, the “faithful men,” and the “others also” (2:2). Moreover, Paul was confident that the Lord Himself would guard the word entrusted to him until the day of Christ Jesus (1:12; cf. 1:14). Though he was enchained, the word was not bound (2:9). In such confidence, we too should assess the faithfulness of a ministry not in terms of present numbers or outward chains, but in terms of long-range transmission.

Second, a faithful ministry of the word ***endures through the sovereign-historical Gospel***. When Paul challenged Timothy to endure suffering “according to the power of God,” he could have stopped writing right there (1:8). What need did he have to say more? After all, it truly is God’s power that enables endurance. Rather than finish his challenge right there, Paul elaborated on the great sovereignty of God in saving us according to a “grace” that was “given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but is now manifested by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ” (1:9-10). *Does your church teach the sovereign-historical Gospel?* Do you hear of God’s sovereign good pleasure in selecting sinners unto salvation and then calling them in time by His Spirit through the word? Do you hear of this “grace” being kept hidden until Christ appeared, and then brought us life through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? This is a sovereign Gospel, and a historical Gospel. If your church denies the sovereignty of God in salvation, or flattens the historical dimensions of the Gospel into a simple four-step plan of salvation, then, by implication due to Paul’s elaboration, your church’s ministry of the word will not endure the sufferings to come. A preacher must “be strong in the *grace* that is in *Christ Jesus*” (2:1).

Specifically, a preacher must “hold fast the form of sound words...in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (1:13). In practical terms, this “faith and love” is what the grace in Christ looks like. No mere intellectual persuasion nor raw will-power will endure the sufferings of persecution, or the pressures of popularity. A preacher must seek the inner affections by the power of Holy Spirit, through a holy life of meditation and trusting obedience. Moreover, those who train preachers should not exchange this inner piety for the rigor of mere academics. A faithful ministry holds the theologically and historically rich word with a warm heart.

Third, a faithful ministry of the word ***uses the entire Scriptures***. There is a contrast in this letter between the “foolish and unlearned questions” that cause strife, and the “holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation” (2:23; 3:15). The first, Timothy is commanded to avoid; he must charge men not to “strive about words,” and he must “shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness” (2:14, 16). Please hear me carefully. Just because a preacher may be learned in all sorts of theological speculations or, conversely, in the marketing-techniques and psychological therapies of this world, his multiplication of words does not mean that he is preaching *the word*. Where are the holy writings? In contrast to the words of the world that do not profit, “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable” (3:16; cf. 2:14). In context, the command to “preach the word” (4:2) hearkens back to “all scripture” (3:16).

Therefore, the final, grand mark of a faithful ministry of the word is an unrelenting commitment to teach the entire Bible to the congregation. All of it is profitable; and all of it, in some way, points to Jesus Christ, the “seed of David...raised from the dead” according to the Gospel Paul preached (2:8). A Bible-based, Gospel-centered message is the cornerstone of a faithful ministry of the word.

So how does your church measure up? Though a lot more marks could be mentioned, and some of them very exciting, such as the personal mentoring by example involved in transmitting the word to the next generation, the three mentioned above form the bedrock of Paul’s argument to Timothy in context. If your church is failing, you face a difficult decision. On the one hand, you can pray, pray, pray, and make requests from your leadership for more of the rich theological, historical, spiritual message of the entire Bible. On the other hand, if your efforts have repeatedly failed, or perhaps been rejected out right, it may be time to vote with your feet and with your wallet in favor of a faithful ministry of the word elsewhere. May the Lord give you great wisdom! It is a weighty responsibility.

Listen to a Sermon from Open Door Bible Church

January 1, 2011

The Bible is very clear that Christians are not to believe everything they hear, but rather to “test the spirits, whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1, NKJV). In particular, a Christian must know whether the preacher is faithful to the revealed teaching of the New Testament. Preachers who are “of the world” speak as “of the world,” and the world listens to them; but the apostles are “of God,” and we who know God listen to them (1 John 4:5-6). “To the law and to the testimony,” said Isaiah, “if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20).

Given technology today, testing out preachers just got a lot easier. While in the past a person had to show up in person, or somehow obtain an audio copy, today a sermon is just a click of the mouse away. At SermonAudio.com, you can enter “Open Door Bible Church” in the search line at the top of the home webpage, and sample from several sermons in a growing collection. Please do, and as you do, do not hesitate to double-check what you hear with the Scriptures. Given the fact that the Bible *commends* the Berean Jews for double-checking Paul (Acts 17:11), it certainly must be commendable to double-check lesser preachers like myself, as long as it is done in the spirit of eager humility to find the truth. If you have any problems with this means, or have questions based upon what you hear, please let me know by email at Qoheleth1210@gmail.com.

God bless, and Bon Appetit!

Sincerely, in Christ’s service,

Bob Snyder
Pastor, Open Door Bible Church, Hudson, Michigan

The Church as a Prophetic Community

March 16, 2010

Moses once expressed the desire that all God’s people would be prophets, that God would put His Spirit upon them all (Numbers 11:29). Such are the days in which we now live. Of these days, the prophet Joel wrote:

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also upon the male-servants and upon the female-servants in those days I will pour out My Spirit.”

--Joel 2:28-29

When the Lord Jesus poured out the Spirit at Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit filled all the believers so that they prophesied in other languages about “the wonderful works of God,” it was this text from Joel that Peter used to explain such a strange phenomenon (Acts 2:1-21, 33). God had fulfilled His promise to pour forth His Spirit on

humanity!

Having made such a bold declaration, let me digress a little to explain our church's position. We are a Bible church. We love the Word of God, and hate any rival claim to its unique authority. Therefore, it has been and continues to be the official position of this church that all revelatory gifts such as tongues and prophecy ceased with the age of the apostles. I respect this position, because it guards the uniqueness of Scripture. However, as a Bible church, we need to also adhere to whatever the Bible tells us. If the Bible itself says that the gift of prophecy has not yet ceased, then there must be some other way to guard the uniqueness of "the faith which was once-for-all-time delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

Let me explain what *in the Bible* drives me to question our official position, for I personally have no experience with prophecy, apart from the leading of the Spirit in giving messages, reading Scripture, and handling individual conversations.

First, John the Baptist and Jesus Himself taught the disciples to expect a baptism in the Spirit, even with fire (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:4-5). This baptism, literally "immersion," occurred when the Holy Spirit was poured out plentifully from the exalted Jesus--so plentiful, He *immersed* them--and was repeated later at Cornelius' house, when the Gentile believers there also received "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10:45; cf. 11:15-17). It is this gift of the Spirit that Peter promised to everyone what repented and believed, to as many as God would call, even as the prophet Joel had prophesied (Acts 2:38-39; Joel 2:32).

Some interpreters would like to push Joel's prophecy off to future, either to the Tribulation or even to the Millennium, stating that Peter's "this is that" statement (Acts 2:16) did not refer to fulfillment, but only to a situation similar to that which would occur in the future. If this were so, why did Peter not simply link this "promise" to John the Baptist? Instead, Peter entwined the promise in the language of Joel 2:28, 29, and 32 (see "the promise" and "your children" and "shall call" in Acts 2:39). Moreover, the additional words "in the last days" and "and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17, 18), inserted before and after the quotation on the Spirit outpouring, seem to be Peter's way of highlighting that section of the prophecy as having now occurred. Even Joel's universalism ("all flesh") finds fulfillment in the ever-widening circle of those receiving the Spirit (Acts 1:8; cf. 2:1-4, Jerusalem; 8:17, Samaritans; 10:44, Gentiles).

Others would limit prophecy to Pentecost, or to the era of the apostles. This is tempting, for it safeguards the revelation of the Bible. To me, such a safeguard is guaranteed by the apostles themselves, who alone had the status as official spokesmen for Christ in giving "the faith," the word from God that we must believe for salvation. Christ Himself--not Mohammed, not a Pope, not Joseph Smith--completed the faith (Hebrews 1:1-2), but He did so through His apostles and their prophet-companions, with Paul himself being the last apostle (1 Corinthians 15:8-9; cf. Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; Hebrews 2:3-4). Any gift of prophecy today no longer adds to the Scriptures nor to the faith.

As for the duration of the Spirit's outpouring, Joel himself says it will last for "days," not just Pentecost (Joel 2:29). Moreover, Joel says that the gift of prophecy is the direct result of the outpouring, even to all classes of believers: male and female, old and young, free and slave (2:28-29). Since the Spirit is poured out on all believers "abundantly" (Titus 3:6), should we not expect that the gift of prophecy is still available to all believers today? Indeed, this is exactly what we find in 1 Corinthians, when Paul mentions Spirit-baptism for *all believers* in the context of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:13). True, not all are prophets (12:28); but the gift of prophecy should be desired and sought (14:1, 39). Perhaps the distinction here is similar to all Christians teaching (e.g. Colossians 3:16), though not all Christians are teachers.

In Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts, we have a clear word when prophesying will end:

"We know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect [complete, mature] is come, then that which is in part shall be done away" (1 Corinthians 13:9-10).

When will prophesying end? When the "perfect" or mature state comes. While many say this refers to the completed Scriptures (and in light of prophesying "in part," the Scriptures are the faith made "complete"), the context speaks of the Second Coming, when we see "face to face" and shall know even as we are known (13:12). Prophetically, we live in the time of the Messiah's youth (Psalm 110:3). Someday, when He returns, He will enter

His time of prophetic adulthood (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:11-13). If the typical view were true, it would mean, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once pointed out, that we now with our completed Bible have knowledge greater than Paul himself--a view Lloyd-Jones rightly called "nonsense" (*The Sovereign Spirit*, p. 33).

In the final analysis, our church will need to make a decision on the basis of Scripture alone, and not be swayed by the pull of tradition (which we respect) or the push of contemporary abuses of spiritual gifts (which we reject). Personally, the idea of more power in preaching and evangelism has appealed to me in the past, as does now the fact that the gift of the Spirit is given indiscriminately upon all believers, meaning that each member of the church can have a verbal ministry speaking "the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:11)! True, abuses may prove challenging, and prophecies need to be tested (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22), but the fruit unto edification is worth the challenge. Besides, ministry is messy. The only way to have a perfectly clean barn is to have no livestock (Proverbs 14:4). May Christ direct His church!

Fertilizer and the Last Chance for the American Church

November 7, 2009

"But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

—Luke 13:8-9 (NKJV)

This past week, God "spoke" through some amazing providence, perhaps giving us some hints that He is about to do something big. On Monday, one of our ladies told me that Brother Steve Ayers, pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Benzonia, Michigan was interested in training pastoral interns. Having heard that we had Randy as kind of a pastor-in-training, Brother Ayers indicated that he might call. Later that evening, the same topic came up, this time with Rob Stewart, Associate Pastor at Countryside Bible Church, outside of Jonesville. For several hours, we eagerly discussed how Countryside Bible and Open Door Bible could combine resources to train ministers in-house. All this discussion was in preparation for a five-hour meeting scheduled for the next day (Tuesday), in which some of Countryside's leadership were coming together to brainstorm and plan for ministerial training. Exciting! I told Rob that it has been my dream for years to be a part of a *log college* for training ministers, similar to what William Tennent had in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania as a catalyst for the Great Awakening. In fact, the model goes all the way back to the apostle Paul, who taught the disciples daily in a school in Ephesus; as a result, all Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:9-10).

When Brother Ayers called on Tuesday, I was pumped. He indicated that in-house ministerial training appealed to many pastors in the Michigan Association of Regular Baptist Churches (MARBC). It seems that new graduates from college and seminary often lack the practical experience to make a new pastorate happen peacefully. Rather than let this trend continue, along with its injured relationships and the many young men who leave the ministry for good as a result, Brother Ayers desires to bring them into Faith Baptist for an internship. In fact, there is one businessman in the congregation there who might invest in fixing up a house with low-rent, studio apartments for the interns. Again, this is an exciting idea! But that was not all. In conversing with Brother Ayers, I suggested that he contact Tom Pryde, who has already successfully brought a greenhorn all the way through intense ministerial training to ordination. Today, that trainee is successfully serving a church in the Bay Area as pastor. (God be praised!) At some point, it dawned on me that Brother Ayers had seen Tom sing just the week before at the state convention of the MARBC. Tom had not been scheduled, but there was a last-minute cancellation, leaving a hole that he gladly filled. To top it off, Tom had been a GARBC pastor in California.

A meeting between Tom and the pastors of the MARBC could prove very fruitful, and it is one that we should pray about. As you may know, Tom is involved with an online seminary, Veritas School of Theology, which is currently headquartered in Texas, where the founder Paul Hanebury lives. Tom and Paul have been considering the possibility of moving their operation to Michigan. If so, perhaps Veritas and the MARBC could partner. Online education supplies the technical skills that many pastors either cannot supply or do not have the time to supply. In turn, the online format allows for the student to labor in a local church or in several local churches, where both personal acquaintance and in-house training lead easily into ordination and even missions support, if the trainee is called to the mission field. Moreover, if Veritas were to move to Michigan, students from Michigan churches could easily participate in one-week modular courses. The potential is very great.

Then, as if this was not encouraging enough, I read some articles from WORLD magazine and the Wall Street Journal, stating that a revolution is happening in the print industry. Online news sources and free newspaper articles are beginning to drive some newspapers out of business, with at least fifty currently in some stage of bankruptcy. A similar trend in education is right around the corner. Online schools are about to break the monopoly of traditional higher education. *Will Christians capitalize on this revolution?* This is the question of WORLD magazine editor Marvin Olasky. Instead of going to seminaries, students in the future will learn right here in the church how to become a pastor.

This trend, I believe, may be Christ's last, major effort at fertilizing the American church, putting fresh zest right near the trunk of the tree--the local church. *Will you join me in praying for its success?* While I myself do not despise seminary, and still think that much face-to-face interaction is necessary in Christian training, I also recognize the value of experts sharing their knowledge via the Internet, and the value of re-emphasizing the face-to-face interactions with the local pastor. Is that not a good way to learn how to serve as a pastor--to be apprenticed under an existing pastor? This is how colonial America often trained its up-and-coming pastors. What do you say? Will you as a church join me in praying about this exciting movement of God in our day? I'm excited to see what God will do. May He fertilize the church richly with men saturated in the truth of God's holy word and in a love for His people! Amen.

An Appeal to Earnest Young Men to Pursue God with Us at the Log College

August 14, 2010

"Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him . . ." (Acts 16:1-3a).

Are you an earnest young man, well-spoken of by the godly people of your area? Have you a deep-down desire in your heart to pursue intensely after God, in preparation for usefulness in His church? No matter what your home background was--believing or unbelieving, and Timothy's had a mixture--it is my personal desire to take you with me for a while, as Paul did Timothy, in order to *at least* prepare you for the ministry of the word, but perhaps also to utilize you in the ministry of the word here, if God should so direct, in order that Hudson could become a center of learning about God for this area. My own heart is earnest in this matter, and I sense the hand of God behind our efforts here with the Log College. Let me explain.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge," says the Lord (Hosea 4:6)--for a lack of *knowing God*. Instead of pursuing a knowledge of God, which God Himself delights in more than sacrifices (6:6), the people in Hosea's day were going with their flocks "to seek the LORD," but they were not finding Him (5:6); they made sacrifices, but the LORD took no delight in them (9:13), for when they cried out to Him and wailed on their beds, they did it "for the sake of grain and new wine," thus turning away from Him (7:14). In a word, they loved their raisin cakes more than their divine Husband, as God Himself starkly explained (3:1).

We live in a similar day, when there are many churches, but there is little knowledge of God. The people called by Christ's name often take more delight in their pleasures, even in their dessert, than in speaking about the Savior who died for them, and in living their lives in the power of His Spirit. This statement is not made out of arrogant anger, but in the heaviness of a saddened heart. We need a revival today of the knowledge of God. We need a people today, who will say to each other:

"Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight. Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth" (6:1-3).

This revival will more than likely require godly leaders--men who know their God, and who are passionate about promoting His worship. If we trace the problem in Hosea's day back to its source, we find God indicting the priests, saying, "Like people, like priest" (4:9). Instead of being different than the people, and promoting the knowledge of God through the exposition of His inspired Law, the priests had "rejected knowledge" and had "forgotten the law of

[their] God;" therefore, God says that he would reject them from being priest before Him (4:6; cf. Malachi 2:1-9).

Do you have an earnest desire to return to the Lord, to know Him in genuine worship, and then to promote this real knowledge and acceptable worship in His church through the sound exposition of His holy word? Please consider joining us at the Log College. It is not a college in the typical sense of the word, but in the classical meaning of the word--a *collegium* of young men, who are intensely pursuing God together in the word, in prayer, in fellowship, and in ministry. As a means of learning, it is inspired by the historical precedent of William Tennent, Sr., who as a pastor in the days just prior to the Great Awakening, trained young men for the ministry out of his own church context in a school derided as a "log college." Derided it was, but God used several of its graduates to promote His cause mightily in the revivals that ensued. The Log College is also inspired by the historical precedents of Jesus, who singled out several young men with "Follow Me," and of His apostle Paul, who was educating Ephesian disciples daily in the school of Tyrannus, for a space of two years, with the result that "all they which dwelt in Asia [a Roman province] heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). Solid, patient training in one city can have a regional effect.

It is my conviction that the best place to train young men for the ministry of the word is in conjunction with the local church. Moreover, it is my opinion that many men trained academically through our seminaries would best serve our Lord by taking the richness of their training to scattered pastorates across this nation and there to train new men for the ministry. It is high time we bear more fruit in America, and the Lord is allowing us this opportunity to once again fertilize his vineyard (cf. Luke 13:6-9). *Who will help me?* Again, if you are an earnest young man, with a heart for the word and an eye on future ministry, will you consider becoming one of these young men that I will have the privilege of training in conjunction with other men and churches? Please do not misunderstand me. I am not opposed to Bible colleges or to seminaries. Personally, I have received much from such schools and still see the need for these institutions in training the trainers, in promoting research, and in sharpening our skills in the biblical languages. Not all education or training can be done within the confines of the local church. However, some things can be done better within the local church, or in institutions closely associated with a network of local churches. One such thing is the training of young men for the *pastoral* ministry of the word.

Perhaps you are thinking of attending a seminary. Why not take one year to pursue God with us, and then go to seminary? By God's grace, the motivation and perspective received here will greatly enhance your experience at seminary, helping you to survive spiritually, as seminary can be a dangerous place to lose your soul in a sea of relentless academics and grades. Perhaps you are leaving seminary or leaving Bible college. Please consider the advantage of a year of pursuing God with us in the hope of receiving ordination. At its heart, this is what the Log College is all about. Degrees do not validate anyone as qualified for the ministry of the word. The Lord Jesus set up ordination as His method (cf. 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22). In the Spirit of Christ, and relying on His gifts of discernment through the eyes of many godly people, it is our aim to test young men in their knowledge of God, their genuineness in prayer, and their faithfulness and skill in service, in order to ordain only those fit for the ministry, and to recommend them for the consideration of other churches. *Does this vision move your heart?*

If you are moved to inquire, I invite you first to read through the handbook, which is posted on this website, and to read through the blogs posted here as well, in order to get a flavor for the kind of training you would receive; then, to devote the matter to earnest prayer, seeking counsel from those godly people who love you, as well as asking any question of me that would help. The Log College is not for every man. God provides in many different ways, and He sends His men as He will. At the Log College, we require a year of rigorous reading and active service in the church, without promising a job either while you are here nor after you leave. If the Lord is sending you here, He will provide for you. At present, we have tentative plans for one of our current members, who is also a seminary graduate, to oversee a Brother's House as a place for young men to interact informally on what they are learning as they reside together. (This informal interaction occurred at my house this past year to great profit.) For some of you, this pursuit may lead to long-term ministry here in this area. As you get to know us, and get to know the churches that are connected with us, doors of ministry may open up--and I pray that they will for some of you--leading to fruitful service here in this area. Either way, the knowledge of God is valuable in itself. According to the New Testament, knowing God is the key for becoming like God (2 Peter 1:3-4), and knowing God is itself the essence of eternal life (John 17:3).

