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# *Living in a World where Life is Cheap. The Relevance of the Book of Deuteronomy and the Sixth Commandment for the Debate on the Sanctity of Human Life.*

Melvin Tinker

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At the time it was published back in 1948, Shirley Jackson's, *The Lottery*, created a storm of outraged moral protest. The story is set in a small town somewhere in rural America. In it the townsfolk gather for some sort of ritual which is obviously critical for the well-being of the crops. At the centre of everyone's thoughts is 'The Lottery'. The story gradually builds up to a stunning climax when it becomes clear just what the lottery is for - deciding on a human sacrifice. Tessie Hutchinson, wife, mother and neighbour chooses the slip of paper containing the dreaded black spot. Instantly she finds herself isolated in the centre of a cleared space and even her little son Davey has pebbles in his hand ready to stone her to death. 'It isn't fair', she screams. But nothing can stop the ritual. The story ends with a sickening thud and the words: 'and then they were upon her.'

From the late 1940s throughout the 50s and 60s the story had been the subject of discussion amongst American high school students. The story was so well told, the moral so powerful, that it invariably engaged the student's sense of right and wrong. That has now changed.

One night Kay Haugaard was leading a class discussion on 'The Lottery' in which she registered no moral response at all amongst her students - nothing. 'The end was neat!', said one woman. 'It was all right. It wasn't that great', said another. 'They just do it' one argued, 'It's their ritual' - as if to say - what is there to get so upset about?

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One woman in the class, a stylish woman in her forties who normally wrote passionately about saving whales and the rain forest, couldn't summon up even a modicum of concern for the sacrificed victim. Haugaard reported her disturbing findings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and concluded: 'No one in the whole class of more than twenty ostensibly intelligent individuals would go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice.'[\[1\]](#)

One may well respond by saying that it is only a story and perhaps with the increasing number of violent images which people are subject to on the TV and cinema screens today, it is not surprising that this story appears tame and anodyne in comparison and elicits little emotional response.

Here, then, is a true story about a newborn baby, called *Baby Garcia*, which took place in a major hospital in Los Angeles. This is the way the nurse involved, called Jennifer, related the events:

One night a nurse on my shift came up to me and said, 'Jennifer, you need to see the Garcia baby'. There was something suspicious about the way she said it, She led me to a room the nurses used for their breaks. Women were smoking and drinking coffee, their feet up on the stainless steel counter. There, lying on the metal, was the naked body of a newborn baby. 'What is the baby doing here on this counter?', I asked timidly. 'That's a preemie born at 19 weeks', she said. 'We don't do anything to save them unless they are 20 weeks.' I noticed the chest fluttering rapidly. I picked him up for a closer look. 'This baby is alive!' I exclaimed. I thought they hadn't noticed. Then I learned the horrible truth. The nurses knew, and it didn't matter. They had presented the baby to its mother as a dead, premature child. Then they took him and tossed him on the cold, steel counter in the lunch room. I did the one thing I could think of. I held him in his last moments so he'd at least have some warmth and love before he died. Just then one of the nurses - a large harsh woman - burst into the room. 'Jennifer, what are you doing with that baby?' she yelled. 'He's still alive... ', I pleaded. 'He's still alive because you are holding him', she said. Grabbing him by the back with one hand, she snatched him from me, opened one of the stainless steel cabinets, and pulled out a specimen container with formaldehyde in it. She tossed the baby in and snapped the lid on it. It was over in an instant. Jennifer went on to say, 'To them this child wasn't human. In seven more days he would have qualified, but at 19 weeks he was just trash'.[\[2\]](#)

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Welcome to our 'brave new world'. Such stories could be multiplied. This one is mentioned not simply to shock gratuitously, but in order to alert us to the kind of world we have been busy creating for ourselves - a world in which God has been declared dead - of no significance - where absolutes of right and wrong have been swept away only to be replaced by spurious 'feeling' and 'what works for me' moralities, and in which human life has inevitably become very cheap. Ours has become the throwaway society, and perhaps now Christians are just beginning to realise how much is being thrown away. Whereas, 40 years ago, more or less everyone in the West would have cited the sixth commandment, 'You shall not kill', with ease and conviction, now we can only subscribe to the eleventh commandment, 'You shall not judge'.

We, however, are not to think that there is no intellectual force behind such developments. The case for euthanasia and infanticide is being put forward as a serious proposition based upon naturalistic assumptions. As a result we have Peter Singer, in his book *Practical Ethics*,[\[3\]](#) taking as his starting point what he calls 'the principle of equal consideration of interests'. That is the view that the interests of all human beings must be taken into account when assessing the consequences of an action. He argues that this principle extends to other sentient beings who can suffer, and only such beings can be said to have 'interests'. He puts forward the view that human beings can be thought of in two ways - as belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, or being a person. He defines a person as a 'self-conscious or rational being' who can therefore act as an agent in making decisions. He wants to maintain that some primates are also self-conscious to some extent and so could be described as persons. Being a member, therefore, of the *species* *Homo sapiens* is not a sufficient, or necessary, reason for being conceived as a person. This has very far-reaching effects. It means that adult primates are persons but a newborn infant is not. It is therefore not intrinsically wrong to kill a newborn baby who is not self-conscious whereas it

would be wrong to kill an animal who is supposed to be self-conscious. Singer does not suggest that newborn children should be killed if they are healthy and wanted, but that they *could* be if they were unhealthy and unwanted. He says that strict conditions should be placed on permissible infanticide, but that 'these restrictions might owe more to the effects of infanticide on others than to the intrinsic wrongness of killing an infant'.

If we are going to withstand the flow of the world into increasing violence, infanticide and euthanasia, we must be able to offer more than platitudes - we must be able to offer a well thought out alternative which we seek to live out. This, of course, is precisely what the early Christians had to do. It is interesting that Singer, who rejects a theistic framework for ethical thinking, has this to say:

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If we go back to the origins of Western civilisation, to Greek or Roman times, we find that membership of Homo sapiens was not sufficient to guarantee that one's life would be protected. Greeks and Romans killed deformed or weak infants by exposing them to the elements on a hilltop. Plato and Aristotle thought that the state should enforce the killing of deformed infants. The change in Western attitudes to infanticide since Roman times is, like the doctrine of the sanctity of human life of which it is a part, a product of Christianity. Perhaps it is now possible to think about these issues without assuming the Christian moral framework that has, for so long, prevented any fundamental reassessment.

Surely this is one of our greatest challenges as theologians. That we equip God's people who are constantly being bombarded with values and ideas which run contrary to God's Word in such a way that these people don't simply go with the flow, but become truly counter-cultural. How are we going to enable them to think Christianly and so act Christianly? This will mean more than referring to set 'proof texts', like the sixth commandment, but showing what undergirds them, how the function within the wider matrix of God's dealings with his world as Creator-Redeemer.

Interestingly enough it was into a world not that dissimilar to ours that the commandment 'You shall not murder', which is the correct rendering of the Hebrew word (*ratsach*), was delivered. It too was a world that treated life as cheap - hence the gruesome tale in Exodus 1 of the Pharaoh ordering all the Jewish baby boys to be thrown into the Nile to be drowned - infanticide. This was a world of human sacrifice with Caananite babies being thrown into the fire to appease the god Moloch. Why then did this vagabond rabble which had the audacity to call itself a nation, believe that all forms of unlawful killing of human beings were morally reprehensible? What was it made them think that they were right and all the other nations wrong? It was because of three beliefs which underlie the sixth commandment and which are woven into the whole fabric of the Book of Deuteronomy: That life is a gift, that life is on loan and that life is to be redeemed.