Will you seriously consider joining us in 2011? We hope to hear from some of you. May the Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, direct your steps to do His will. Amen.

Basket Five • Counseling Encouragements

Faith or Feeling?

November 2008

“I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house” (Mark 2:11).

So often the road to recovery, when we fall down or are in despair, is one small step from feeling to faith. For example, Jesus comes to us and says, “Love your spouse,” but we look in our heart and respond, “I no longer feel love for her. How can you command me to love?” Jesus comes to us and says, “Go the extra mile,” but we feel the burned-out and respond, “Lord, I can’t take one more step. I’ve had it. Haven’t I done enough?” Or Jesus says, “Rejoice in hope,” but we feel no joy and look down in despair.

What is the solution to these so-true and so-common scenarios? After all, is it not true that in those situations we feel nothing? Is it not reasonable in such a state to expect nothing from us? Worse, would it not be hypocritical to try to manufacture some love, some hope, some joy, when in actuality we do not feel it? Why not just be “me” and sit here, hoping somebody will understand the legitimacy of my condition based on all that I have endured?

But Jesus came to the lame man and said, “Arise.”

Of all the nerve! Can’t He see that the man cannot walk? If anybody had a right to dismiss himself from obedience, it was certainly the lame man. “Lord,” he might say, “I would if I could, but not only do I not *feel* like walking today, I actually *can’t* walk.”

Yet Jesus said, “Arise,” and in His command is the power to obey—if we believe. Mind you, not to believe in ourselves, but in Him. Do we believe in Jesus, that He Himself is the Resurrection and the Life? Then we will bank on His power giving us what we lack *as we rise up and walk*. It just takes one step in the direction of faith.

This has been the secret of Christians for ages. Late in the fourth century, Augustine penned his prayer that made Pelagius, the self-righteous British monk, so angry. “Command what You will,” Augustine prayed, “but give what You command.” Was this not the attitude of Peter on the night sea? “Lord,” he answered, “if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” In response came the simple but miracle-producing command, “Come.”

What is it that has you bound, feeling helpless in your natural state? An unloving person? An impoverished bankbook? A depressed spirit? Whatever it is, the formula is often the same: Jesus will square you up, make you face it, and then command you to do it—to love, to give, to rejoice, or to give thanks—and in that moment you will have the choice either to look down at your feelings or to look at Him and take your first step towards freedom. What will it be? Faith does not bank on what the Lord has already given you, which is so often gauged in our feelings, but on what He will give you if you walk out to Him. In that sense, faith is truly future-oriented, not present-oriented. The Bible says that he who comes to God must not only believe that He is there (most people do), but also that He is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). In other words, it will pay to seek Him. I can bank on Him. He will not let me down. Therefore, I step out and walk.

God bless you as you rise up and step out! May the Lord heal your weak limbs and fill your empty heart with the grace that He secured on the Cross, dying due to human sin and rising due to divine vindication! May the Lord also then fill you with the peaceful fruit of righteousness! All this is similar to what Jesus said once regarding humble service: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17).

Help for Those with an Addiction

July 30, 2010

“That You may say to the prisoners, ‘Go forth;’ to them that are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’ They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places” (Isaiah 49:9).

To remain bound, to remain in the dark, is *not* the will of God. After years of struggle, it may seem reasonable to resign, to give up hope for a true change, but the very word *salvation* reminds us that the main point of Christianity is *deliverance*--deliverance from the *penalty* of sin, the *power* of sin, and ultimately, from the very *presence* of sin.

Before His birth, God told His Son, "It is a light thing that You should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give You for a light to the Gentiles, that *You may be my salvation* unto the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

At His birth, the angel announced, "You shall call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The very name *Jesus* means "*salvation*."

Going further, the apostle wrote that Jesus "gave Himself for us, that he might redeem us *from all iniquity*, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

Do you see it? Salvation!--God's mighty act of deliverance--it is on the surface of Scripture, heard even in the name of "Jesus" itself. It is *salvation* that God intends--for you to be free and to be seen, no longer to be bound and not around. *But you must believe this.* "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established," warns the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:9). "Without faith it is impossible to please Him," warns the New Testament, "for he that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a *rewarder* of them that diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6)--believing not simply that God *exists* (even the devil believes that), but that He rewards those who diligently seek Him--in other words, that it *pays* to seek God.

Do you believe this?

The wicked do not. In unbelief, the wicked strongly say, "It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered" (Malachi 3:14-15).

Those who fear God know better. They know that God is the rewarder of those who seek Him; therefore, they speak often with each other, and the Lord hears in heaven and remembers them, and will make them His jewels on the Day when He makes it as clear as heaven and as clear as hell that there is a difference between "him that serves God and him that serves Him not" (Malachi 3:16-18).

If we believe that God *will* reward our seeking with finding, we will *wait*, and we will wait *with anticipation*. "Therefore I will look unto the LORD," writes the prophet, "I will wait for the God of my salvation: *my God will hear me*" (Micah 7:7).

Oh believer, down-cast, and in darkness, struggling with a recurrent sin and knowing that it is wrong: *Keep believing, keep seeking.* Know that His deliverance will come, for He *is* "the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." *None* of those who wait for Him shall be put to shame, left high and dry, holding the bag (Isaiah 49:23). The promises are general, available to all; for He says, "*Whosoever* believes on Him shall not be put to shame," and "*Whosoever* shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:11, 13). Therefore, "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart: wait, I say on the LORD" (Psalm 27:14).

This is where it all starts--*with faith*--with faith that believes enough to wait,...and to wait, and to wait, and to wait, knowing that it is impossible for God to deny Himself. He *is* the Rewarder of them that seek Him! Therefore, "As the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes with upon the LORD our God, until that He have mercy upon us" (Psalm 123:2).

Having established the principle of Faith and Hope--that genuine faith produces a waiting hope--the next letter will (Lord willing) address the question: *What exactly do I do while I am waiting in faith for God to save me?*

Help for the Newborn Christian

May 25, 2010

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

Out of all human beings, some of the most helpless are newborns. As in physical life, so also in spiritual life, newborn Christians need the most help--not only from their pastors, but also from the entire body of believers. There is no way that a pastor alone can provide the kind of *daily* encouragement that Scripture requires and a newborn needs (cf. Hebrews 3:12-13). Therefore, as a church, we need to ask ourselves: *What does a newborn Christian need?*

First, a newborn Christian needs to be forewarned about the pressures of life. When Paul and Barnabas revisited the churches they had just planted, their basic message was: “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The word “tribulation” means *pressure*, embodying various forces that will try to push us off the road to heaven. Praise be to Him who keeps our feet from slipping (Psalm 121:3)! Please note: There will be many such forces (“*much* tribulation”) and there is no other way to heaven except to persevere through them (“we *must* [go] through much tribulation”).

We do young Christians no favor when we hide from them the realities of persecution, indwelling sin, and hypocrisy in the church, to name a few tribulations. Nor are we faithful to the Gospel message itself, if we present Christ as the one who will fix their outward marriage, finances, or health, as if these were the essence of Gospel *salvation*. Those who have signed up for such a deal will soon find themselves tempted to drop away, as the rootless plants on the shallow soil. Instead, we are promised a new heart, and the joy and peace of Jesus Himself to overcome the world *through its various pressures* (John 14:27; 15:11; 16:33; 1 John 4:4; 5:4-5).

Second, a newborn Christian needs to realize his own instability. In life, we crawl, toddle, and then walk. Similarly, newborn Christians experience many highs and many lows in the initial years of spiritual growth. It is important for the newborn Christian not to be alarmed, as though some strange thing has overtaken him. Moreover, it is important for those who care for the newborns to expect many falls and scrapes, to comfort the spiritual child, and to nurse him back to health through close and loving attention. That is the way Paul treated the newborns at Thessalonica--like a nursing mother. His concern was their stability in Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8; 3:1-13).

Stability is one huge reason God has ordained the ministry of the word in the church. Christ Jesus appointed “pastors and teachers” for the maturing and building-up of the saints, so that we would no longer be “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:11-14). A newborn Christian should be especially close and open with his pastors; in turn, the pastors of a church should give extra care to the newborns, just as a mother of seven favors her youngest with extra attention. And again, ultimately, it will be the entire body, “speaking the truth in love” to each other, that will cause the entire body to grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

In the final analysis, a newborn Christian needs one thing most: the word. Just as suckling babes have a diet of one thing, it would do well for newborn Christians to cut out all other media input, and drink in the word of God alone for the first few years. *Catch that? Years.* We bring so much faulty thinking into our salvation--so many assumptions, reactions, goals, and habits--that it takes years to really deep-scrub these out of our minds. Though it may be a simple Gospel that saves us initially, it will take a much deeper grasp of the Gospel to preserve us eternally. For this reason, we see Paul, on the one hand, establishing teaching elders in every church for the care of newborn saints (Acts 14:23), and, on the other hand, preaching the Gospel to mature Christians in Rome (Romans 1:15-16; 15:14-15). All Christians need the Gospel preached to them over and over again, in greater and deeper detail.

In practice, what will feeding on the word look like for the newborn Christian? First, newborns should meet weekly with a pastor or mature saint to discuss spiritual struggles openly and to receive prayer. Second, newborns should learn to toddle their way through the spiritual disciplines of meditation, singing, memorization, and prayer. (Some helpful hints are given below.) Third, newborns should embrace every opportunity for loving others, especially other Christians. Muscles grow in exercise, and spiritual muscles are no exception. In this way, it is possible for newborn Christians to imitate the new believers at Thessalonica, who, by God’s grace, grew both in faith and in love, even “every one of [them] all toward each other” (2 Thessalonians 1:3). May it be! Amen and amen.

Helpful Hints for the Newborn Christian

The basic goal: Drink in the pure milk of the word (2 Peter 2:2). How?

1. Every day, meditate on these three truths about the past, present, and future:

The Cross - Christ loved me and died for me, taking away the *penalty* of my sin.

Born Again - Christ lives in me by the Spirit, and prays for me in heaven, taking away the *power* of sin.

The Second Coming - Christ longs for me, and prepares a place for me, to take away the *presence* of sin.

Ultimately, His name is *Jesus* ("Savior") because "He shall save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

2. Make sure your mind is constantly playing songs rich in the word about Christ (Colossians 3:16).

The easiest way is to listen to Christian radio, but beware: Much that is "Christian" is not *rich* in truth.

Far better is to listen to a CD that is rich in Scripture (e.g. Tom Pryde, *Sorrow to Hope*, Sermons in Song).

Borrow a hymnal from church, and sing from it at home until you have memorized a hymn.

3. Memorize important Scripture sayings.

Write out the saying in full, post it in your house, and read it over slowly once a day (cf. Deuteronomy 6:9).

4. Attend all the Bible studies and worship services that you can.

Encouragement comes through other believers (Hebrews 10:25); discouragement comes in isolation.

5. Maintain a close and open relationship with a mature believer, and especially with your pastors.

All sheep need shepherding, but the little lambs often need it the most (cf. Acts 20:28).

Thank God for your church and its leaders, praying for them as they, in turn, pray for you.

Are Joy and Happiness Different?

March 19, 2010

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines;
the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat;
the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

You know the usual rubric: "Joy is an attitude; happiness is a feeling." In other words, happiness depends on *happenings*, and thus goes up and down; in contrast, joy is something deeper and more steady. Is this true?

Several years ago, in teaching through Philippians--the epistle on joy--it struck me that joy is actually *circumstantial*, that is, based on circumstances. Just read the epistle. Paul rejoiced because of things that were happening, just as if he were happy. True, he rejoiced *in the Lord*, but only because the Lord was behind all the happenings. Does this not seem odd? It is as if Paul is simply happy.

True, Paul was in prison, and rival preachers sought to add pain to his chains; yet in all this Paul kept his eye on the good that the Lord was doing in the midst of the pain: guards came to saving faith, brothers still free were emboldened to preach the Gospel, and even the rival preachers preached Christ--a point on which Paul resolved, "I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Philippians 1:18).

Only the eye of faith could spot the goodness amid the badness. Perhaps we dismiss happiness in favor of some supposed "joy" because we are weak in faith and fail to spot the grace in every place. Only Spirit-empowered faith spots grace and holds it firm as if already possessing it (Hebrews 11:1).

When Paul blessed the Roman Christians, he prayed, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Romans 15:13). The words “fill” and “all” and “abound” remind us that God desires to maximize our joy and peace, which are the feelings of hope; but these feelings come to us by means of *believing*. Often we must believe in the reality of something future, which we will someday receive, and thus rejoice now in hope (Romans 12:12; e.g. Matthew 5:12; Hebrews 10:34). Either way, whether we already have the grace, and need only to spot it amid the pain, or whether we will certainly have the grace, and need to rejoice in hope of receiving it, it is still true that circumstances provoke the joy. Yes, we rejoice “in the Lord,” but we do so because we experience Him through the circumstances of life (e.g. Philippians 4:10).

But what about the extreme circumstances, when, for example, a man loses both wife and mother in almost a day (as Teddy Roosevelt experienced early in life)? How can a man rejoice then? Is there no place for grief and a deeper attitude of joy? Who could feel simply “happy” then?

To answer such questions quickly would seem insensitive and presumptuous, as if one were himself exempt from the crucible of life. Moreover, such questions are certainly valid given Jesus’ title as “Man of Sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3) and even the apostle Paul’s own admission that he was once depressed (“cast down”) and often felt “great heaviness and continual sorrow” for his perishing countrymen (2 Corinthians 7:5-6; Romans 9:1-3). From such references it appears that a life of joy is not one-dimensional, excluding all other emotions due to simultaneous thoughts in two or more real directions. In that sense, joy is not simply happiness. Jesus did have joy set before Him, but the nails bore deep (Hebrews 12:2). We do not grieve as those without hope, but our Lord Himself did weep near a grave (1 Thessalonians 4:13; John 11:35). Life is complex. Joy and hope; pain and grief. Thankfully, life is never just unmitigated grief, for “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

In the text given above, we have an extreme condition--no blooms, no fruit, no olives, no meat, no flocks, no herds, and all due to the impending invasion of a ruthless foe. If anyone had just cause for lacking happiness, it was the prophet Habakkuk; and yet, he choose to rejoice in the Lord (just as Paul would later say) and to encapsulate his joy in a song, which is the substance of chapter three. *But why did Habakkuk rejoice? What made him joyful enough to sing?* Was it just the thought of an abstract God, a God with whom He had nothing to do, but yet in whom he needed to rejoice *despite all circumstances*? Not exactly. Habakkuk took joy in “the God of my salvation”--in other words, in the God who will save me. Joy is circumstantial, even if the circumstances are still in the future, guaranteed by the grace of God. Believer, believe and rejoice in the Lord *always* (Philippians 4:4)!

How to Avoid the Hypocrisy of Not Being a Hypocrite

April 29, 2011

“Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow unto salvation” (1 Peter 2:1-2).

Hypocrisy is hard to detect. Like greed, it comes in more than one form, though in essence it is always the same—a incongruity between what is external and what is internal. Most of us are familiar with garden-variety hypocrisy. A person pretends to be good, but inside he is harboring bad motives. Shysters, charlatans, and cheats fall under this kind of hypocrisy. But what about the person who sincerely desires to be loving, to have no incongruity between intent and action? *Is it possible for even such a sincere person to be a hypocrite?*

Yes. Such “sincere” hypocrisy is possible, and due to its double duplicity, it is doubly dangerous.

Consider the text quoted above from the apostle Peter. Taken out of its context, it gives us a list of don’ts and do’s. On the one hand, I need to lay aside all ill-intent, all double-facedness, and all bad-mouthing; on the other hand, I need to desire the life-giving milk of the word in order to grow. Simple, it appears. *Let’s get to work!*

And that is when the inner hypocrisy begins. In focusing on myself, I automatically cancel out the thing I supposedly desire to have—the “sincere love of the brethren,” mentioned at the start of this paragraph (1 Peter 1:22,

lit. “unhypocritical brother-love”).

Here is how it often happens in practice: Faced with a situation that requires kindness, I realize that my heart does not possess the proper motive to show kindness with integrity. If I just say, “All that matters is the action,” and then do the deed, it is a sin and I am a hypocrite. As everything should be done in faith, so also everything should be done in love (Romans 14:23; 1 Corinthians 16:14). *Everything*. That is a big word.

Realizing this predicament, I then delay the action and deal with my heart. “Hey you,” I say, “it is time to feel something.” Upon this resolve, a mighty campaign begins, complete with reasons and efforts to produce some sincere feeling or motive before acting. Once achieved, I do the deed and feel good about myself, thanking God that I was not a hypocrite in showing kindness.

Wrong. My focus was still on self. In action, the deed appeared kind, but in motive, it was still about me—making sure that I did the deed with proper motive. In one sense, it reminds me of an athlete who is more concerned about “doing his best” than about winning the game. Or in marriage, it resembles a man more concerned about being a good husband than about pleasing his wife. The test comes when the performance is achieved but the results fail. Is there genuine sorrow, or is there only the smug satisfaction, “Well, at least I played a good game”? *How wretched are our hearts!* Lacking a genuine concern for souls, for example, we may conjure up some feelings of concern before “doing evangelism,” but then later take comfort in “being faithful”! *Is this sincere love?* Can a sincere farmer rest without a crop, or a sincere lover, without the one beloved?

Do you see how common this inner form of hypocrisy is? It may appear as a forced tear at a graveside, or as good feelings in worship. It comes in many flavors, but its basic ingredient is the same—a preoccupation with having sincere motives. In this way, trying to rid oneself of hypocrisy becomes another form of hypocrisy.

So what is the way out?

According to the context of First Peter, this tree (“laying aside...all...hypocrisy”) only makes sense within a God-saturated forest. The body of the letter begins with three paragraphs on faith, hope, and love. Only then does the letter enter into specific duties about submission and suffering. Therefore, we see that external duties are meaningless without internal virtues. This prevents garden-variety hypocrisy. But even the initial triad of virtues sits within a God-context that prevents them from becoming inner hypocrisy. As my friend Tom Pryde likes to say, it all starts with God and ends with God:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope...” (1:3).

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...” (2:9).

Everything starts with God. He caused us to be born again by His incorruptible seed (perhaps a reference to the Holy Spirit) through the living and abiding word (1:3, 23). This is revelation. His word reveals the glory of God, by which we are called (see 2 Peter 1:3).

Everything ends with God. According to the final sidebar on worship (2:4-10), we are a spiritual priesthood in order “to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). God has transformed us by the marvelous light of His glory so that we would reflect this glory in our lives (2:9). Just as the apostles Paul and John express elsewhere, we are transformed into glory as we see His glory (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2).

Based on these facts—that everything begins with God through His word and ends with God in worship—Peter emphasizes two points about our personal experience.

First, we are **born again**. Peter inserts this thought into every section (1:3, “begotten us again”; 1:14, “as obedient children”; 1:23, “having been born again”; 2:2, “as newborn babes”; 2:5, “as living stones”). Laying aside hypocrisy is impossible without genuine rebirth. Hence, if we repeatedly find hypocrisy in our lives, of whatever kind, we may need to ask ourselves, “Am I truly born again?”

Second, our hope is **glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ**. That moment will be our true “salvation.” (Note: Peter uses the word “salvation” differently here than we typically do. He acknowledges that we have already been born again. Salvation means obtaining glory after suffering, as the sidebar in 1:10-12 makes clear.) Again, Peter inserts this thought repeatedly, telling us of “an inheritance...reserved in heaven for you” (1:4), of a “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:5), of “glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7), and of “receiving...the salvation of [our] souls” (1:9). We are expressly told to “hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:13). Therefore, all forms of perfectionism must go. Until the day of Christ Jesus, we will always live with some level of sinfulness; but we can grow, and it is that thought which brings us back to the text quoted above: “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow unto salvation” (2:2).