## **The Belief that Life is a Gift**

We live in the age of human rights, although if there is no God and no transcendent source of values it is very difficult to see upon what basis an appeal to 'rights' can be made - natural law has been replaced by positive law. Christians, however, have always defended the notion of rights because God himself underwrites our value. In Deuteronomy 4:32 we read: 'Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day *God created man on the earth.*' God was not obliged to create us, as Karl Barth reminded us, this God is no 'lonely God' for even his creation is an expression of his nature the fact that he is a gracious God. Back in Genesis 2:7 it is God

who forms man from the dust of the earth and breathes into man 'the breath of life' - *nephesh hayyim*, with the result that Adam becomes a living being - *nephesh hayah*. Unlike the

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bringing about of the rest of creation we see a special intimacy here, The 'Lord God' -*Yahweh - Elohim* - the covenant - creator God - breathes into Adam the *gift* of life. Human beings are repeatedly declared to be made in 'his image' - Genesis 1:26-28, which is why murder is considered to be a particularly horrific crime. Not only is it a crime which is irreversible - (in theory at least if you steal something it can be returned, if you lie, you can then tell the truth, but if you kill, you cannot bring back the dead); but also attacking the image bearer is tantamount to attacking the one whose image we bear - God.

Think of it like this: You have a photograph of yourself taken at a moment which was very precious to you - perhaps when at school or a wedding. It is unique, irreplaceable, it evokes some of the most precious memories for you. Imagine that someone comes along and takes that photograph. It doesn't mean much to them, so they spit on it, desecrate it, tear it up and throw it away. How would you feel? It's only an 'image' - but it is still important. The act of desecration is significant. Multiply that by infinity and then we will have some idea of how God feels when one of his image bearers is callously disposed of. Back in Genesis 9, is the reason given why God instituted capital punishment. Verse six tells us:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God, God has made man.'

In the words of one writer, Paul Ramsey, to take away an innocent life is 'to throw the gift of life back in the face of the Giver.

## **Life is on Loan**

This is the second belief which underlies the sixth commandment. These commandments begin by reminding the people who it is they are dealing with - verse six, 'I am the LORD your God'. The word for 'god' in Hebrew is Elohim, but then the 'gods' of the other nations were called 'Elohim'. It is a great mistake to think that simply because we use the word 'god' in a conversation it means that we are talking about the same thing as our friends. The true and living God is distinguished from the false and non-existent gods in that he revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush as 'I AM'. That is, he is the self-existent one, so unlike anyone or anything else we might conceive, and in this he is holy - totally distinct. He depends upon no one, whereas everyone else is dependent upon him - our life is contingent. He is the Giver, existence is a gift. What is more, this is his covenant name - the one who has pledged himself to the well-being of his people, so that their purposes are bound up with his loving purposes for the world. Therefore by virtue of God being the creator, let alone LORD and redeemer, he has owner's rights over each individual. It is no doubt significant that the composite title *Yahweh-Elohim* occurs 20 times in the narratives of Genesis 2-3, and only once

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elsewhere in the Pentateuch - but is absent in 3:1-5. This is no doubt because the writer wanted to emphasise that Yahweh is both Israel's covenant partner and the God of creation itself. The deity

that is spoken of in 3:1-5 is depicted by the serpent as one who does not have the best interests of his people in view, and it is because of this that the term Yahweh, which signifies such a commitment to people's well being, is dropped.

These commandments don't hang in mid-air. They are not arbitrary or relative which we can make or unmake as we wish. They have the backing of God himself. They reflect his character as LORD - the creator-ruler. The reason that we should not lie, but keep our word, is because God keeps his word. The reason we should be faithful in our married relationships is because God is faithful in his relationship with his people. The reason why we shouldn't murder is because God is the great life giver. The bitter irony is that in our sin, like Adam and Eve, we want to be like God in making up our own rules and that is when we are *least* like him. We are most like him, when we keep to his commandments, being as truthful, faithful, caring and honest as he is.

As the LORD he is sovereign, and as such, since life is a gift which he chooses to give or withdraw as he wills, that life is on loan. Life is not our absolute possession to do with as we see fit, but a gift to be treasured as God has decreed.