There are no throw-away phrases in the Scriptures. To view this verse as some general command to grow would miss the forest from the tree. The command is not to grow, but to “desire the pure milk of the word.” If we are genuinely born again, we will grow, and we will want to grow, but we will do so not so much by concentrating on growth (that breeds hypocrisy!), but by concentrating on the same source that gave us life initially—the word that reveals the glory of God in Christ! Long for that external word, and quit focusing on internal feelings and motives.

Granted, growth is in view, but it is growth “unto salvation.” In other words, my preoccupation is not with the present here-and-now, typically seen as being a good person in whatever sense of the word. My hope is to be *fully* on the grace and glory to come (1:13). As the rest of the book makes clear, this life is more about what is done to me (suffering), than about what I do or achieve. As in Romans chapter eight, to be conformed to the image of Christ is not so much about achieving Christ-like activity, even with proper motives, but rather about suffering a Christ-like cross in order to attain a Christ-like glory someday (see Romans 8:29 in context). Capturing this difference is the death of inner hypocrisy. It is as Paul stated in Galatians, in the face of the hypocrisy in Antioch, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...” (Galatians 2:20). *No longer I.*

In essence, inner hypocrisy sets up a counterfeit to the divine process of growth. On the front end, when faced with the possibility of an empty deed, the mind grabs reasons and presses the will into change. As a result, the focus is on becoming a *better me* (a phrase borrowed from an early book by John Piper). Any such focus on becoming a better me is idolatry, even if supposedly done to the glory of God. (Never forget how the Pharisee in Luke 18 thanked God that he was not like other men.)

Instead of this self-improvement project, let us long for the pure milk of the word. Something, somewhere in the word will reveal the glory of God afresh to us, and set our souls free once again, to glorify Him. *That is exciting!* Freed from our failure, freed from our emptiness, freed from ourselves, it will be a blessed taste of heaven and of the glory to come. May the Lord fill our lives with such “fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11)! Amen.

Liberation from Present Vindication

February 2009

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.”

—1 Corinthians 4:3-5 (NKJV)

The eye of man exerts a pressure without touch. We all know the *feeling* of being watched—sized up by our actions and our words, categorized and ranked by what we do and how we do it. Beneath this pressure, we are careful to avoid doing or saying certain things in the presence of certain individuals; or if we must, we add comments that explain or clarify our behavior, in hopes of averting the penetrating gaze. Is this not so? Do we not feel *forced* to vindicate ourselves in the presence of critical humanity?

In this passage, Paul exhibits an amazing freedom. He was a very public man, and had more than his fair share of critics; therefore, his freedom from present vindication does not come from any lack of scrutiny. In fact, his second letter to this same church reveals the depth of his critics’ accusations, touching on his motives, his manners, and

even his spirituality. Even so, in the spotlight, Paul testifies to his sense of freedom. What were his insights? What truth did he possess that can *liberate* us (as Kent and Barbara Hughes put it) from the necessity of present vindication?

First, our problem is not necessarily the *desire* for vindication. God Himself is jealous for His honor. This same apostle tells us elsewhere that Jesus was crucified *publicly* in order to vindicate God's status as a God of justice (Romans 3:25-26). For centuries, God has been pardoning sinners. If He were a human judge, such action would make Him utterly detestable (Proverbs 17:15). Therefore, to show that He truly is a just God and punishes every sin, God publicly punished all the sins of His people in the body of His beloved Son on the Cross (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). Now we *see* how seriously God really does take even the casual sin we commit.

Second, our problem is not necessarily the *desire* for vindication, but the *timing* of vindication. God Himself waited centuries before sending Christ, often letting Himself be misunderstood by sinful men (e.g. Psalm 50:21). Similarly, God here commands that we "judge nothing before the time" (verse 5). Only the final exam counts—when Christ returns, when both our actions and our motives are brought to full light.

Third, our problem is not necessarily the *desire* for vindication, but the *source* of vindication. Two common sources mattered little to Paul—what others thought about him, and what he thought about himself. Neither justification by men nor self-justification mattered, but only receiving praise from God. Remember: True success is often not public. True success is a measure of the heart more than the hands. While men are prone to quantify, and to measure us with statistics, God weighs our heart. Do we *truly* love God? Do we *truly* love each other? God knows all these things, and only His evaluation of us counts. The Great Day will reveal all.

As individuals, we need to ask ourselves hard questions about whom we aim to please. Why are we so consumed with what others think about us? True, I should care what others think about *Christ* because of me, but that is far different than caring what others think about *me*. Why *do* we care? Whose glory are we concerned about after all?

Truly, we need *an audience of One* (as Steve Camp puts it). If His gaze feels threatening, perhaps we have yet to understand the Cross, and approach Him rightly. Too many trivialize their sin and presume on God's graces, but such assumptions can never explain the Cross. God is serious about sin. It must be punished. Either my life is given completely to Christ, along with all my feelings of self-justification, or I perish. If this fits you, you need Christ!

Even if you have Christ, the question remains: Are you seeking to please the Lord alone (2 Corinthians 5:9)? As Richard Foster once pointed out, your silence will show it. Peter wrote of Christ: "When He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). Believer, this same Christ now lives in you. Be free from the bondage of present vindication, and wait for *the time*.

Proverbs for the Spiritually Depressed

September 11, 2009

"Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13, NASB).

One of the greatest hindrances to growing in grace as a Christian is the grip of the past—whether it be the long-range past or the immediate past of a fresh sin. By focusing on the sin, we cease to focus on Christ, to the detriment of running our race (Hebrews 12:1-2).

For example, with regard to fresh sin, some Christians feel the need to make themselves feel sufficiently bad, in order to gain the freedom to let it go. Certainly there is some truth here. If we have not truly repented, we should not offer a glib, "Please forgive me," and move on. Charles Spurgeon was right in remarking, "I am always afraid of a dry-eyed repentance." However, even repentance itself is a gift, and one to be sought from the hand of Jesus. Keep looking to Jesus. By considering His word, perhaps in fasting so as not to distract attention nor to coddle the flesh, let the knife of His word sink deep until a violent hatred of the sin erupts into godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:9-11). Then make a firm decision, "The past has passed; the blood of Christ alone atones; and I am pressing on, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13).

Similarly, with regard to the lingering memories of a life of sin, often in the face of daily reminders due to the consequences, we must also make a decision: “Am I going to dwell forever in the past conditions of my life, or move on in the Lord into fresh country?” This decision is especially critical for those in counseling, for psychology tends to focus solely on the past, often attaching labels as if the past were permanent. No! The labels of God are future-oriented. Abram became Abraham, “the father of many nations,” before he ever had the promised son. Gideon was hailed as “mighty man of valor,” while yet in his fear. Similarly, God reckons us righteous through faith in Christ, when He knows full well our sinful condition. Why is this so? God creates the reality He names (see Romans 4:17). We are not only free to move on, but obliged by faith to reckon it done. Then we offer ourselves and our bodies to God as those who are already alive from the dead (Romans 6:11-13). The battle is won, not by looking behind to our sin, but by looking ahead to Jesus.

“Whatever to me was gain, because of Christ I count as loss” (Philippians 3:7).

We may often think that the source of our spiritual depression is past failure. This is not always the case. Success may also keep us enslaved to the past, without us realizing the problem. In fact, the principle of “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” may actually refer both to past success and past failure. When Paul penned that principle, he had just rehearsed his former success under the Law as well as testified to his present shortfall as a Christian (see Philippians 3:3-14).

It is often a bad sign when earthly defeats cause intense grief and earthly victories cause intense joy. Such instability points to a preoccupation with the present world, and a lack of perspective regarding our standing in Christ. At conversion, we were crucified with Christ to the world and to its code of righteousness—a code that is ruthlessly performance-based (see Galatians 2:19-21; 6:14). By nature, we strive to establish our own rightness by keeping a set of rules. If we fail, we feel dejected and worthless. If we succeed, we feel elated and worthy. When we finally succeed in conquering a sinful habit, we really feel elated and are tempted to regard ourselves as truly righteous now. All this is a delusion. The cross put an end to such performance-based emotions and self-worth. Not only are we not to let our emotions be tied to winning or losing this righteousness game, at the cross we forfeited the right to play the game at all. He alone is our righteousness—His death alone makes up for our sins, and His life alone makes us different within. We have nothing more to prove—win or sin. Christ is everything.

For that reason, Paul writes not only about his former life, but even about his present life, that he regarded anything that was to his credit as manure in order to gain Christ and to be found in Him, having a gift of righteousness from God (Philippians 3:8). Our righteousness is Christ alone. He alone is our sense of worth—our glory. Therefore, even when we succeed at breaking a huge sin habit, we forget about it and move on. Our success is one more feather in His cap; our failure, one more reason for the cross.

“When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10, NKJV).

One of the secrets to getting free from the past is to turn the circumstances of our lives on their head. What the world reckons a liability, a Christian must reckon an opportunity, for the world has yet to put God into the equation. We all know that the world is wrong, yet unwittingly we often think in worldly ways. This is what Paul faced when he was writing his second letter to the Corinthians.

The Corinthian church had just rejected Paul, their founding father in the faith, listening instead to “super-apostles” who claimed great powers in visions and in speech. In contrast, Paul was written off as a weakling—a man bold in print, but unimpressive in person. In reply, Paul felt forced to display his credentials as an apostle of Christ, but he called such a display foolish, for the Lord had told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (12:9a). Three times he had prayed for God to remove the thorn in the flesh, but the Lord told him, “No,” saying that His free-favor on Paul’s life was enough, for power uses weakness to display its fullness.

What about you? What natural weaknesses do you have? (I am not talking about sin or sinful tendencies, but natural infirmities due to sickness or external difficulties.) Have you sought to eliminate these natural weaknesses of your life, thinking that then you will be more effective in the Lord? Humbug. Do you not see that these very weaknesses are opportunities for God to display His strength? Rather than be ashamed, boast in your weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in you (12:9b). Did you catch the connection? Boasting in your weaknesses

leads to power. The key to receiving power is your attitude. Turn these things on their head. Think well of your weaknesses, hurt feelings, neediness, persecutions, and predicaments, for when you are weak, then you are strong (12:10). Each handicap is a platform to display the wonders of God's grace. Would you want to strip Him of such an opportunity? Then let Him then confound the somethings of this world through your nothingness. This is exactly what He did through His Son on the Cross, who "was crucified in weakness, yet . . . lives by the power of God" (13:4). And now, Christian, Christ Himself lives in you! Boast in Him!

"Where sin increased, grace super-abounded" (Romans 5:20).

A propensity to sin is not a "weakness." When Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong," he had in mind the physical limitations of life. However, the same principle applies even to our sinfulness, but with more caution. Given the deceitfulness of our heart, it may be tempting to justify our sin by pointing to a positive outcome—to even say with others, "Let us do evil that good may come." In response, Paul warned, "Their condemnation is just" (Romans 3:8). Still, for the genuine believer, who has repented and looked in faith to Christ, past sin does often seem to limit the future. Where is the hope here?

Consider Israel's unfaithfulness. Where their sin increased, God's grace super-abounded (Romans 5:20). Samson indeed fell to Delilah, but his humiliation led to a greater victory. David indeed fell to adultery and murder, yet his next son by this same woman was nicknamed Jedidiah, meaning "Beloved-of-the-Lord." Even the murderous envy of the Jews brought about the wondrous redemption on the cross! Sin cannot limit God. He gives "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning,...that He may be glorified" (Isaiah 61:3).

So who are you? A blaspheming, persecuting, violent man? So was Paul, yet Christ made him an example of His patience (1 Timothy 1:13, 16). Are you a Gentile dog? Instead of arguing against the point in some plea of self-esteem, admit it to God and glory in the fact that even dogs eat crumbs from the children's table (Matthew 15:21-28). Whatever your sin-liability is, do not minimize or deny it. Turn it on its head and offer it to God as an opportunity for Him to display His great grace. If you need discipline, let Him decide that. Do not act as if you were your own father in punishing yourself. If you are a Christian, God is your Father. Leave the discipline to Him, and offer yourself up to Him again as a display of His grace. May His grace super-abound wherever your sin has merely abounded!

"Blessed is he who does not condemn himself in what he thinks" (Romans 14:22b).

"Everything not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23b).

A good conscience is a precious gift. Purchased by the blood of Jesus, it is the right of every believer, and necessary for a life of love (Hebrews 10:22; 1 Timothy 1:5). No one can truly love while feeling guilty. Therefore, like Paul, we too should strive to "maintain always a blameless conscience" (Acts 14:26, NASB).

One of the best ways to maintain a good conscience is to avoid the pit of moral indecision—either before the incident, or after the incident, when, by endlessly wondering whether it was right or wrong, we prevent the possibility of clear-cut repentance and forgiveness. Often this retrospective indecision was caused by a lack of circumspection before the incident, when a firm decision should have been made in prayer and with counsel based on God's word. Either way, the solution to moral indecision is firm faith informing our conscience where to get off.

In Romans 14, Paul makes some startling assertions. First, not every decision is right or wrong. For example, we can freely eat meat or religiously avoid meat, as long as it is done to the glory of God. Sure, there is a right answer—Jesus pronounced all foods clean—but getting the right answer is not the main thing. Rather, the main thing is: "Can I truly worship God in what I do or do not do?" If so, we are fine, and need not fret that we cannot do *now* what we may be able to do *later* as we grow in faith. The bottom line is: Make a firm decision in faith and stick to it (14:5). (For a good example of what this looks like in firmly choosing the good instead of the better, which is not a sin, see 1 Corinthians 7:36-38).

Second, Paul asserts that even if we do something right, but doubt that it was right, we have sinned (14:14). When in doubt, throw it out! If, however, you feel that you must do it, and suspect that it really is right, seek counsel from God's word beforehand and pray hard, so that later you will not condemn yourself later for your decision. God bless you in pursuing this happy road of faith!

“As they went, they were cleansed” (Luke 17:14).

Introspection is the bane of many Christians, especially those who struggle with assurance of salvation. This is not necessarily a sin, for God has appointed fear as a necessary discipline for a lack of love. Too many Christians tell those struggling with assurance to just not think about it, or that it is wrong to doubt their salvation at all. No. The sin is in not hoping in God. The incident with the ten lepers provides the key for the introspective Christian struggling with assurance.

Those who struggle with assurance have two difficulties: They look back and they look in, but they do not look forward. Jesus told the lepers to show themselves to the priest for the inspection detailed in the Law of Moses. How ludicrous! When Jesus said the words, the men’s hands were still just as white as before. Why should they show the priests what had not changed? Similarly, why should a doubting soul gain any comfort from Jesus’ words as long as he continues to look within and see no difference? Ah, the power is in the command. They went, and significantly it says, they were healed *as they went*.

Faith has assurance (Hebrews 11:1), but it is a forward-looking assurance, rather than a backward-looking assurance (as Calvin taught). The assurance is that God not only is there, but that in seeking Him He *will* reward me (Hebrews 11:6)—that is, in going, He *will* heal me. Since mature love is what casts out the fears of going to hell, giving me assurance that I not only deduct that I am alive spiritually, but I truly *know* that I am born again and can assure my heart of the same (1 John 4:18; 3:18-19), the only way out of Doubting Castle is through increased love in my life. But how can that happen if I am still thinking about myself all the time? I stop looking down at my hands, *believe* that Jesus will heal me and so launch out into a life of love, banking on Him. Therefore, faith leads to hope and that leads to love, which will ultimately give me assurance. Therefore, the way to gain assurance is not to sit there looking back for evidence or looking in for evidence, but looking unto Jesus, believing that He *will* give the evidence in time. He will heal you as you go.

How Can I Be Thankful When I Feel So Low?

November 7, 2009

Recently I was talking with a woman who was truly troubled over the state of her soul, wondering whether she had strayed so far from the Lord that He was now afflicting her physically, even wondering whether she was truly saved or not. Not everyone reveals inner struggles so freely as this woman did. It is a rare find, and I treasured it. Her thoughts were honest and real, and in some ways similar to ones that I myself had faced ten years ago pertaining to my own salvation. Since these doubts are so common, yet so uncommonly voiced, I thought you also would benefit from the answers that I gave her personally.

First, there is no necessary connection between personal sin and personal affliction. In other words, being afflicted does not necessarily mean that we have done anything specific to cause it. We know this, but do we believe it? For some of us, outer pain seems to translate automatically into feelings of inner guilt. If that were always so, what about the book of Job? That’s the whole point of his life. He had done *nothing* wrong in particular to reap what he had not sown. Even Jesus Himself, the Bible says, “*learned...obedience by the things which he suffered.*” He learned, not because He was sinful and needed correction, for He truly was and ever is “holy, harmless, undefiled,” but because He was immature in human development and needed to become mature (Hebrews 5:9; 7:26; 5:10). At the very least, we can say that affliction brings the opportunity to learn. Moreover, if *we have* been straying, then we may also suspect that God is not only teaching us, but correcting us, so that we would come back to Him.

Listen to clear voice given in Psalm 119 to the benefit of affliction:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I have kept Your word” (verse 67).

“It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes” (verse 71).

“I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that You in faithfulness have afflicted me” (verse 75).

My second point comes from the second verse: The key to thankfulness is to find something truly good. Notice that I said *truly* good. This is not an exercise in self-delusion. God is not asking you to act as if bitter is sweet and then give thanks. His Son Jesus is the Truth, and He does not teach us to lie to ourselves in order for us to feel better.

Therefore, if we are to be thankful “in everything” and “for all things,” as the Bible commands (1 Thessalonians 5:18; Ephesians 5:20), then there must be something *truly* good in what we are experiencing. Amazingly, the psalmist says, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted.”

Can you say that? If you are a genuine Christian, you not only have every right to say that, you *must* say that. God has promised to work “all things together” for your good (Romans 8:28). He really does love you. The cross was not a lie. Therefore, reckon it so by faith; believe that the sour will mingle with the sweet into something grander than bland candy. God is wiser than that, and loves you more than that. The moment you finally see your affliction as “good” is the moment you can finally give thanks without self-delusion.

Finally, you must be your own preacher. The psalms are such a treasure-chest of wisdom on soul-care! Listen to the way another psalm addresses perpetually down feelings:

“Why are cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (Psalm 43:5).

Please note: Who must take your soul to task for feeling blue? You must. This point was made long ago by Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his famous series of sermons on spiritual depression, but it bears repeating here: Quit listening to yourself, and start preaching to yourself. It will be very hard at first. Your emotions will be pulling the other way, and may take a long time to turn around, but do not give up. Rejoice in hope. Stick to the truth, and let the truth set you free. It always will. God bless you, and may you be feeling better *soon* as you begin to think better *now*!

When Prayer Makes Me Feel Worse

November 13, 2009

Not all prayer is beneficial. There is a kind of prayer that is simply worrying in God’s presence. Instead of *casting* all cares on God, as the word of God commands (1 Peter 5:7), unprofitable prayer merely holds these cares up before God, while refusing to let them go. If this persists, the mind begins to dig a rut, having gone over the same ground repeatedly, and the heart begins to give way, having grown emotionally unstable due to stress. Eventually, this so-called “prayer” implodes on a person, leaving the soul a nervous wreck. *What went wrong?*

Consider carefully the kind of prayer that protects against *anxiety*, which is here called being too “careful”:

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

This is straight-forward teaching. The first sentence is the cause; the second sentence is the effect. Regarding the occasion for the cause, God is serious. He commands us to be worried about *nothing*. Mark that word: “nothing” means *not one thing*. Oh, how we dismiss this sin of worrying so easily! Yet look at the damage it causes us internally! We worry ourselves to weariness, but God desires none of it. He shows us the kind of prayer that gets rid of worry.

First, it is an *asking* prayer. There is a “request...made known unto God.” If you are in Christ, you have a cupboard full of promises to ask of God. Pick one; ask it. Second, it is a *humble* prayer, for the word “supplication” refers to asking for a favor from God. In other words, we come to God as undeserving sinners, asking not for what we have earned, but for what He is graciously disposed to give us through Christ, on the basis of His atoning death. Third, it is a *thankful* prayer. Of the three elements of worry-ridding prayer, thanksgiving may be the most important, for how can we worry when we are thankful?

But how can I be thankful when I’m worried? Answer: If you really believe the promise, you will give thanks in advance, and drop the request. It is that simple; but it is not simplistic. It is profoundly effective. As a result of thankful prayer, God promises that His very own peace will guard both your heart and your mind through Christ Jesus. It is a real peace—not some kind of positive thinking that kids yourself, but the inner working of God’s Spirit, causing the inner turmoil and restlessness to cease, and bringing the soul back into wholeness. Though it may take

some time for the biological flywheel of emotions to stop spinning, God's peace will keep the wheel from getting fresh spins. As stated in the verse above, God's peace is a protecting peace, keeping both the mind and the heart from being disturbed by fresh memories of rutted thoughts or by flash fears of future cares. So many people assume that such peace only comes when all the unknowns are known; in contrast, God's peace surpasses all human comprehension, guarding the soul when no answer is known.

For those with ongoing problems in life, thankful prayer will usually involve one good prayer session per day. Granted, we are told to pray "without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), but that command does not mean *every second* in endless succession, anymore than Paul himself prayed for the Thessalonians continuously, as if that was all that he did (1:2-3). On the contrary, to pray unceasingly means to pray regularly and persistently about something until it is answered or until God indicates to stop praying (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9). Based on the model Jesus gave regarding our ongoing need of food, I often advise people to pray *once a day* for ongoing problems, and then to drop it for the rest of the day (cf. Matthew 6:11). If the devil should tempt us to pick up that cast-off care, we can answer that we will address it again in earnest tomorrow, but that for today, it is safely in Jesus' hands.

For highly unstable persons, thankful prayer may simply be a *nod*. In my own life, I have sometimes thought so long about one particular point that just to pray through it would overwhelmingly tempt me to worry again and feel more unstable. By God's grace, I was delivered through the prayer nod. In the back of mind, the ugly thought would arise and want to be thought about in the front of my mind. Rather than even acknowledge its presence through consciously thinking about it or verbalizing it in prayer, I would keep it in the back of my mind and simply give a nod to the promise that I had already asked in prayer earlier in the day. Neither the ugly thought nor the promise received internal verbalization. It was simply a nod, and I keep right on consciously thinking about whatever was at hand. In practicing this nod, God has delivered me from more than one deeply-ingrained bad habit of mind.

In God's grace, the choice is now yours. Will you cast your cares or clasp your cares? You cannot do both simultaneously. You must do one or the other. Why not ask God for a promise that pertains to your problem, then in faith search your Bible and ask for counsel until He gives you that special promise. How the Lord does this is beyond me, but He is able to make a verse "speak" to us from His living word in such a way that we know it is from Him. Then hold on to that verse tightly and pray it fervently. You may think that you need a coterie of verses, when in reality you need just one lifeline to keep us from drowning in the raging seas of inner emotion. Cling to that promise in firm faith, give thanks, and throw your cares into God's mighty hands. He truly does care for you (1 Peter 5:7). May God bless you richly in Christ Jesus!

Controlling Anger: The Little Teakettle That Could Not

May 26, 2010

"The churning of milk brings forth butter, and the wringing of the nose brings forth blood; so the forcing of wrath brings forth strife" (Proverbs 30:33).

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

There once was a teakettle that had a problem. Day after day he sat alone on the stovetop, having driven all his friends into hiding through his incessant spouting off. No pot nor pan could stand the shrill whistle the teakettle made each time he heated up. What was the poor teakettle to do?

At first, he blamed his environment. If it were not for the stovetop, he would not be so heated. After all, when the stovetop was cool, the teakettle could be as quiet as any pot or pan. *It must be the fault of his nurture.*

If that were so, why was he the only one who spouted off, and did so every time? After all, who had ever heard of a pan whistling or a pot hissing? In fact, since he alone spouted off, the teakettle concluded that it must be in his genes to spout off. According to his therapist, the teakettle ought to accept who he was and to never expect radical change. *It must be the fault of his nature.*

Granted, both nurture and nature have a powerful influence, but did they necessitate spouting off *every* time? Surely there must be something the teakettle could do that would help him to resist spouting off. At an anger management class, he learned several techniques for corking his spout. Instead of regarding it as a virtue to always speak his mind, the teakettle learned diplomatic ways to smooth feathers and to avoid issues, even ways to contain the pressure through willpower alone. To be honest, this did cut down on the number of times the teakettle blew up, but when he did, the delayed response led to an even greater mess and one that the rest on the stovetop did not expect. Again, what was the poor teakettle to do?

In desperation, he sought counsel one last time. This time, the teakettle was told that his problem pertained more to what he let come inside of him than to what he let go outside of him. He could not change his environment, nor could he change the fact that he was a teakettle; however, neither of these factors demanded the presence of water. If the teakettle were not full of water, he would not spout off, regardless of the heat applied. Therefore, the teakettle learned that the solution pertained more to the lid than to the spout, more to his inner thoughts than to his outer spout. If only humans would learn this insight, and receive grace from God through Christ to do it!

The Lily and the Apple Tree

May 30, 2008

Are you listening to the voices all around you—
to the choir of lilies neatly offset in your neighbor's ditch,
or to the ranks of apple trees in the farmer's orchard?
Since the whole world is ripe with meaning (Psalm 19:1-4),
what are the lilies and apple trees saying?

In Solomon's love song, the only one in the Bible, he wrote of his beloved:

"Like a lily among thorns,
So is my love among the daughters" (Song of Songs 2:2).

In response, she says:

"Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods,
So is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down in his shade with great delight,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste" (Song of Songs 2:3).

Wives, how is your fragrance, your beauty?

Does your husband sense the spiritual scent of "a gentle and quiet spirit,
which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:4)?
Not even Solomon, in all his glory, was arrayed like one lily! (Matthew 6:29).

Husbands, how is your shade, your fruit?

Does your wife find security under the steadfast convictions of your faith?
Does she find refreshment from the words of your lips and the kindness of your heart?

The month of June is typically the month of weddings.

As we remember our anniversaries, our marriage,
and remember that by nature we are thorn bushes and jack pines,
let us remember the transforming grace of God in Christ Jesus—
let us remember the *lily* and the *apple tree*.

Spanking Is Biblical

September 30, 2009

Spanking is not child abuse. This must be stated right up front, for some parents, in their self-delusion, think that striking a child out of anger is proper discipline. Not in the least. Too often, a parent has been lazy in dealing with a misbehaving child, occasionally yelling and threatening the little one, until the misbehavior can no longer be ignored, and in heated anger, the parent strikes the child. That is selfish and evil, and an indication that the parent

himself needs to grow up. True spanking smarts, but does not injure.

Moreover, spanking is a form of teaching--of disciplining and correcting a child--not a form of punishment, let alone a pressure valve for an angry parent to cork disturbing noise. Please note: Judges punish; parents correct. As parents, it is our God-given responsibility to train a child in the way of righteousness. What an weighty responsibility! We call this duty "discipline" or "training," for it involves both positive development and negative correction, depending on the situation at hand. This two-fold aspect is easily seen in sports, where coaches develop their player's skills and correct their bad habits. Once we see the two-fold nature of our task, spanking begins to take its proper place. Let me explain what this looks like for older pre-school and grade-school children.

First, it is our responsibility to develop our children's character through both teaching and guided experiences. God did this with His children in the Wilderness, when He both taught them through Moses and also forced them to rely on Him for bread (see Deuteronomy 8:1-5). When our children disobey, it is our responsibility to correct them, again through both teaching and experience. The teaching is called "reproof" (Proverbs 29:15). We correct our children's thinking, telling them where they are deceived and then giving them the facts. Reproof is very important, for it addresses the possibility that the child simply misunderstood us, and it also enables a child to make an informed choice to either obey or disobey. If the child disobeys, he is rebelling against our word and must be corrected by the experience of the "rod" (Proverbs 29:15); therefore, we must spank him. Normally, it is best to follow this two-step process of reproof and rod. The only exceptions may be when the child has lied, which cannot be tolerated, or when he has physically harmed another child, which also cannot be tolerated and must be stopped.

At this point, you may be thinking that a "time-out" would work fine. Granted, compared to child abuse, a time-out is wonderful. In fact, for children recently adopted out of abusive environments, a time-out may be the only way to go until he is convinced that you love him. Moreover, for parents who grew up with true child abuse, spanking will be very difficult to do, and if that is you, I hope to help you by giving you some guidelines. Given these qualifications, let me assert plainly, however, that correction without physical smarting is not loving your child. The Bible is clear: "He that spares the rod *hates* his son; but he that loves him *dawns* to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). There is something about a little physical pain that typically does wonders on rebellion. In another place, God says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15). This is the way God disciplines His children. When I do wrong, He does not just put me in my room for a week; He often makes me feel some pain in my health, my home, or my finances (see Proverbs 3:11-12). So should we.

So how do we go about spanking? Real brief, let me explain how I was taught by two excellent little books. First, the book *Withhold Not Correction*, by pastor Bruce Ray, taught me to ask my child questions before spanking him. Instead of reacting in anger, I need to take my child aside privately, get down on his level, and look him eye-to-eye and ask him, "What did you do?" This gives him opportunity to confess. Once he does, I then ask him, "Was that right or wrong?" This helps to eliminate later resentment, as if I somehow wronged him by spanking him. Finally, once he has admitted to wrongdoing, I ask him, "What does God say that Daddy must do?" Please note, the question is not what I prefer to do, but what I must do due to God's command. Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, our children must see God's authority behind our word and deed (Proverbs 9:10). At this point, the child knows that his wrongdoing demands a spanking and he acknowledges it verbally. If there is any resistance, that is further rebellion and calls for added spankings.

All of this occurs before the spanking, but it is so important, for the goal is not simply to get the child to stop misbehaving, but to teach him, to *train* him. In fact, one parenting tape I listened to years ago made the excellent point, that much correction would be eliminated if we better filled our lives with more verbal instruction and (I would add) our own consistent behavior. Therefore, we should take the time to *teach* before we spank.

Once we have asked the questions, we spank the child--not through jeans and a diaper, as I have seen some do (how can that smart?), but on bare enough conditions to make the child feel a smarting pain, but with no injury. In his book *Spanking*, Roy Lessin cautions against two extremes. On the one hand, we must spank the child enough to drive the rebellion away, as not worth the price of retention. On the other hand, we must not spank too much, or we truly do hurt the child and fail to communicate love. Great wisdom from the Lord is needed here, for extremes on either end will produce resentment. Once finished, I like to take my little one onto my knee, hold him close, and pray for him, speaking of the suffering love of Jesus for sinners. Moreover, I also tell him to stop crying, for everything is over. I forgive him and I love him. This sense of finality, incidentally, is one huge advantage that

spanking has over time-outs, which often let the child brood without removing the attitude or restoring good feelings between child and parent.

Again, how important is spanking? The Proverbs say that it may make the difference between life and death, perhaps even between heaven and hell (Proverbs 23:13-14). Consider: “How will my children receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, if they do not understand authority or sin?” God bless you, therefore, in your pursuit of responsible discipline.

Thousands of Rams and Veggie Tales

August 2009

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God?

Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with *thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil*?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you

but to do justly, to love mercy, and *to walk humbly with your God*?”

—Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

In 2001, Phil Vischer was in the midst of selling 30 million *Veggie Tales* videos. Two years later, his company, called Big Ideas Productions, went bankrupt, resulting in the sale of all assets, including Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber. *What happened?* What was God teaching him in all this?

In an interview conducted by *Leadership* magazine in Spring 2007, Vischer identified the breaking point as a “big, hairy, audacious goal.” This concept came from a business book he had read in his scramble to manage his growing company. Treating the book like scripture, Vischer set the “big, hairy, audacious goal” of Big Ideas becoming one of the top four family media companies in the world. At the time, he assumed that it was always God’s will to make a big impact—to affect as many people as possible—and that anything less was poor stewardship. In the end, his big goal cost him Big Ideas.

Despite his outward losses, Vischer did gain some inward insights. First, nothing should be treated as scripture except Scripture itself—the Bible. (Sound counsel, very sound.) Second, there is a danger in applying business principles to ministry, for it assumes that God chooses the same path for each of His servants. The “gospel of impact” is a *false* gospel, for God equates success, not with “measurable impact,” but with obedience and a daily walk with Him. (If that were not so, we may note, the poor widow ought to have kept her coins to herself.) To his credit, Vischer openly admits that in the midst of selling scads of videos and receiving 400 letters of fan mail a day, he lacked every single fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. None were present, not one. No matter how much he succeeded in vegetables, true success demanded fruit, *spiritual* fruit.

How about you? Are you enamored with *your* big ideas of what *you* will do for God? Will you, as the prophet said, bring Him “thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil,” as if God has need of your offerings and efforts? Is it not the case that only *His* grace can forgive sins based on *His* Son’s work on the cross? Is it not also the case that He is the leader, that you should walk *humbly* with Him? If so, the important thing is not what you will do for Him, but what He has done and will do for you—not your ideas, but His ideas.

It may be something big or it may be something small—whatever God’s will for your life may be, the important thing is that it is *God’s* will for you. Phil Vischer had to learn the hard way. How about you?

The Martha Syndrome

September 21, 2007

If Jesus came to your home, what would you consider to be your first priority? Honestly.

Once when Jesus entered a certain village, a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at His feet, listening to His message. The other sister was distracted with the meal preparations and began to grow annoyed at having to serve alone. Accusing the Master, she said, “Lord, don’t You care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Then tell her to help me.”

Honestly, is that not the feeling of every busy person? “I’m doing all the right things, but I can’t keep up. *Lord, don’t You care about me? How come I’m not getting any help?*” Feeling self-pity, we accuse the Lord of indifference. Moreover, we look on others as lazy, wondering how they can have so much time for extra things such as Bible studies and multiple church services.

But what was Martha missing? The Lord and Savior of the World had just stepped into her home, but she honestly felt it was more important to serve Him than to listen to Him. Wouldn’t we? Not seeing grace in His visit, we so often greet the Lord as a boss having expectations rather than a parent having a gift.

Jesus identified the root error. He tenderly replied, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” In our busyness, we mistake so many things as necessary, saying, “I need to be there. I need to do this,” when really only one thing is *necessary*—listening to Jesus. And to think, it’s enjoyable.

We invite you to sit with us at the feet of Jesus four times a week. True, Jesus is not physically here, but His Spirit is and so is His word. His counsel to Martha remains the same. A “good portion” of spiritual food awaits. Really, are all those other things *necessary* after all?

Source: Luke 10:38-42.

The Man with Too Many Hats

There once was a man with many hats--too many, in the opinion of others, but not in own eyes. True, he would sometimes feel a twinge of guilt in owning many hats that he never wore. Day after day, as he entered his closet, the hats would wave, as it were, “Here I am. Wear me.” This daily greeting oppressed him, until he finally concluded that he must wear more than one hat at once.

Imagine the spectacle. There was the man with many hats walking into town with two, three, or four on his head, sometimes more. To do this, he learned to “balance” many hats at once--something he had learned once in a seminar. He even learned to “prioritize” his hats, knowing which hat should go on first, and so forth. After a while, he felt quite proud at his accomplishment. Compared to others, who typically wore only one hat at a time, he clearly could accomplish more.

At least, that is what he thought. Two problems plagued him. First, there remained the feeling that this was all artificial justification. The “quality time” he gave to each hat consisted of little more than an hour or two a week, surely not enough time to justify the activity or enhance the relationship with that hat. Visibly, each hat showed no wear, except for his favorite ball cap that he snuck on every so often. Again, he doubted whether he should have so many hats. Second, the “balance” theory did not hold well when he faced windy days--the so-called adversities of life--when hats went flying everywhere and often lay for days in the fields before he eventually found them. Something needed to be done.

The answer appeared to come through his reading of history. Others before him had owned many hats. How did they accomplish this feat? One man, to his great amazement, had worn close to twenty hats on his hat with regularity. Even though this historical man had died of a stroke in his fifties, his philosophy of hats so impressed the man with many hats that he converted it into a proverb:

“Only work things one by one;
Wholly work them till they’re done.”

The problem, he concluded, was trying to wear more than one hat at one time. Away with such a silly habit! From now on, he would wear just one hat at a time.

To his satisfaction, this worked well for a time. Now the hat he wore received the attention it deserved, even to the point of getting fully broke in. For the first time in his life, the man with many hats was accomplishing things. Again, he felt superior and congratulated himself on his accomplishments.

Still, there were many hats to wear. By wearing only one hat at a time, the man began to stay up later and to get up earlier, even trying to wear his hat to bed at night, much to his wife's dismay. Now what would he do? He could not sustain this pace for long; but it was hard to give up, given the sense of satisfaction he felt over his accomplishments. Desperate, he tried the priority game again, making elaborate schedules and devoting allotted times for each hat. Inevitably, some hat was left unworn, and some person was sent away rebuffed for interrupting his hat-wearing schedule. Not even his family felt loved, for his drive to wear each hat began to consume his energy and thought. It was hard work coordinating all those hats, and he was determined to do it, even if it killed him.

In the end, it did. How vain that he had spent his years on hats, when so many friends and family longed for his time! How vain that he had spent his years in grief, when God was so willing to give him sleep! How tragic that he did not see the problem was not priority, but superfluity! He had too many hats, more than God wanted him to have or enabled him to wear. It was a mixture of pride and self-love that kept the man from letting go of some of his hats. Oh that you and I would learn to hope in God, letting Him prune us and casting on Him the cares beyond our ability! It is His will that on average those whom He loves receive a good night sleep, perhaps with a cozy nightcap.

Source: Psalms 127:1-2; 131:1-3.

Be a Loyal Friend

December 11, 2009

"O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?

O Judah, what shall I do unto thee?

For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away" (Hosea 6:4).

Many of our so-called friendships resemble the fickleness of gasoline-buyers: For two cents less a gallon, we forsake the station of our forefathers for an upstart. We resemble the fickleness of the Jews, who forsook their God for other lovers, showing that their "goodness"--literally, their loyal-love--was as loyal as morning fog that dissipates at dawn. It is a cultural mindset, a disease that has corroded our relationships, and I am writing to urge us Christians to regain a habit of mind that is loyal almost to a fault. God is loyal to us; and we should be loyal to our friends.

The word for loyal-love in the Hebrew is *hesed*--that special quality that Ruth exhibited to Naomi, when the older lady urged her to return, but Ruth replied, "Where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). It is that special quality that Jesus exhibited when "having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). It is that special quality that we should now exhibit to one another, as the Son of Ruth lives in us by the Spirit of Truth.

Consider your adornment. What do you wear around your neck, and write upon the tablet of your heart? According to the book of Proverbs, we should not let "mercy and truth" leave us, but place them on our body where they will not be lost, and keep them in our memory at all times--as if written there in granite. Literally, the Wisdom of God advises us to keep *loyal-love* and *being-true-to-others* with us at all times. What precious qualities! Such rare jewels, perhaps even more rare today than at other times! If we do keep them close, then as a rule we shall find "favor and good understanding in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3:3-4). In other words, other men will think well of us and grant us favor, as will God Himself.

This fact of God's world is especially important in hurtful situations, where we have wronged one another. Though we often say that time will heal, it will not do so without the right ointment. According to Proverbs 16:6, the ointment is again the "mercy and truth" of loyal friendship. Do not push the wronged person to accept you with

open arms, as if nothing has happened. True, that person must forgive; but a wound is a wound, and healing takes time. How can we aid the healing process? Be loyal and true in all that you do over the long haul, and with the favor of God, trust will be restored, and the wrong will be largely forgotten.