Some years ago there was a play which was later made into a film starring Richard Dreyfus, entitled *Whose Life is it Anyway?* It was the story of a highly intelligent individual, Ken Harrison, who in the prime of his life, was involved in an motor accident which left him completely paralysed, except for some slight head movement. The whole drama revolved around the following question: If life is our personal, private possession then, as with any other personal, private possession, the individual has the right to dispose of it as he or she chooses? Well, this man no longer wished to live and he wanted help to end his miserable existence. It was a very powerful film and you can guess in which direction it went. The view, however, that it is all a matter of personal choice is far too individualistic. These commandments are given to a community, to enable that community to function in the most wholesome way possible - reflecting the full life which God freely gives. Apart from the Bible's answer to the question: 'Whose Life is it anyway?' being, 'it is God's' absolutely and ours contingently, so it is not for us to do with as we please - there are more far reaching implications to consider. Even when it comes to the disposal of our own possessions we cannot simply do with them as we wish: for example, have property exchanged for money in order to spend it on hate literature - because the effects of our actions on the wider community has to be assessed. So if euthanasia were to be legalised (and the dividing line between voluntary and involuntary euthanasia can be a grey one as events in Holland have shown) what effect do we think that might have on the trust that is necessary for the doctor-patient relationship? Imagine it. Someone is in an old people's residence. That nice young doctor comes to see you and offers them a pill. It is yellow today, not the normal pink colour. What thoughts would go through their mind? Will it not be something like: 'Will this cure me or kill me?' Trust is then replaced with suspicion.

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We must also ask: what of the effect on the medical profession itself? The traditional motivation for doctors and nurses has been to strive in order to save lives. What becomes of that if they are legally required to take lives? How loving is that for *them*? Will it foster those traits of compassion and care we look for instinctively in what are called the 'caring' professions. Alternatively will it result in a hardening and the sort of callousness displayed by those nurses in that Los Angeles hospital? Bad actions corrupt good character. We are whole beings - we cannot function in Jekyll and Hyde mode -steeling ourselves up to end life in one part of the hospital and save life there in another section. Something will give way in the end and surely we know enough about human nature to know what that will be. It is that spark of humanity. Life is on loan and we

are called to be its good stewards.

In pre-war Germany there was a permissive attitude towards euthanasia. There was an effort, led by Dr Karl Brandt, to eliminate the mentally and physically defective from the population. This programme put to death 275,000 people. In the light of the revelations at the Nuremberg trials, the BMA in 1947 issued a statement which could well be reissued today:

The doctors who were guilty of these crimes against humanity lacked both the moral and professional conscience that is to be expected of members of this honourable profession. The spirit of the Hippocratic oath cannot change and must be reaffirmed by the profession. It enjoins the duty of caring, the greatest crime being cooperation in the destruction of life by murder, suicide and abortion.

The hardening of the conscience has to begin somewhere and it is at least accelerated when society gives permission.

## **Life is to be Redeemed**

The third belief which runs throughout Scripture is the fact that life has to be redeemed. In Deuteronomy life is seen as a great blessing - the gift of life in conception and the experience of life in longevity, lived out in God's presence in the land. Both are linked to humble obedience in response to his covenant promises. Deuteronomy 6:1-3 states:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you.

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Certainly this is more than physical-biological life, it is the spiritual life of a restored relationship with the one who has made us and for whom we were made and consequently with each other. This is after all the redeemed community of Israel to whom the commandments are given: 'Hear O Israel I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.' The indivisibility of God is basic to his self-revelation: 6:4 - 'Here O Israel, the LORD your God is One' - the *Shema*. There is one God, who has chosen one nation and has given them one law. So these ten words for living not only reflect God's character, they express God's care, expressing the whole of his concern for the whole of his people.

So 'life' in all its fullness, we might say, is experienced in covenant relationship with God and his people. This also explains why the promised land in later Judaism is referred to as 'the land of life'. Rabbi Tanhuma said, 'The Land of Israel is called the land of life and Jacob's hope to return to the land of Israel was his claim to his portion in the land of life.' Those inside the land are in the 'land of the living', those outside are in the 'land of the dead' - which would explain the phrase in Isaiah 53:8, that the Lord's servant would be cut off from 'the land of the living'. For Israel, then, 'life' was understood as both land and a way of life and both are dependent on the covenant with God. The former was his promise to the people, the latter the response of the people to the promise. To break the covenant meant in the deepest and profoundest sense possible to forfeit life

and exchange it for death.