Interestingly, it is just these two qualities that Christ came armed with at Christmas: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) *full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). The unique glory of Jesus, showing us that He was more than mere man, was the fullness of loyal-love and truth exhibited in His life and death on our behalf. In these traits, more than in His supernatural power and miraculous wonders, the Son revealed the Father as His exact image. Christian, it is from this very fullness, the fullness of loyal-love and truth, that you and I have all received--receiving not only the grace of Jesus dying for us, but now the grace of Jesus living in us by His Spirit (cf. John 1:16). You are armed with all the loyalty of the Best Friend Himself, free from your sins and free to love fellow sinners. By His fullness then, *be a loyal friend* and display the glory of Christ to others, even as He displayed the glory of the Father to you. Loyalty is what the Lord requires, and loyalty is what we should love (Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:8).

Basket Six • Cultural Observations

America, Not So Beautiful

July 2, 2008

Lately my heart has been moved, even to tears, by the moral decline in America. Not many like to read about such things, including myself at times, but I ask you to continue reading. When finished, you may want to share this with a friend, to help spread the word about the current situation.

The apostle Paul once said, “She who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives” (1 Timothy 5:6). As a nation, Lady Liberty is still filled with activity, from commerce to recreation, but at her core, she is really dead. **America died about 1962, and it was God who put her to death.** Let me explain.

According to Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome (then the capital of a vast empire), God treats all nations alike based on the following principles. First, God makes Himself known through what He has created, thereby rendering all men inexcusable for their suppression of the truth about God (Romans 1:18-20). This is why there is so much hostility among scientists against the Intelligent Design movement. (See the movie *Expelled* for details.) Second, God judges those who refuse to worship Him or give thanks for His merciful goodness. Now, when we hear the word “judgment”, we often think in terms of military defeat, famine (severe economic hard times!), wild beasts, and disease—God’s self-declared “four severe judgments” (Ezekiel 14:21). Instead of mentioning these, Paul tells us about a *preliminary judgment*, when God first hands over a people to the tyranny of their lust—especially sexual immorality and even homosexuality, leading to dishonor and eventual death (Romans 1:24-32). All this occurs when men refuse “to retain God in their knowledge” (Romans 1:28).

Officially, America rejected the knowledge of God around 1962. On June 25, 1962, the Supreme Court ruled in *Engel v. Vitale* that the following prayer given by New York school children was unconstitutional: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence on Thee and beg Thy blessing over us, our parents, our teachers and our nation.” One year earlier, in *Torcaso v. Watkins*, the Supreme Court overruled the Maryland Constitution, which made “a declaration of belief in the existence of God” necessary to hold public office. In both cases, the knowledge of God was rejected, overturning a tradition stretching back to America’s founding document, which declares not only independence from Great Britain, but also dependence upon rights bestowed by a “Creator” and an entitlement given by “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” (*The Declaration of Independence*). In other words, it is not only wrong to reject the knowledge of God, it is *un-American*—but it happened.

As a result, God handed America over to sexual revolution of the 1960s and to the consequent guilt of having aborted fifty million babies—almost 4,000 per day, which is the number of troops killed in Iraq since the war’s beginning. Do you see? In light of America’s sins, we may dread war, famine, beasts, and disease, but we must realize: *America is already under judgment*. This nation’s very addiction to sinful pleasure is a form of God’s judgment, and will lead to further judgment unless she officially repents. Like the woman mentioned at the beginning, America is *already* dead, and needs a resurrection.

Disturbing Trends in America

July 25, 2008

Lately I have been pained by the lack of sensitivity in our culture. Many live with severe wounds and do not even feel it. Daily they step on hot coals, but walk on, oblivious to their danger—and if someone should point out the danger, they seem indifferent or perturbed. The dangers are simply *unthinkable*, falling outside the circle of their experience. “Who’s living your way anymore?” they seem to ask, or, “Who’s really getting hurt by such things?”

Three areas in particular have gripped my attention.

First, there is a growing acceptance of fornication. The following examples have been brought to my attention this week in conversation. Unmarried couples in their twenties are no longer ashamed to say they are living together, but openly talk about their children or about their landscaping endeavors at their house. Young unmarried

ladies commonly take birth control pills, as if this were a virtuous thing, to wisely avoid unwanted pregnancies while engaging in sexual activity. Teens feel the pressure to pair up as if they were married and belonged to one another, but then find it difficult not to act as married couples do in private. Even visiting the bank recently, I overheard a country music singer in the background praise his woman (his wife?) for her lovemaking abilities, while a day later I sat under another loudspeaker filling the room with the messages of “classic rock.” Do these things no longer disturb us as a community? Have we forgotten the warnings of Scripture, that fornicators do not inherit the kingdom of God, but receive the judgment of God in due time (1 Corinthians 6:9; Hebrews 13:4)? Sexually-transmitted diseases and scarred emotions are nothing compared to the lake of fire, whose smoke ascends forever.

Second, there is a growing delusion about the expendability of a public commitment. For instance, it is not uncommon for folks who never attend church to profess to be Christians, and to say that a Christian does not need to go to church, let alone join a church in a public commitment. Honestly, it reminds me of a youth claiming to be on a local ball team, even though he never goes to practice with his team or listens to his coach. This is ludicrous! Is it loving for fellow Christians to not even *know* each other or *see* each other, let alone pray for each other and encourage each other? John wrote: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this is the commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21, NKJV). Similarly, living together does not constitute a marriage commitment until vows are publicly exchanged. Jesus once told a woman, in His successful efforts to win her to salvation, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly” (John 4:17-18, NKJV). As a culture, we are so far gone, that we now argue whether a union of a man and a man should be called “marriage,” when God has clearly called it an “abomination,” a detestable act which defiles the land and provokes God to eject the transgressing nation from the land (Leviticus 18:22, 24-30).

Finally, and most tragically, there is a growing blindness to guilt. Recently, I was talking with one elderly woman about “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, NKJV). She responded as if she had no sin. Having no sense of sin, how could she sense a need for a Savior?

Do you see? We have grown insensitive to sin, truth, and guilt. Sin has grown so common, and judgment so uncommon that God’s patience has become a seal of approval to the status quo. Would to God that He would awaken us once again with words and not with a rod! But words of warning sound unthinkable to this current generation, so what is left but the rod, or else final doom? It is just as Isaiah foretold: “When Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. Let grace be shown to the wicked, yet he will not learn righteousness” (Isaiah 26:9-10, NKJV).

I am fearful about the future of America, but I am hopeful about the prospects of individuals. If this letter has moved you to sorrow for sin, and you desire counsel about what to do next, *please* call me, and let’s arrange a visit. For centuries, God has been calling individuals to “flee from the wrath to come” (Matthew 3:7), renewing their *sensitivity* so that they have “ears to hear” and eyes to see (Matthew 13:9). It is a blessed thing to fear the judgment of God and to find refuge in the shadow of the Cross (Psalm 2:12)!

Death in the Definition of Success: Thoughts on a Commencement Address

June 11, 2010

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

This year, I heard a meaningful commencement address at our town’s high school graduation ceremony. In contrast to some years, when the address seems as predictable as the attire and the music, generating as much interest, this year featured a local chiropractor, a hometown boy at his prime in mid-life, giving his philosophy of life, and calling the graduates to very specific things.

First, he called them to success, defining it in terms like *the progressive realization of an established ideal*. (No platitudes here!) In his opinion, only five percent of high school graduates achieve success. Most fail, but end up blaming others for their failure. Instead of the blame-game, he called on the graduates to take responsibility for their own lives, including their failures.

Second, he called them to non-conformity. In explaining why so many failed, the speaker identified conformity as the main cause. Most just follow the crowd and never stop to think about where they are heading or where they could be heading. They mindlessly drift through life.

Third, he called the grads to goals, identifying this as the key to achieving success. In all, he tried to back up his points with quotes ranging from Emerson to the Bible, though the latter was not quoted in context well.

Since this was a public address, I would like to take this opportunity to respond publicly with these comments:

Regarding the need to take responsibility, I fully agree. Human nature has been practicing the blame-game ever since Adam pointed to Eve, and Eve to the serpent. In contrast, the Wisdom of God says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). Given our society's victim-mentality, we need more public admonitions like this, not less.

Regarding conformity, its status as virtue or vice depends on the issue at hand, as well as the crowd. In a church, non-conformity may represent rebellion against God, assuming the congregation is generally obedient to Christ. Furthermore, non-conformity can sometimes be the cloak of prideful self-assertion, which, while differing from the herd-mentality, is nonetheless lacking in the fear of God and conformity to His law. Sometimes a group of "non-conformists" end up conforming to one another, ironically looking the same in their con-conformity to the Establishment. In the end, we must *both* not conform and conform. The same Bible that calls Christians to not conform to the world also calls them to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 12:2; 8:29). No man is an island.

Finally, regarding the definition of success and the need for goals, the address begged the question, "What are worthy goals and ideals?" For example, if I do everything right regarding my health, my wealth, and my family, and die at a ripe old age, how in the end do I differ from a fool who squandered his health, wealth, and family? In the end, are we not both dead and absolutely impoverished, having no life? It was thoughts like these that drove the wise writer of Ecclesiastes to hate life (2:17). He despaired of his labor to think that after his death, he would bequeath everything to an unknown person, who may turn out to be a fool (2:18-19). To what advantage would that be? It is as if we can already hear Jesus asking, "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Therefore, death is the final leveler of all definitions of success. If the success cannot jump the grave, it is at best a glorious failure. Even if it were to benefit many now and many more later, at length such "success" shall all be circumscribed with death, when generation after generation lie in their graves. This may be hard to accept for a strong man in his prime, who, as I will attest, has helped others, such as my son's ball-team and my neighbor's need. Still, somehow, the question of death must be faced--and it might as well be faced by high school grads, before they build a mountain of vanity to insulate them from the specter of Eternity. Ironically, while I agree with speaker in calling the graduates to look down road, and often find that such a mindset is the preparation for salvation, with Jesus I insist that we look *all the way down the road*, to see if the bridge is built back in Christ, or if it is still washed out due to our sin. Ignoring death is not prudent, nor is any definition of success without death successful.

Only one Man has addressed the question of death with more than speculation or personal heroism. Jesus Christ not only brought life and immortality to light through His message, and faced the ravages of crucifixion with resolution, He Himself rose from the dead and reigns as Lord, promising to return someday to resurrect both the righteous and the wicked. To enter that Kingdom of God should be our chief goal. All other achievements will be burned up when the Lord Himself establishes a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. He has told the way, and He has shown the way. Indeed, *He is the Way*. Do you know Him? That is eternal life and true success.

A Review of the Play, "Our Town," by Thornton Wilder

October 9, 2009

Last night at Hillsdale College, I was profoundly moved by the play "Our Town," written by Thornton Wilder. Set in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, around 1900, the play depicts typical life in small-town America through

three acts: daily life, love and marriage, and the meaning of life and death. Though billed as a nostalgic look at rural life in America, the play is deeper than nostalgia. Similar to the poetry of fellow New Englander Robert Frost, Wilder uses the details of rural life to make a profound statement about the vanity of life, in even its most happiest moments.

Hints of this profound side are dropped even at the beginning of the play, when the narrator--a charming, though mysterious character--lets us know that Mr. Gibbs survived his wife by many years, even though we are witnessing Mrs. Gibbs hurry on with breakfast, in an effort to get her children out the door for school. It is this detached sense, this sense of impending death, that sets all the talk about the weather on one hand, and urgency on the other, in a larger, though subtle context. Yes, there is the humor of everyday life, the embarrassment of mishaps, and even the disappointments of not ever going on vacation, as Mrs. Gibbs relates her frustrated dreams to her neighbor, Mrs. Webb. There is also the beginnings of young love, as George Gibbs seeks help in algebra from Emily Webb. Charming. There is even the recurrent mention of small details, such as the sunrise and the butternut tree in Emily's front yard. Amidst it all, however, stands the march of time, incessantly mentioned by the narrator.

The second act is entirely consumed with George and Emily, how they first knew they were in love with each other, and then the wedding day itself. The awkwardness of first love and the nervousness of one's wedding are portrayed so well that a husband and wife will likely be led to reminisce themselves about those early days. Again, charming. The act ends, however, in a foreboding way, as the narrator (acting as the preacher) recounts having done two hundred weddings or so, but then wonders why. The story is the same: children, then the first rheumatism; grandchildren, then the second rheumatism; then death, and the reading of the will, to which he adds, "only one in a thousand is interesting." All the while, a young lady in the back is crying over the (supposed) beauty of the wedding, and the scene ends with her calling out after the bride Emily, "Happiness. That is all that matters."

At this point, Wilder has thrown down the gauntlet. Is a wedding, or any significant happy moment, the highest meaning of life? From the careful review of details in the first act, Wilder at first seems to be saying that it is the small things in life that make it worthwhile. Do not overlook the sunrise and sunset, the birds and the trees in your yard, or even the interesting people around you every day. In other words, why overemphasize the few "big" days at the expense of so many "small" days?

This re-emphasis on the small things in life may be one message of Wilder's, but not in the way we may first assume. The third act makes it clear that Wilder is more interested in emphasizing the small things because they are not such a great loss at death. Whether it be the cynicism of the town drunk, who took his life because he perhaps overemphasized this life, or the disappointment of Mrs. Gibbs, who after death realizes she and her husband had the money for a vacation and never took it, the final act uses death to de-emphasize the big things of life. Why should we place so much weight on the big things to make us happy, when they too are doomed to cease when life is over, leaving us with a greater feel of disappointment?

It was at this point that I felt like preaching to the audience. The whole play screams at us, "What is the point of this life?" Like Ecclesiastes, Wilder rightly points out the vanity of life--all of life. Whether we were wise or foolish, happy or sad in this life, it all must end. Death is the great equalizer. And then what? That is where the play monumentally fails. Having set the audience up for such a question, the best Wilder can offer is a false conceit that all is at rest beyond the grave, waiting for a nebulous better future, but certainly better off than the blind people who scurry about in the town, thinking mistakenly that their acts and words have anything significant about them. But on what *basis* can Wilder give such a hope?

We need eyewitness testimony, not poetic speculation. In space and in time, in the land of Palestine and in the days of Caesar Tiberius, Jesus Christ "abolished death, and...brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10), of which I have been appointed a herald to our town of Hudson, Michigan. The play "Our Town" may be the most popular play in American history, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only true answer to the meaning of life and the vanity that Wilder so rightly perceived. May the Lord use the play to drive despairing sinners to the Light of the Glory of Christ!

The Political Conservative and the Rhetoric of Fear

May 6, 2011

Yesterday, I listened to a well-known political conservative urge a room of pastors and civic leaders to react in fear. The Revolutionary War and the Civil War were repeatedly cited, creating a sense of current crisis. Stories were told of individuals facing death in making a stand, from the 9/11 flight over Pennsylvania to the Chinese students waving the Declaration of Independence before oncoming tanks. Even Franklin Graham's rejection at the Pentagon last year and his subsequent prayer in the parking lot became an example of what "we" will probably have to do more frequently in the future. *Do you see?* Face your fears, and take a stand. That is what the rhetoric said.

To someone prone to fear—someone like myself—such rhetoric is intimidating. *Me? Face a tank? Face terrorists? Gulp.* Listening then becomes imagination, and imagination leads to a fleshly determination to take a stand next time. If effective, some poor shopkeeper or bystander may perhaps get an earful, not due to my love for him, but due to my love for The Cause and to my selfish desire to be "faithful" till death. Similar things happen in evangelism, when a Christian is whipped into courage by statistics or by a guilty conscience, and then "tells" someone the Gospel. The issue becomes fear versus faithfulness, not loving sensitivity. As an effort to effect a loving change, such evangelism and politics are often hypocritical. Fear is the enemy, according to the rhetoric; and the solution is to take a stand—even if it is entirely futile.

Granted, there are times, such as the 9/11 plane, when it is necessary to lay one's life down for others. And granted, such times will need courage to overcome personal fear. But even then, courage should be motivated by love. According to the apostle Paul, the answer to timidity is not raw courage, but a combination of power, love, and sane thinking (2 Timothy 1:7). If the only thing at stake is proving my courage, then love and sane thinking are irrelevant; but if I have nothing personal to prove, but only loving objectives to obtain, then I should consider carefully if *running away* may be the best course of action. Jesus retreated often, and urged those persecuted to do the same (see Matthew 10). History should not always honor the "martyrs" for a cause, even a right cause.

In the current political climate, there are two things that a Christian should keep in mind:

First, fear is never the issue. Love is the fulfillment of the law, and all earthly laws should be patterned after the divine law. "Let all that you do be done with love" (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Second, in Scripture dealing specifically with politics, we are told that it is God's will for us to silence "the ignorance of foolish men" by doing what is right (1 Peter 2:15). Actions must speak louder than words, for those under authority are urged by the apostle in the larger context to keep quiet. Often action will require courage, but in focusing on acting over speaking, we are encouraged both to look to God for our vindication and to look to our neighbor for his good.

Take the abortion debate, for example. It is true that abortion should be outlawed as murder. In our political context, it should at least have been left to the states to decide. It was not, and now over fifty million have died. *What should we do?*

At first glance, it is tempting just to write letters to the editor and to picket outside clinics and courtrooms. Such letters should be written (and I have done so), but they must be done very carefully, for by saying abortion is murder, I am indicting lots of ladies who have chosen that option in the past, often under pressure and ignorance, and who now are often regretting such a decision, even to the point of suffering. Do I have a simultaneous word for them? Am I not a murderer myself, according to Jesus, for all the angry words I have hurled in my lifetime (Matthew 5:21-22)? Is not my mission to preach the Gospel, not the Law? Again, the issue is not fear, but love. Somehow, in keeping the preborn from dying, I must also learn how to love the living.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that abortion will never be fully eradicated, especially in our current climate. Abortion is the product of a culture committed to unbridled lust, and governments can only enforce one step above the culture's mores. It was due to this fact that not even the Law of Moses could abolish divorce, though it did get regulated (cf. Matthew 19:3ff). If we are to reduce the number of abortions, it must be primarily from the bottom up, though coupled with helpful laws that make it difficult to get an abortion ignorantly and privately. Here is where the rhetoric of love can greatly offset the rhetoric of fear.

According to the research of Marvin Olasky, an editor with *WORLD* magazine, abortions per capita were higher in the mid-1800s than they are today. Mainly due to prostitution, abortions abounded in eastern cities. The numbers were ultimately reduced not by laws, for they were *already* on the books, but by benevolence. Christians provided care for young ladies caught in a web of sin and need, and by and large this action reduced the occurrences of abortion.

The same kind of reduction has occurred in our generation. We have needed laws, and they have helped. God bless the politicians who out of fear of God and love of man have stood firm for our preborn neighbors, for it is the duty of rulers to speak out and to decide in favor of the oppressed! But that is not the whole story. A whole network of benevolence has arisen, taking advantage of technology and charity in order to provide an alternative way.

Given the fact that most of us have limited access to political power, what should we do regarding abortion? We should support our local crisis pregnancy centers, and befriend the troubled teenager who lives next door. We should affirm the goodness of children, and speak well of families raising many children responsibly. We should be willing to adopt, provide foster care, or even take in young ladies in distress, caring for them full-term, as Christ cared for us and bore our sorrows to the cross. We should also discuss politics with one eye on the salvation of our neighbor, remembering that the enemy is never flesh and blood, and that souls are more valuable than votes. In doing these things, ignorant men will be silenced; and as the stories are told, God will be glorified (cf. Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12ff). In today's climate of fear, we need desperately to hear the stories of quiet love. *Who will tell these stories?*

The room yesterday lacked such stories, and sadly, that occurred in a state that may lead the nation in the number of abortion reductions. Surely there are stories here that need to be told.

The Real Issue Is Marriage, Not Homosexuality

May 2008

Our nation is facing one of the greatest moral crises since the abolition of slavery and its hundred-year delay on payment, as Martin Luther King, Jr. phrased it. Only this time, instead of debating the implications that "all men are created equal," we are wrestling with the implications that all people are created either male or female. Instead of simply being another debate over civil rights, which is an important topic and pertains to one's status in society, the current debate enters the home and deals with the most fundamental of all human relationships--the very first relationship in human history and the legitimate source of all other human beings--marriage itself.

On one side of the debate are those who insist that marriage should be redefined to include any exclusively-committed relationship between two consenting adults, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Some who advocate this position practice an "alternative" lifestyle, while others simply desire not to judge. To be honest, it is tempting to pick up stones and to throw them at this point. I refrain. Yes, I do believe that homosexuality is a sin, for our Maker says so in His word, but I also believe that the goal of His Gospel is to save sinners of all kinds, including heterosexual sinners and homosexual sinners. By God's own record, both heterosexual sinners and homosexual sinners have been cleansed of their unclean lifestyle by the saving power of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

In this regard, I have failed in the past to keep the main thing the main thing; and so perhaps have others, who along with me oppose the redefinition of marriage. It has been said of us that we are unfairly picking on homosexuality, and on many occasions the charge has been just. True, the political climate lends itself to such a focus, for in state after state, it is the debate of the day. Moreover, there is reason to see homosexuality as a more extreme form of sin, for it is not merely the sin of excess involving natural functions, but it is the very abandonment of that which is natural for that which is contrary to nature, even though it may feel "natural" over time (see Romans 1:24-27). All of this is true, yet in Jesus' eyes, ignorant homosexuality is not as bad as the inconsistency of those who regularly hear His word and yet do not obey (see Matthew 11:23-24). If we make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, we have voluntarily assumed a higher standard upon which to be judged--and woe to us if we should fail to repent for our own sins, which are many. Failure here is hypocrisy, which is worse than ignorant homosexuality.

Furthermore, the main issue politically is not homosexuality, but marriage. "Marriage is to be held in honor among

all,” says the sacred record, “and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4). If marriage is the standard, where is the protest against *all* breaches of it, heterosexual as well as homosexual? Adultery, premarital sex, divorce-and-remarriage, cohabitation, pornography, and inner lust are all contrary to the standard of marriage that God set up in the Beginning. Jesus Himself concluded, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:6). It is still possible in modern times to uphold the standard of marriage in cases involving adultery, as South Korea recently showed in sending an adulterous actress to prison. In America, such sins are described as “affairs.” In America, divorce has hurt the children to the point that they tend to live together before seeking marriage. Even some elderly couples are now cohabitating without a marriage license so as not to lose social security benefits.

The real issue is marriage, not homosexuality. The real issue is our own personal sin, not the sin of another. The real issue is salvation. “Come,” says the prophet, “and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up” (Hosea 6:1).

Health Care Reform and the Value of One Life

September 2009

Amid the rising costs of health care, it is tempting to think that for the good of the “team” some individuals should be denied care. This is apparently the logic of Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, health-policy adviser to the Office of Management and Budget. In a recent editorial of the *Wall Street Journal* (August 26, 2009), it is reported that Emanuel calls improving the current system mere “lipstick;” instead, what is required is a wholesale reevaluation of the medical mindset itself, including a medical doctor’s Hippocratic Oath to “use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgment.” According to Emanuel, such thinking myopically focuses on the individual to the jeopardy of society. In other words, some individuals should “take one for the team.”

In one sense, this proposal is logical, perhaps even heroic. If there are limited resources preventing everyone from being served, then some individuals *should* step aside so that others in greater need can be served. Much of Christianity is based on this principle of self-sacrifice, epitomized in the voluntary death of Jesus Himself for the sin of the world. Two things, however, bother me about Dr. Emanuel’s reasoning. First, is it really true that there are limited resources? Not only can God multiply our assets (if only we would turn to Him in repentance, rather than ban Him from mention in our public square), but even on a human level, there is so much waste due to litigation threats and the lack of accountability in pricing due to the impersonal nature of the insurance industry. Can *nothing* be done here? Second, on a more philosophical level, who has the right to decide who should get care? It is one thing to die voluntarily for the good of society, but quite another thing to be denied care, even when you as an individual could pay for it. Does any governing board really *know* that a particular life is worth more to society dead than alive? Can we humans foresee all the ramifications?

On September 2, 1944, several American flyboys careened towards the island of Chichi Jima in order to take out some Japanese radio stations. The third plane took a hit, yet managed to drop the bombs as commanded, before the crew “hit the silk” to escape the burning plane. Just before the plane exploded, the twenty-year-old pilot bailed, and spent over three hours in a yellow raft, while American planes fired 1,460 rounds of machine gun bullets at Japanese boats to keep them at bay, allowing the American submarine USS *Finback* to eventually pick up the pilot. That pilot’s name was George H. W. Bush, the forty-first president of the United States. Years later, a Japanese soldier told the president, “Do you know what the Japanese soldier next to me said when we saw the submarine that rescued you? He said, ‘American sure take good care of their pilots!’ Sending a sub for one pilot was something Japan would never have done.” To the Japanese, the wounded were an impediment. For the good of the “team,” the wounded typically either killed themselves or were killed (see James Bradley, *Flyboys*, pp. 142, 192-97, 334).

Sadly, America herself is now beginning to reason like imperial Japan. God’s law commends the care of the orphan and widow, but we Americans are beginning to estimate the value of a deformed infant and a demented lady strictly in terms of the good of society. *Do we know such things?* Do we know what that infant will become? Do we know what profound effect that older lady may be having on those around her, even when she herself can no longer think? Am I God, knowing the end from the beginning? If not, why do I assume His place, making decisions about who should live and who should not?

Remember, it was wicked Caiaphas that justified the destruction of Jesus by saying, “It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (John 11:50). We are beginning to see the return of Caiaphas today—men who sit in God’s place and make decisions about ultimate good, as if they really did know. Beware of such gods in our midst! Ironically, Dr. Emanuel’s last name literally means, “God-with-us.”

Liberty, Equality, Then What?

September 2009

Historically, the French answered, “Fraternity.” More recently, William Kristol from Harvard University suggested the possibility of “Honor.” What should it be? This question is more than simply historical trivia. In our current politics, those in favor of liberty are often pitted against those in favor of equality. It is the libertarians against the egalitarians, and currently the egalitarians seem to be winning. But must these ideals be opposed? Part of the solution is found in correctly answering the question above. To understand the solution, consider the following dilemma.

Suppose we tried to make everyone in America both free and equal. First, we must face the problem of definitions. On the one hand, are we striving for positive liberty, when a person is empowered to do what he wishes, or are we settling for negative liberty, when a person faces no constraints in doing what he wishes? Similarly, regarding the concept of equality, historian J. R. Pole discerned six separate definitions used in American history, including equality before the law, equality of opportunity, equality of power, equality of esteem, equality of the sexes, and equality of religion. Thus we have at least two definitions of liberty and six definitions of equality, leading to a matrix of twelve combinations. Which one will we use?

On the surface, the solution may appear simple. We will opt for negative liberty, for not even God Himself operates on the principle of an equal amount of positive liberty, since He bestows His gifts in varying degrees according to His own sovereign grace. Therefore, let every man be equally free from constraint! Not so fast. As libertarian Jan Narveson pointed out in one of his essays by way of argument, money not only empowers some, but the lack of money also hinders others. In this way, we might say that economic poverty really does constrain a man against his will. Think about it in the extreme. If a man is starving to death and dies, his liberty is definitely curtailed. Therefore, even on the basis of negative liberty, it would seem that economic equality may be necessary for equal liberty.

Interestingly, the Bible does favor some form of economic equality among Christians, but not the form that the radical egalitarians and communists of our day would recognize. Interestingly, a scholarly article appeared recently that mistakenly cited “Corinthians 8:14-15” as a communistic sentiment. Besides the fact that the reference was botched (it should have read “2 Corinthians 8:14-15”), more importantly, Paul’s point was missed. Yes, Paul does quote the Law in confirming that the goal has always been “equality, that now at this time your [the Corinthian believers’] abundance may supply their [the poor Jewish Christians’] lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality” (8:14). General economic equality among Christians is a Christian goal. However, the means to this equality is not external force, but inner love. A few verses earlier, Paul made it clear, “I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others” (8:8). Do you see? Paul did not remove their liberty to force an equality, but instead appealed to their liberty to voluntarily bring about economic equality.

Years ago, I heard theologian David Wells say that once love diminishes in a society, law rises to fill the void. We have a lot of laws today. We are in desperate need of a revival of love, which is the classic Christian way. Paul urged love when he wrote, “Brethren, you have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). Martin Luther urged love when he wrote his classic treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). Do we not need it urged again today?

Christian, let me ask you. If you are a political libertarian, is it solely because you oppose political larceny or might there also be some reluctance to part with your earned income to help the poor? Conversely, if you are a political egalitarian, is it solely because you oppose the oppression of the masses or might there also be some secret envy to have what others have? In both cases, it is covetousness—either to want what others have, or to keep what others need. Either way, the solution is love. We need more love.

Therefore, I conclude with a suggestion triggered by my sixteen-year-old son. Perhaps the saying should read, "Liberty, Equality, Charity." Only by grace in Christ can such an ideal ever be even foreshadowed here on earth, but what a beautiful picture that presents! Praise God for His glorious gospel and grace!

Multiculturalism, Equality, and the Unfair Position of the Jew

October 2, 2010

"To the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

The horseshoe of privilege ringed the room, with white, privileged males inhabiting one end and minority females on the other end. Near the females stood a minority male, who carefully explained to the group that privilege resembled a baseball bat. Those who have the privilege often tote the bat with no thought of hitting someone, while those below see the bat as a threat. More conversation ensued. Suddenly, one of the white, privileged males broke rank, crossed over and embraced members of the other side, declaring to all that we were one in Christ. One of the thoughtful minority females demurred--not at the sentiment, but at the cross-over itself, which could not be done in real life. The horseshoe represented real experiences that could not be swapped. Her point stood, but the man of the bat took the man of the cross-over to the middle as a visible affirmation that indeed, we all were all one in Christ.

For me, this conversation was my first taste of a very common exercise done today in multicultural awareness. Educators use such exercises to make the privileged aware not only of the underprivileged and disadvantaged, but also of their own privileges--of aspects to their lives that cannot change, but must be handled with both gentleness and responsibility. As a Christian, I appreciate this reminder, for it is the responsibility of the strong to help the weak, and not to please themselves. Such is the example of Christ (see Romans 15:1-3). Moreover, in Christ, there is "neither Jew nor Greek,...bond nor free,...male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). To deny this unity by asserting a separate identity is wrong. We should rather affirm our oneness with all Christians.

Still, for all these healthy lessons, there was a disturbing, underlying tone in the room that left me uneasy.

First, the exercise left the impression that all inequality is wrong, as if inequality would not exist in an ideal world. Granted, some inequalities are wrong, and should be condemned as injustice; granted, some inequalities are unavoidable, and must be handled with grace and responsibility; however, *is it the will of God to rid humanity of inequality?* In this world, we see a huge variety in natural talents and abilities. Is this distribution an error? In the world to come, some will rule "ten cities" and others only "five cities" (Luke 19:17, 19). Will that be unfair?

With regard to justice, God is strictly equal: He will "render to every man according to his deeds...for there is no respect of persons with God" (Romans 2:6, 11). However, with regard to grace, God is free to bestow more on one than on another. If we should be envious, as if God wronged us, we may hear Him respond as the master in the parable, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Matthew 20:15). Granted, grace is not often *fair*, in the sense of strict equality, but it is always *right*, in that God never wrongs us in withholding a gift we could never obligate Him to give (cf. Job 41:10; Romans 11:35). Ironically, in the parable, the full-time workers resented the master making the part-timer workers equal in pay. Wonderful "inequality"!

Second, the exercise lumped all inequalities together, as if there were no fundamental distinction between economic status, gender, and race. With regard to economics, God distributes His manna unequally to His people, so that we would freely distribute to anyone in need among us, thereby creating equality (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). With regard to gender, God established a fundamental inequality that is only partially erased by spiritual equality and soon fully erased in the world to come (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:7-9; 1 Timothy 2:11-14; Luke 20:34-36). Although both economic and gender inequalities are by design, only the former is to be fully erased now--and even then, only through voluntary means, rather than coercive redistribution of wealth.

Race falls in between economics and gender, sharing the inflexibility of gender but the flexibility of wealth, in that all races should be granted full equality now--all races, that is, *but one: the Jews*. Ironically, for all the hype in the

room over equality among the races, even with the laudatory emphasis on missions, the very preoccupation itself proved our Gentile arrogance. We assumed that the final goal in history is the salvation of the nations, rather than the salvation of Israel. Three times, Paul warned Gentile Christians not to “boast,” or be “highminded,” or “wise” in our own estimation, as if we were the goal of God’s program (Romans 11:18, 20, 25). Missions ultimately promotes the glory of God by saving the Jews through the salvation of the Gentiles (see Romans 11:25-36). Ironically, the Jew is often not mentioned, let alone highlighted, in talks about East and West, colored and white. For this reason, we should revisit the apostolic principle: “To the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). This inequality may not be fair, but it is certainly right, for “salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22).

The National Debt and the Nation

October 2008

A trillion is a million millions--and the United States owes *twelve* trillion dollars. Every day this debt is costing American taxpayers over one billion dollars in interest. *Every day*. This fiscal year alone, the government overspent 1.4 trillion dollars, which is about 3.8 billion dollars *per day*. All in all, the national debt already takes forty cents of every tax dollars just to pay interest--in other words, almost half of your income tax does nothing for the American people except keep your government’s nose above the water for a little while longer. That is amazing. All these statistics come from my recollections, having read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* online.

Blaming the government is too easy, however, especially in a nation where officials are elected by popular vote. According to Christian authors David Chilton and Randy Alcorn, the United States government would not borrow so much money if the people themselves were opposed to debt. The statistics seem to bear this out. According to the Federal Reserve, consumer debt in August sat at 2.5 trillion dollars, which is mainly what “we the people” owe on credit cards and car loans. On one- to four-family residences, we owe 10.9 trillion in outstanding mortgages. The overall debt is 14.5 trillion dollars on mortgages, with farm debt accounting for only 113 billion dollars. In other words, the American people owe more money than their government. We are all in the kettle together.

How did we *as a people* get to such a point? Where are we going? What should a Christian do in light of it? This essay will address the first question, leaving the second and third for subsequent postings.

To set the context for American policy and custom, it is first necessary to consider debt and interest in light of biblical law. First, in the Old Testament, *God established a limit to debt*. Every seven years, the Jews were literally told to drop all debts against one another (Deuteronomy 15:1). The rationale seemed to be this: debt is a form of slavery, and God did not want His people, whom He just redeemed from slavery in Egypt, brought back into slavery again through debt (cf. Proverbs 22:7; Deuteronomy 15:15). Moreover, if the people obeyed the Lord, there would not even be need for debt, for due to God’s blessing there would be no poor in the land. Even further, they, as a people, would lend to other nations and not borrow; they would reign, and not be reigned (Deuteronomy 15:4-6; cf. 28:12). Knowing, however, that the people would not obey, God also gave instructions about lending to the poor, stating that “the poor shall never cease out of the land”--a statement Jesus Himself affirmed to His disciples (15:7-11; cf. Matthew 26:11). Therefore, it is a blessing to be free of debt; and only God’s blessing can eliminate poverty, the cause behind such debt.

Second, *God also established a limit to interest*. Although He allowed the Jews to charge interest to foreigners, He repeatedly forbid His people from charging interest to one another (Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20). In Hebrew, the word “interest” literally means a “bite” (*neshekh*). Interest takes a bites out of the debtor, which is doubly cruel if the debtor was forced to go into debt due to poverty or taxes, as the situation in Nehemiah’s day makes clear (Nehemiah 5). While some argue that it may have been proper for Jews to charge interest on business loans, given Jesus’ comment on interest in the parable of the talents, it should be kept in mind that Jesus did not endorse every detail of His parables (e.g. Luke 16:1ff), nor does He or anyone else in the Bible teach explicitly about debt in any other context than poverty. As Randy Alcorn has observed, the Bible gives not one favorable word about debt, but assumes that debt is the last resort, entered only when one faces abject poverty. Therefore, the test of genuine charity in lending was whether the creditor lent *interest-free*. This was a mark of the upright man (Psalm 15:5; cf. Ezekiel 18:8, 13, 17).

In all these commands, the Jews were to fear God (Leviticus 25:36; cf. Nehemiah 5:9). He stands above all

governments as the final Judge. If the Jews abused the poor man, God would still hear his cry, for, as He assured them, “I am gracious” (Exodus 22:17). Moreover, in His providence, the man who “oppresses the poor to increase his riches...shall surely come to want,” for in reality he is gathering these riches “for him that will pity the poor” (Proverbs 22:16; 28:8). Both governments and people alike cannot afford to miss this fact: “The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all that are oppressed” (Psalm 103:6).

This confluence of poverty, debt, and interest forms an interesting backdrop for the current situation in America. From what I have been told, American mortgages used to be limited by the seven-year rule of Deuteronomy. According to the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), most loans before the Great Depression lasted from three to five years, and required at least fifty percent in down-payment and a balloon payment at the end. As a result, only one in ten Americans owned a home, in contrast to the recent peak of over two-thirds in 2001. Two events in the 1930s brought a radical change to the way both Americans and the government regarded debt and interest.

First, in the heat of the Great Depression, the United States went off the gold standard. Of all Franklin Roosevelt’s legislation, historian Samuel Eliot Morison called this step “the most revolutionary act of the New Deal, since it broke the implicit contract between government and public to the effect that all government bonds, and bills from \$20 up, were to be paid in ‘gold coin.’” In other words, the dollar bill you hold, which is technically a “federal reserve note” that is “legal tender for all debts, public and private” (see the fine print), is not backed by anything constant. If the government wants to print twice as much as is currently in circulation, your buying power would eventually be cut in half. This devaluation of the dollar is a form of robbery, and a breach of good faith. Moreover, as a result of this new “freedom,” the government entered into debt full-steam. Although some economists warned that the United States could not sustain a 100-billion-dollar debt, by the end of Roosevelt’s presidency, the debt had soared past 250 billion dollars, and continues to climb today.

Second, the rules regarding mortgages changed. In an effort to boost housing sales, the government created the FHA in 1934--a government agency that issued *thirty-year* fixed-rate mortgages. This change of custom opened the door for many Americans to enter into debt, because the mortgage payments were dramatically reduced, due to the debt being spread out over a longer period of time. In order for the FHA to have more money to lend, the government in 1938 created the Federal National Mortgage Association, otherwise known as “Fannie Mae,” to borrow from the American people in order for the FHA to lend to the American people. To further augment the supply of money to lend, in 1954 the government next allowed banks to lend mortgage money, and in 1970 created another federal lending corporation, nicknamed “Freddie Mac.” In all of this, fractional reserve banking also increases the money supply, and thereby reduces your buying power through inflation.

While it might be easy to criticize the New Deal from today’s vantage point, in fairness, we must recognize that times were tough, the economic conditions had changed radically in a couple generations, and warnings about the speculative habits of the 1920s had gone largely unheeded. In other words, while I myself do not agree with principles of the New Deal, I grant that the situation was difficult. Moreover, I also recognize that I myself have never gone through such dire times, nor do I want to, and that I have been the beneficiary of the prosperity that has resulted from this bad habit of American credit. As in most cases of borrowing, this pool of debt created initial prosperity. Only now, as seen in the recent housing crisis of 2008, is America beginning to feel the weight of debt that must be paid. *What does the future hold?* The next essay will address this question from a biblical perspective.

Sources: Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, rev. ed (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989, 2003), 305-26; David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1981, 1982), 206-09; Lawrence Kadish, “Taking the National Debt Seriously,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 October 2009; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 955; “Mortgage Debt Outstanding,” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System; “The Federal Housing Administration (FHA),” U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; “Consumer Credit,” Federal Reserve Statistical Release; Gareth Marples, “The History of Home Mortgages--A ‘Dead Pledge’” (www.TheHistoryOf.net); see also “The Federal National Mortgage Association Charter Act (1954)” (www.answers.com).

The National Debt and the Future

October 2008

When President Franklin Roosevelt launched his New Deal, Winston Churchill commended “the courage, the power and the scale of his effort,” and likened him to “an explorer who has embarked on a voyage as uncertain as that of Columbus, and upon a quest which might conceivably be as important as the discovery of the New World.” While such comments from a Brit may well be expected, seeing how the United Kingdom went off the gold standard two years before the United States, it is the analogy that is striking. *Just where was Roosevelt taking America on his voyage into the unknown?*

There are three federal programs that line up like stars pointing to the pole star: *The New Deal, the Fair Deal, and the Great Society*--three programs with positive names and an ominous future. While Truman’s Fair Deal mainly ended up preserving the New Deal, the third program, launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson, contained a new element and is very important biblically in forecasting America’s future. In his 1965 inaugural address, President Johnson reasoned that poverty in America did not need to exist, given the land’s abundant wealth, medicine, and education. While some in the audience may have worried that new welfare, leading eventually to Medicaid and Medicare later that year, would take from the rich in order to give to the poor, Johnson assumed an increase in common resources. “By working shoulder to shoulder,” he argued, “together we can increase the bounty of all.” In other words, American bounty seemed assured through union.

Biblically, Johnson’s reasoning is disturbing on three counts. First, in aiming to eliminate poverty, Johnson assumed what Jesus said would not happen (Matthew 26:11; cf. Deuteronomy 15:11). Second, Johnson spoke of blessing without giving credit to God, whose blessing alone can eliminate poverty (Deuteronomy 15:4-6). Third, Johnson sought to renew an American covenant of faith in “justice and liberty and union” and “in ourselves,” but not in God. In contrast to the Bible’s assertion that obedience generally brings blessing, Johnson launched his “Great Society” fresh on the heels of the Supreme Court decisions to remove Bible-reading and prayer from the nation’s schools. In essence, the American government was stepping out on its own, boasting of great things while trying to gag God. How fitting that American coins lost their silver in that same eventful year, testifying to the lie printed on the face of each coin, “In God We Trust”!

There is a cardinal rule in God’s universe that will not be broken: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that he shall also reap” (Galatians 6:7). It is impossible for a nation to reject the knowledge of God in the very institutions that train the next generation of citizens, and then to experience the blessing of God indefinitely. God is slow to anger, but He will not be mocked. Eventually those who sow to the wind must reap the whirlwind. *How will that whirlwind come?*

Though I am not a prophet, I do know what one prophet wrote about another proud nation. Granted, America is perhaps not as bad as Babylon in some respects, but this nation resembles that ancient superpower in pride, in greed, and even in bloodshed, with one out of every three conceptions ending in abortion, according to a recent report. The prophet Habakkuk pronounced “Woe” upon the king that increased what was “not his” through interest on loans. In light of divine justice, the prophet announced that this greedy creditor would become a debtor, and its creditors would eventually arise to “bite thee.” How long, asked the prophet? Not giving a direct reply, God only indicated, “Suddenly” (see Habakkuk 2:6-7). Such is the fitting end for a proud man, whose soul “is not upright in him” (2:4).

Again, we ask, how long for America? How long will it be before a nation addicted to credit is bit? With China holding a sizable portion of our debt, having become rich, in part, through our greed for cheap goods, how long will it be before America is bit? Our forefathers would have never dreamed that this nation would someday owe so much money to a *communist* nation!

Interestingly, one sign of an unjust nation is the corruption of its language. According to Isaiah, the categories get confused. Not only is evil called good, and good called evil (5:20), the “vile person” is said to be “liberal” (that is, philanthropic), and the “churl” is said to be “bountiful” (32:5). In other words, crooks are called philanthropists and fools are noted for their generosity. We have definitely reached this point in America. Even our language is corrupt, and we fail to realize it. Future generations were not given a “Fair Deal,” nor did our cities become a “Great Society.” The “New World” chartered by Roosevelt’s New Deal has instead led us right into slavery to foreign powers, similar to the curses threatened to Israel’s disobedience (cf. Deuteronomy 28:43-44). It is really

true: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7)--even in “the land of the free, and the home of the brave.”

What should a Christian do, in light of such news? Please stay tuned for the next essay, and the answer that genuinely surprised me from the Scriptures. (God be praised!) In the meantime, consider these words from Habakkuk, in the midst of his anticipation of national calamity:

“O LORD, I have heard Your speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy” (Habakkuk 3:2).

Sources: Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 959 (Winston Churchill quote); Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *A Short History of the United States*, 6th ed., revised and enlarged (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 535-37, 659-60; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 185-91; “Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, Inaugural Address, Wednesday, January 20, 1965” (www.Bartleby.com).

The National Debt and the Christian

October 2008

If the Lord should bring a total collapse to society, turning the world upside down and scattering its inhabitants, then, of course, all classes in society would meld into nothingness, and the borrower would be the same as the lender. In other words, our financial status would be irrelevant and erased (see Isaiah 24:1-2). Barring such total destruction, and assuming a more subdued collapse to the economy, *how should we as Christians prepare for the coming economic crisis due to the national debt?* After all, the wisdom of God says, “A prudent man foresees the evil, and hides himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished” (Proverbs 27:12).

Before answering that question, let me first draw your attention to God. According to Scripture, all spiritual growth proceeds from rightly knowing God, even though we tend *first* towards knowing our duty. As in salvation, so also in sanctification, life comes through faith, not the law; therefore, let us first know who God is, then what our duty is.

Fundamentally, God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth” (Exodus 34:6). With regard to the oppressed poor, He hears their cry, for He says, “I am gracious” (22:27; cf. Psalm 103:6). When the entire nation of Israel groaned under the bondage in Egypt, God delivered them, and provided them the precedent for graciously lending to each other (e.g. Leviticus 25:35-38). Similarly, when we were impoverished due to our sin, Jesus demonstrated His own grace in voluntarily becoming poor, that we “through his poverty might become rich,” thereby laying the precedent for Christian giving (see 2 Corinthians 8:9 in context).

This connection between God’s grace and our grace is perhaps most stunning in Psalms 111 and 112, which are acrostic mirrors of each other. Boldly, the psalmist first sings of God as “gracious and full of compassion” (Psalm 111:4); he then echoes, singing of the man who fears God as “gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous,” having grace and lending to the poor (112:4-5). Moreover, just as the Lord’s “righteousness endures forever” (111:3), so also the righteousness of the man who fears God endures, for he never stops distributing his wealth to the poor (112:3, 9). Like a farmer who continues to sow his seed year after year, the godly man continues to give, and to receive from the Lord a fresh harvest to meet his own needs and the needs of others (see 2 Corinthians 9:8-11, which quotes Psalm 112:9). This mindset of perpetual giving and harvesting, rooted firmly in the gracious character of God, is the basis for the New Testament’s commands to give to the poor.

Therefore, Christian, in light of the national debt, *strive to be in a position to give*. Think of the national debt as providing an opportunity to give, rather than a justification to stockpile for the indefinite future (cf. Matthew 6:19-21). The godly man “shall not be afraid of bad news; his heart is fixed, trusting in the LORD” (Psalm 112:7). He seeks God’s kingdom and righteousness first, knowing that God will supply his own food and clothing, even in famine (Matthew 6:33; cf. Psalm 33:18-19). As we shall see in a bit, the godly man *ever gives* and shows grace to the poor.

Is this not exciting? What an opportunity lies ahead! Listen to this surprising contrast from the Psalms:

“The wicked borrows, and does not pay back; but the righteous shows mercy and gives” (Psalm 37:21).

Literally, the righteous is *gracious* and gives. It is not just enough to pay off one’s debts; the real contrast between the righteous and the wicked is in giving versus taking. In light of fiat money and bankruptcy laws, in which both government and people borrow and do not pay back, how brightly do the righteous shine when they give and give and give! Later, David testifies in the same psalm:

“I have been young, and now am old;
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his offspring begging bread.
He is ever merciful, and lends; and his offspring is blessed forever.
Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forevermore” (Psalm 37:25-26).

The godly man is “ever merciful”--literally, *ever gracious*. Nothing makes the righteous man stop giving.

Therefore, in light of the gracious character of God and of the man who fears God, let me close with some practical counsel.

First, get out of debt. Borrowing and lending are opposite categories (Deuteronomy 15:6; 28:12, 44). You cannot truly give or lend, if you yourself are in debt. When a debtor gives, he gives away what technically belongs to his creditor, the owner; therefore, when we are in a position to pay back what we owe, we must pay it back immediately (Proverbs 3:27-28). Next to our tithes to God and daily necessities, debts come first in our order of priorities.

Second, develop a gracious disposition toward the poor through focusing on God. There is an interesting proverb that links our stance toward the poor with our attitude toward the Lord: “He that oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker; but he that honors Him has grace on the poor” (Proverbs 14:31). If we truly honor God, we will give to the poor; if we oppress the poor, we are somehow *blaming* God, perhaps for making poor people in the first place.

Third, seek to be creative in helping the poor, especially those who are poor through sin. For example, the Bible says clearly that laziness brings poverty (e.g. Proverbs 24:30-34); therefore, let us help the lazy poor through providing opportunity to work. Moreover, those poor through gluttony, drunkenness, and substance abuse should be given help through the Gospel, honest work, and accountability (cf. Proverbs 23:20-21). Even those who are poor through foolish credit may be helped better through refinancing at no interest than through paying off their loan outright, so that they might learn the seriousness of debt. Lending is a biblical form of giving (see Deuteronomy 15:8, 10; Psalm 37:21, 26; Luke 6:30, 35). In all these ways, the true and full needs of the poor must be our criteria, not selfish means of gain. Like the Jews who were told not to charge interest, we too will be tested, whether our endeavors are truly charity for the poor in honor to the Lord, or manipulation.

Finally, let me send you off with this beautiful thought from the book of Proverbs: “He that is gracious to the poor lends to the LORD; and that which he has given will He pay him again” (Proverbs 19:17). Did you catch that? God takes out a loan. Every time we give to the poor, it is as if we are lending to the Lord. What an encouragement to trust God with our own needs! As I give to meet real needs, I can rest assured that when I truly need it, God will give to me. Unlike our culture, God is righteous. God always pays off His loans. Interestingly, He often pays off His loans to the righteous by taking from the ill-gotten interest gained by wicked creditors (Proverbs 28:18; cf. 22:16). We truly have interesting days ahead. Let us pray:

“O Father in Heaven, You have been so gracious to us, in not only giving us a superabundance of daily bread, but in also erasing our sins through the poverty of Christ on the Cross. Forgive our bad attitudes towards the poor, as if we ourselves were not poor in Egypt when You found us. Please deliver us from our current financial debts, perhaps due to selfish desires and foolish spending, and grant us grace to see the real needs of those around us, preparing well for the day when we can meet the needs of others locally and of suffering Christians abroad. Please, O Lord--You are gracious; make us gracious too. In the name of Your Son Jesus, Amen.”

Beyond the Turkey: Pilgrim William Bradford and Lessons for an Economic Recession

November 18, 2009

"I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread. He is ever merciful, and lendeth; and his seed is blessed. Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forevermore."

—Psalm 37:25-27

Ever merciful. Such beautiful words! Hidden here are economic recessions, personal disappointments, trials to faith, and the gloating gait of the wicked, strutting with his ill-gotten gain. Despite it all—even famine itself--the righteous are *ever merciful* and giving. What a statement of faith!

In many ways, Pilgrim William Bradford epitomizes this psalm, and in particular these two words, *ever merciful*. Far beyond the turkey and the Indians, this Pilgrim governor should be remembered for his principled generosity in the midst of severe economic deprivation.

William Bradford was born around 1590 to fairly well-to-do yeoman farmers in northern England. His family had feather beds, flocks of lambs, and spoons that were silver, not wood; but money is no shield against death. First his father, then his mother died, leaving seven-year-old William sickly and in the care of his two uncles. Forced to lay low, William took to reading and writing--something children did not often do then, nor were there schools in general. He especially took to reading the Bible. At age twelve, William was quite versed in the Bible; as a teen, he started attending church where the word was being taught. Rather than capitulate to the pressures of his family, who urged him to remain in the local parish, William walked sixteen miles each Sunday to hear a Puritan preacher.

How about us? Are we principled enough in our Christian faith to veto faithless preaching with our feet (as Mark Dever would say)? Why do we stay and starve in a church that does not preach the word, when we could *drive* (not walk!) sixteen miles to hear the word faithfully expounded elsewhere? If a teen can stand up to the opinions of family, certainly we can as well, by God's same grace. This teen's example challenged me, and rightly so, for I have not always stood my ground for the truth.

Halfway to church, at Scrooby Manor, Bradford met his spiritual father William Brewster, who was thirty-seven at the time. The two formed a friendship that lasted all the way to the New World and the next. It was Brewster who encouraged Bradford in his faith, and tried to put Puritan preachers in the local pulpits. When this failed, due to the Crown's intervention, the two walked twelve miles to hear John Smyth preach; then, when that proved too dangerous, the church there split and half started meeting in Brewster's home.

These were the early days of the Separatist church. They had separated from the Church of England, believing that the monarch had no right being head of the church, and that a congregation was formed by believers covenanting together under the lordship of Christ. To us today, these views may seem normal; in that day, they were treasonous, leading to exile from England, and then execution, if one returned to England. Once Separatists started being jailed, Bradford, Brewster, and the other members of the Scrooby church concluded they should flee to Holland, where liberty of conscience was granted. This they did, after being betrayed by one sea captain and abandoned by another.

In Holland, the group finally settled in Leyden on the Rhine River--a beautiful city with about thirty islands and 145 bridges. Here they faced a new test. In England, their faith had faced the threat of persecution; in Holland, accommodation. Of all the Separatist groups that fled England, this Leyden group was the only one that did not ultimately assimilate into the Dutch culture. Bradford certainly felt the pressure to conform. Having sold the family property in England, he spoke fluent Dutch and was a member of the local weaver's guild. But what about the children? Instead of keeping the Sabbath holy for worship--which began at eight with an hour of standing prayer, and continued most of the day with two sermons and lunch--the children were tempted by their Dutch contemporaries to view the Sabbath as a holiday! Besides, persecution reached even here, as Brewster was being hunted for a pamphlet he wrote against King James' treatment of Scottish Christians. Perhaps the Spanish would soon retake Holland and impose the Inquisition. Therefore, Bradford was in hearty agreement to settle in the New World, selling his property (again) to invest in the *Speedwell*, a ship for fishing in New England.

Here again, Bradford put faith above finances. While some may criticize Bradford for his utopian dreams and

wonder why he did not seek to evangelize the Dutch, being salt and light where he resided--and certainly there is warrant for such questions, considering especially how many eventually died--it is also worthwhile to note that had Bradford acted differently, he would not be salt and light to us today. Could it be that we Christians are too accommodating in our faith, thinking that we should compromise known points of obedience in order to maintain our influence in the present culture? Perhaps it would be better to sacrifice our present influence for lasting influence among our posterity. Yes, there may be risks, but we must all die sometime.

At any rate, he made his choice and here is where the story becomes more familiar. First, due to the debacle of the *Speedwell*, which was unfit for the open sea, one hundred and two passengers joined thirty crew members aboard the *Mayflower*. Half the passengers were Pilgrims, journeying to a new land (not America, but heaven); half were so-called "Strangers," having been recruited by the sponsoring Merchant Adventurers for their skills. After sixty-six days at sea, averaging two miles per hour, with one passenger having been lost to death and another one gained due to birth--little Oceanus Hopkins--the ship finally reached land, which Bradford described as "their proper element." Here, on November 11, 1620, the Pilgrims and Strangers signed the Mayflower Compact, to form "a civill body politick" of self-government, choosing their own governor and making their own laws, under God and under the king.

Having weathered the sea, the New England winter almost did them in. Both the passengers and the crew lost half their members. At times, there were only six or seven healthy colonists to tend to the rest. If it were not for some buried corn, which they stole and later repaid, they may not have survived. Even so, the grace of God had not abandoned them, for they founded their town of Plymouth on a dwelling site with fields, now strangely deserted. In the spring, a Wampanoag warrior named Samoset told them that the site had been the home of the Pawtuxet tribe, which had been wiped out by small pox a few years earlier, thereby explaining why the other tribes left the newcomers alone all winter. In a remarkable providence, the last of the Pawtuxet tribe, Squanto, joined the Pilgrims, speaking English, having been captured by a ship captain before the small pox. Apart from him, it is said that the Pilgrims would not have survived, for he taught them how to plant corn, with four kernels on top of a fertilizer of three fish.

In recognition of God's providence and in imitation of the Dutch celebration of their independence from the Spanish, thirty-two-year-old Governor Bradford called for a Thanksgiving celebration to honor God for His bounteous care. From the Wampanoag tribe, now in treaty with Plymouth, came chief Massasoit and ninety of his men for three days of feasting and games of sport--142 people altogether. What a feast! At this point, we today expect the end of the story; but it is what occurred after this point that makes Bradford such a model for us today.

To his chagrin, Bradford later realized that he had overestimated the harvest. As a result, he cut the rations in half, for the food had to last until the next harvest. Then, on November 9, 1621, the *Fortune* arrived, bringing thirty-four newcomers that had to survive through the winter with the others in the seven existing houses and a storehouse. They brought no supplies themselves, but rather an accusation from the Merchant Adventurers' manager Thomas Weston that the Pilgrims were lazy, talking too much (implied, about religion). Instead of a bitter reply, Bradford answered the charges and loaded the *Fortune* with goods (mostly pelts) to help repay their debt.

Now, with rations quartered, the Pilgrims faced yet another hard winter, this time with Indian trouble, caused in part by Squanto's haughty attitude. Then the *Sparrow* arrived, bringing no supplies, but seven more settlers that Weston expected the Pilgrims to feed before they started a rival colony to the north. Bradford complied. Then, in the summer, the *Charity* and the *Swan* arrived, bringing sixty men for the rival colony and no supplies. Again, Bradford complied, even though his own people were near starvation. The righteous are *ever merciful*.

By the fall 1622, the newcomers were settled forty miles north in Wessagusset, expecting Plymouth to help them look for food. Already, for food Bradford had traded precious furs that would have paid off debts. Instead of balking, Bradford complied and found the Indians amazingly generous, giving beyond their means. In contrast, the newcomers thought the Indians were hiding food, and threatened to attack them, but Bradford advised them otherwise. These newcomers finally left on the *Swan*, hoping to find Weston.

In 1623, as if it could not get worse, two wicked men arrived. The first, Weston himself, arrived impoverished by a shipwreck, asking for a loan of beaver pelts. Even though Bradford did not believe him, and even though a loan would risk a mutiny from the townspeople, the governor secretly complied and never received repayment nor

supplies. Weston was truly wicked: “The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous showed mercy, and giveth” (Psalm 37:21). Then Captain Thomas West arrived, demanding an exorbitant fee as kind of a sea-fishing license, and then offering two barrels of dried peas for another exorbitant amount. Some pity! Though I do not know what specifically happened to West, the Scripture says, “He that oppreseth the poor to increase his riches...shall surely come to want” (Proverbs 22:16). Bradford rightly refused the peas.

The Scriptures also say, “The LORD knoweth the days of the upright: and their inheritance shall be for ever. They shall not be ashamed in the evil time: and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied” (Psalm 37:19). The year 1623 sure looked like “days of famine” to Bradford and the others. The Pilgrims were near starvation, gaining little by hunting and fishing; yet they were now faced with two more difficulties. West told Bradford of two more ships coming. *How would they feed these newcomers?* Moreover, their corn crop, which was larger than normal due to Bradford’s executive decision to allow for private property--their corn crop, their only visible hope, stood blighting in the late May sun. *What would they do?*

Let me here interject: *What would we do?* Many of us stick to our principles as long as the times allow for it. The Pilgrims were not above bending to supposed necessity, as the stolen corn illustrates, but by-and-large Bradford himself was a stout man of principled faith. Having resisted family pressure to pursue the word of God as a teen, and having resisted later the allures of Holland for the dream of a biblical community, he held his ground again and again on principle, being *ever merciful* and not refusing any who approached him with physical need. *What an example of Psalm 37!* What he did points to what we should do--pray.

In one great act of faith, Bradford called the entire town out for a Day of Humiliation before God. They fasted and prayed. Those now most known for the Day of Thanksgiving spent a Day of Humiliation in prayer to God for rain. He answered. For fourteen days, a gentle rain refreshed the earth, and after that harvest, the Pilgrims never again faced starvation.

An economic recession is not famine, but it is enough for us to show our faith. Are we fair-weather givers, abandoning our principles due to “times of necessity,” or are we men of principled faith, who, like Bradford, are *ever merciful* and cared for in the end? It is a question worth pondering, as we sit down with our families this Thanksgiving season. May the Lord increase our faith and faithfulness!

Source: Gary D. Schmidt, *William Bradford: Plymouth’s Faithful Pilgrim* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1999).

The Progressive Era and Socialism in the United States

March 2010

Do you trust a President to uphold the Constitution of the United States, or to believe in the tenets of the Declaration of Independence, upon which the Constitution was established? When a President is sworn into office, he takes a solemn oath that he will both “faithfully execute the office of the President” and “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.” In taking such an oath, a President binds his own loyalty under the Constitution to the highest power known to man, the authority of God Himself. This is serious business. Any deviation affects not only the people, but the name of God Himself. A violation here not only breaks American law, but the Third Commandment, to not take God’s name in vain. What a weighty office to subsume! How have the Presidents done?

In Mount Rushmore are the faces of four Presidents--George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. Of the four, the choice of Roosevelt stirred the most debate, and yet is the one choice that represents perhaps the biggest change in orientation. The first three upheld the Declaration of Independence, though I disagree with Lincoln’s emphasis of equality over liberty; Roosevelt, however, represents a movement that undercut the fundamental tenet of the Declaration--a movement that opened the door to socialism in America.

In 1776, this nation was founded on principles of individual rights delineated in the Declaration of Independence. If these principles were not true, the nation based upon them has no legitimacy. To disagree with these principles is to be *fundamentally* un-American. Even more, since America is the first nation to be founded upon a creed (as G. K.

Chesterton once quipped), with the Declaration functioning as “American Scripture” (to use historian Pauline Maier’s phrase), disagreeing with the Declaration in America is *political heresy* and potential grounds for excommunication from office. Amazingly, one presidential candidate of the Progressive era openly reinterpreted the Declaration, and yet was voted into office.

In 1912, Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt both faced off against Howard Taft, the incumbent President. All three men claimed to be progressive, though with differing notions of what “progressive” looked like in practice.

For Roosevelt, as heard in his April 1912 speech “Who Is a Progressive?,” a Progressive was anyone who sought “to give the people real control, and to have the people exercise this control in a spirit of the broadest sympathy and broadest desire to secure social and industrial justice for every man and woman.” This “industrial justice” included the great “trust-busting” of the large monopolies, as well as the limitations placed on child labor and hours worked by women in factories. The popular “control” included direct election of senators, direct primaries, referendums and recalls, all of which eliminated much of the indirectness established by the Founding Fathers to offset the dangers of demagoguery in the new republic. To justify his agenda, Roosevelt quoted Lincoln, and ended his speech by saying that the cause of Liberty focused now on neither foreign tyrants nor slave-owners, but on “the present-day American citizen who oppresses others by the abuse of special privilege, be his wealth great or little.”

Wilson went further than Roosevelt and represents the real break with the doctrines of the past. In one of his campaign speeches, Wilson openly criticized citizens who “never got beyond the Declaration of Independence,” whose “bosoms swell against George III, but they have no consciousness of the war for freedom that is going on to-day.” According to Wilson, the Declaration needed to be “translated” to address modern conditions, being a document that viewed government as a machine based upon Newtonian physics, rather than as a living organism based upon Darwinian evolution. At one point, Wilson flat-out appeals, “All that progressives ask or desire is permission—in an era when ‘development,’ ‘evolution,’ is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle.” He ended his speech by saying that the new economic conditions demanded a whole-scale restructuring of the government architecture along the lines of Europe and Canada.

What does that mean for us today? Your individual rights as an American were safeguarded in the Declaration of Independence, which states that “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.” The Progressive era questioned this priority of individual rights, and asserted that they could be trumped by the good of society, as defined by the government.

For example, in education, Herbert Croly’s magazine *The New Republic* argued in an editorial for July 29, 1916 against parochial schooling: “During the nineteenth century popular rule became increasingly a reality, and people came to feel that government is not an alien thing to be limited, but a social instrument to be used. Democracy has been evolving from a protest into a purpose. It is becoming a philosophy of life, no longer protestant but in its own way catholic. To be a democrat to-day is to be something more than a voter. . . . ‘Modern sociologists’ are simply men engaged in stating the affirmative faith of democracy.” Having turned democracy into a religion, the editorial then redefines tolerance from allowing “every one freedom to practice almost any creed, even though the creed was opposed to freedom,” to a belief that the government should not allow the old to impose their beliefs on the young through schooling. In this redefinition, the magazine claimed the right of democracy “to develop in every child the capacity for testing its own convictions.”

Similarly, with regard to property rights, which the Declaration handled under the rubric “the pursuit of Happiness,” Roosevelt had advocated in 1910 an even larger role for government control than even he exercised in his presidency: “We grudge no man a fortune in civil life if it is honorably obtained and well used. It is not even enough that it should have been gained without doing damage to the community. We should permit it to be gained only so long as the gaining represents benefit to the community. This, I know, implies a policy of a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had, but I think we have got to face the fact that such an increase in governmental control is now necessary.” This is an amazing confession! For the good of society, he said, the government must decide whether individuals should be allowed to retain their private property. In this shift, Roosevelt was apparently influenced by Herbert Croly.

As Americans, you and I have been living under this mindset for almost one hundred years. The government is no longer viewed as a potential danger to be kept in check, but as a tool to benefit society. Increasingly, Americans

have come to look to the government for the solution to many problems, including the care of the elderly, the education of the young, the alleviation of poverty, and the management of our entire economy. Beneath the march of progress lies the Declaration of Independence, trampled in the streets.

As a Christian, the Declaration is not my “Scripture,” nor do I agree with every detail of it, nor am I quick even to apply the appellation “Scripture” to such a political document. However, I am happy to report that the Declaration’s stress on individual rights is closer to the truth of God’s word than the Progressives’ stress on the rights of society over the individual. When God said, “You shall not steal,” He did not leave governments exempt. True, the Law also commands the rich to help the poor, even as the tenth commandment prohibits covetousness; but God nowhere commanded His government in Israel to *force* the rich to give. Instead, the poor were expected to “cry unto the LORD” against the rich (Deuteronomy 15:9). The companies were indeed at fault, but the principles advocated by the Progressives expanded government beyond proper bounds.

By taking too much to itself, government takes the place of God and is no longer His servant; but since government does not have the wisdom of God Himself, this can only lead to trouble for the individual. *God help us*, for that is where you and I are as American citizens, at the whim of a government that thinks it knows what is best overall and does everything in the name of “the people.” Thankfully, I am looking forward to a “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13)—a new order that Jesus Himself will establish. Rightly did the psalmist sing, “It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (Psalm 118:9). Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Note: The quotations given earlier from the Progressive Era come from an excellent resource, *American Progressivism: A Reader*, edited and introduced by Ronald J. Pestritto and William J. Atto (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 37, 44, 51, 136, 137, 6, from which also came the opinion that Roosevelt was influenced in his views by Herbert Croly. Interestingly, the progressive change in political theory mirrors the shift in theology from orthodoxy to modernism. Could it be that the theological writings of the fundamentalists, so maligned by the culture, may hold hints about how to handle the political unfaithfulness of the progressives and their heirs? The parallels are not accidental, but rooted in the same hermeneutical framework.

The Beginnings of American Fundamentalism and a Lesson to Learn

May 12, 2011

Every child has a father, and organized American fundamentalism is no exception. In the summer of 1918, *William Bell Riley*, pastor of First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, met with other prophecy-conference leaders in the summer home of R. A. Torrey, dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, to discuss future plans. The group had just completed a successful “prophetic conference” in Philadelphia, where attendance far exceeded expectations; but instead of planning for another one in Philadelphia, Riley convinced the group to host a conference on the defense of the fundamentals of the faith. Such a confederation had been his desire for at least a year, as seen in his book *The Menace of Modernism* (1917); surely, he must have been excited to see this vision get some traction.

During May 25 to June 1, 1919, over six thousand attended the first ever World Conference on the Fundamentals of the Faith. Riley gave the keynote address, comparing this nascent movement to the Protestant Reformation. Citing anti-modernism as a cause for the conference, Riley then mentioned the goal of “a new fellowship, a fellowship that is bringing into closer and closer union men from the various denominations who hold to the certain deity of Jesus Christ and to the utter authority of the Bible” (*God Hath Spoken*, 45).

As a result of the conference, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) emerged, representing the first “organizational structure capable of correlating the fundamentalist opposition to modernism” (Gatewood, *Controversy in the Twenties*, 18). Riley served as president. One of his main goals was “to bring under the WCFA umbrella the just-emerging interdenominational network of fundamentalist Bible schools and publications” (Trollinger, *God’s Empire*, 39). To correlate the work of these separate institutions, five standing committees were created:

- (1) On Bible Schools – to standardize curriculum and creeds
- (2) On Colleges and Seminaries – to create a list of doctrinally safe schools

- (3) On Religious Magazines and Periodicals – to promote WCFA and in turn receive articles and reports
- (4) On Missions – to withdraw support from unfaithful boards and to give it to approved boards
- (5) On Conferences – to bring the concerns to other cities

Of the five, only the fifth produced substantial results. Chaired by Riley, the committee “launched an extraordinarily ambitious cross-continent tour,” with speakers staggered out in a series, going on ahead without waiting for the others to finish speaking. The results were amazing. In six weeks, the tour reached eighteen cities, and “transformed the concerns of Riley and other conservative Protestant leaders into a national crusade” (Trollinger, *God’s Empire*, 39-40).

Equally amazing, however, was how quickly this initial organization faded in importance. By 1922, the WCFA was already in decline. Commenting on this decline, Riley’s biographer noted, “Although Riley’s speaking tours and related activities heightened antimodernist sentiment, they were of minimal value in banding fundamentalists together in a tightly structured organization” (ibid., 41). *What went wrong?*

Chief among the factors was a stiff independent spirit among the fundamentalist leaders. In the words of Riley’s second wife Marie, “Some personal incompatibilities, and a constant tendency towards independent leadership combined to retard the progress of what was intended to be an ‘all-inclusive fellowship’ in the Association itself” (ibid., 41). This independent spirit seemed to include Riley himself, who probably chose unwisely to lead the surge that he had birthed. Yes, he himself lamented, and perhaps rightly so, that “some fundamentalists are laws unto themselves, and [that] even those who have no such disposition are not as yet in the close co-ordinated fellowship that would accomplish the best and most to be desired results” (ibid., 41-42); but the fact also remains that he himself kept the coordinated effort under his supervision.

If there is one lesson to learn from the beginnings of American fundamentalism, it may be this lesson: *Revival comes through brotherly unity* (cf. Psalm 133). Disunity grieves the Spirit and dooms all effort to the resources of the flesh, which cannot succeed in building the temple of God (cf. Ephesians 4:30; Zechariah 4:6).

Regarding the 1920s, more than one commentator has noted that fundamentalist “internecine battles, especially the power struggles among ambitious spokesmen, help to explain their organizational difficulties as well as their failure to achieve some of their stated goals” (Gatewood, *Controversy in the Twenties*, 17-18; cf. Trollinger, *God’s Empire*, 41-42). As a result, the WCFA in particular failed to provide “an institutional alternative to the modernist-tainted denominations,” and eventually shifted its goal to antievolutionism, which was in essence almost an admission of defeat, though not as public a defeat as the ill-crafted Scopes Trial it later sponsored (Trollinger, *God’s Empire*, 43, 44).

Brothers, there is a spirit of unity among many churches today. God be praised! Let it be discerning unity, as the ground for unity is ever the truth that is in Jesus, but let it also be an ambitious unity, for the motive for unity is the love that makes us speak the truth (cf. Ephesians 4). If we hold to the fundamentals with a firm faith, and promote them with a genuine love, how can God the Father and God the Son not be pleased and pour out the Holy Spirit on such a house?

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The Treason of Silence

April 8, 2009

On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp for his resistance to Nazi Germany. He had been involved in a conspiracy to assassinate the Führer—to “not just bandage the victims under the wheel” of the Third Reich (as he said), but even “to jam a spoke in the wheel itself.” It failed, but his legacy as a pastor and political resister remains. What obligation do fellow citizens have regarding the oppression of the weak by an evil government?

Personally, I find several aspects of Bonhoeffer’s life difficult and troubling. His book *Life Together* has moved me deeply, but his neo-orthodox foundations disturb me. His courage in the face of danger—especially his return from America on the last ship into Germany before the war—challenge me, even though I wonder about the legitimacy of individuals acting without authorization. Apparently he also had questions, having asked his fellow ministers at one point if they would grant absolution to the murderer of a tyrant. At any rate, the questions can be set somewhat aside, for the larger question remains: *Will we be silent in the face of unjust oppression of others?* Here is where Bonhoeffer speaks for today.

Have we not each faced such situations? At a board meeting, in the classroom, in the cafeteria—the dominant begin to malign the lonely persecuted, while the rest of us stand silent, scared that speaking up would turn their hatred toward us. It may not be the *Kaufen Sie nicht beim Juden* (“Do not buy from Jews”) of Nazi Germany, but the feeling is the same. *Should I speak up? Will I speak up?* To my shame, I have not always; but I must. Where demanded, let it be with respect—even with a question, if necessary—but never with silence.

With respect to government, the question of legitimacy arises. Who has the *right* to tell the authorities of their wrong? In America, the Bill of Rights has preserved for each one of us the right to speak our mind—to keep the government in check, to prevent tyranny from usurping the liberty of the people. Now, regardless of the legitimacy of our egalitarian system, this much I know: Jesus Christ rules over all, and His word is the final say in the affairs of men. In America, the church has the greater obligation to speak up in the face of unjust oppression of others; and of all churchmen, the pastors have the greatest obligation. That is one reason why I admire Bonhoeffer.

Consider with me the words of Pastor Martin Niemöller, a fellow Berliner, who served seven years in concentration camps for statements such as declaring that Jesus Christ was his Führer:

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists and I did not speak out - because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out - because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me - and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Woe to us if we keep silent! “Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, ‘Surely we did not know this,’ does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?” (Proverbs 24:11-12).

Basket Seven • Personal Reflections

What Is Your Favorite Part of Creation?

June 24, 2010

“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).

As a boy, my family often traversed the Great Plains en route to the mountains “out west.” Compared to our destination, the middle of South Dakota or Nebraska left me unimpressed--so open, so plain (no pun intended), so boring. My attitude then was give me snow-caps over corn-fields and open grasslands.

Later, as a college-student at North Dakota State University, I began to appreciate the wide plain. Perhaps a good share of that appreciation came through two months I spent in Newport Beach, California, doing evangelism amid the crowded, overly-expensive dwellings of Balboa and Corona del Mar. Near the end of my stint, I spent a day on a beach-bike flying down the PCH in search of open country, and finding it in Irving State Park. At last, space! Open space! It was so refreshing, though the diamond snake across my path reminded me I was not at home.

Two years ago, as a father of six, I led my family across South Dakota to join my parents and siblings in the Colorado Rockies for an anniversary reunion. Now mind you, I still enjoy the Rockies greatly (and they still scare me at times), but one of the surprises of the trip was how I enjoyed other aspects of the West--not just the land, though the wide valleys of Wyoming simply awed me, but the Sky. Oh, Lord, how beautiful and majestic is the sky that You have made! In the middle of Dakota, I saw the biggest dome I have perhaps ever seen in my life--so high and wide were the canopy of clouds. Where else can anyone ever go on earth to see something so big? Little wonder Montana is known as “Big Sky Country.”

Interestingly, the more boring the land, the more impressive the sky. Oh, to have less of earth, but more of heaven!

Now, if anyone were to ask me, what is my favorite part of creation, whether earth or sea or sky, I will probably say sky--for the variety of shapes in the clouds and of colors near twilight, for the often imperceptible change in shading from horizon to zenith, for the remarkable blue above to match the blue below, for the towering clouds by day (what work of man can match 80,000 feet!) and the infinite, vaulted dome at night, or, more simply, for the raw power and sheer size that God often exhibits and exerts through this aspect of His creation. Truly, the heavens do declare the glory of God. If we do not listen, nothing can stop the fury! But, ah, if we do listen and fear God, where is the end of our feast of worship? Glory to Your name, O Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father! Amen.

Curse My Birthday?

June 2, 2010

“Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed” (Jeremiah 20:14).

Last week, I had a very strange experience on my birthday. Searching for a text of Scripture in the morning, as is not uncommon, my Bible fell open to Jeremiah chapter twenty; and since this is a favorite passage of my father, who happened to be leaving for home later that morning, I decided to read it. How odd then to find on my birthday Jeremiah cursing the day of his birth, due to the “labour and sorrow” that consumed his days with shame! *Was this a portent of things to come in my life?* The thought lingered a while as I entered the day.

Filled with people, and ending with two little league games, the day eventually quieted down again with me back at my desk, perusing some articles written by James P. Boyce, founder of Southern Seminary. One entry from December 1848 caught my eye: “I Blot Out a Day.” At his desk, he would often mark the passing of time by striking through the day on his calendar. But did he really *blot it out*? The day may have passed, but its history could not be erased nor its influence effaced. In a sense, the day remained. Then, to my surprise, the article ended with a reference to the “dreadful prayer” of Job that his birthday might perish! I looked at the clock. It was four minutes to midnight! Here I was, opening and closing my birthday with two Old Testament prayers that the day of birth be cursed! How strange! How odd! *What did it mean?*

Interestingly, Boyce did not agree with Job. Instead of perishing, he wrote, "Let the day live." Let the day be improved that it may live in supplying happy memories, in giving spiritual strength to work, and in bearing a good witness at the Day of Judgment. This hopeful thought led my mind back to a birthday card that I had read an hour earlier, having this passage from the apostle Paul:

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed;
we are perplexed, but not in despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
cast down, but not destroyed;
always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus,
that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

Now that Christ is risen, there is no need to curse any day, or to wish to have never been born. Boyce was right. Rather than curse one's birthday, as the saints before Christ had done, we who live in the light of the resurrection can say, "Let the day live!" and look for the manifestation of the life of Christ in the dying of the day! Instead of our guilty sentence of sin, we can say, "But now the righteousness of God...is manifested" (Romans 3:21). Instead of our lifeless slavery to sin, we can say, "But God...hath quickened us together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4-5). Instead of weakness being a burden too great to bear, we can say "but not...but not...but not" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

We live in a different era than Jeremiah and Job. We live in the era of Christ. Therefore, *blessed be my birthday*, and *blessed be the Savior who gives me Life!*

Source: Thomas J. Nettles, ed., *Stray Recollections, Short Articles and Public Orations of James P. Boyce* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2009), 32-33.