This fundamental view that life is a blessing and death a curse is particularly highlighted in Deuteronomy 28-30: for example take chapter 30:1 5-16:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

God forged a people and he gave his law to enable them to live the good life and to be a model society to the world so that people would see the difference that knowing him makes and so would seek after him. This 'missionary/witnessing' element is very much to the fore in 4:5-8:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

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These people were meant to be distinctive and one of the things which was supremely distinctive, as we have seen, was their view of the sanctity of human life.

Furthermore, what shaped this distinctive approach to the sanctity of life amongst the Jews was not just the belief that God was Creator but the deep and certain knowledge that he was also redeemer. The value of the people was not intrinsic, it was given by virtue of the fact that they were redeemed - Deuteronomy 7:7 - 8.1:

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

This in turn was to mould their attitudes and actions towards others less fortunate -hence their radical approach to the poor and slavery, Deuteronomy 15:11:

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today*

Not only had God's redemption of this people in the past provide motivation for doing good and saving life, he also promises to redeem them in the future, see chapter 30:1-3:

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and



In other words, the 'life' of Israel was to be redeemed at some future point. This was a life that was to be understood much more fully than physical. It was the life of shalom, peace and wholeness, of restored relationships - of covenant.

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This is where the sixth commandment links up with NT ethics. As is clear from chapters 28-30 of Deuteronomy, the paradigm nation which was meant to be a light to the surrounding nations, was to fail, so causing the reader to ask, when and in whom then will it be fulfilled? The answer is in Jesus. It is no accident that the book of Deuteronomy provides the backdrop against which the temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11) are to be understood - hence the quotations by Jesus from Deuteronomy. Here is the true Israel in the wilderness. The One who does heed the Word of God and whose mission to the cross, rather than the following of the way of the nations (bowing the knee to Satan in order to receive earthly kingdoms) fulfils the mission which lies at the heart of the book as we have seen in Deuteronomy four. He does so by taking onto himself the curses contained at the end of the book, so making sense of his own death in the light of chapter 21:22-23; 'Cursed is anyone hung on a tree.' (cf Gal. 3:10-14).

What we are meant to see in Israel as a community, is meant to reflect the image of God, which is to be understood supremely in terms of 'relationships' - the reflection on earth of the Trinitarian relationship in heaven. This is seen perfectly in Jesus who is described as *the* 'image of the invisible God', Colossians 1:15. How is the image expressed? First: it is shown by how the Son relates to the Father in humble obedience and service (which should have been modelled in Israel, Deut. 6:3). In John 5:19 therefore we read: 'The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his father doing'. This is the apprentice Son par excellence as Israel was meant to be an apprentice or model. Second: Jesus relates to others in serving - through his teaching and healing and supremely his death (I am among you as one who serves - Luke 22:27). The image of God in Christ is also expressed through the way he relates to the rest of creation - hence the stilling of the storm (Mark 4:35-41). This ties back to Genesis 1:26-28 which underscores the function of humankind in the world, so verse 26c is a purposive clause - 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness *in order that* they may have dominion.' What Adam, God's son, was meant to be - relating properly to God, the world and other people in terms of kingly-priestly service, and God's other son, Israel, was meant to be - a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:3b ff). Jesus the second Adam and the true Israel is in perfection as the king-priest.

Could it not be then, that the image of God is not so much something simply *within* us, as something expressed *between* us?[4] So it is more to do with asking whether we represent the life and character of God to others? If that is the case then what we should be asking on matters of life and death, is not 'Is this someone who is made in God's image and who should be treated in this way?' Rather we should be asking is this the way those who express God's image should be relating to each other? In Israel, the laws that are in Deuteronomy were meant to enhance relationships in the community. In Jesus we see what that means in practice. Here is one who does not take life, but

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restores life, who will not break a bruised reed or quench and smouldering wick.

In his excellent book on the relationship between the Christian faith and science, *Rebuilding the*

*Matrix*, Denis Alexander succinctly puts the matter in these terms:

In Christian theism humans are made in 'the image of God'. This expression is first introduced in the biblical text in the context of the responsibilities given to human kind to care for the earth and its biological diversity. In this scenario, humans are delegated by God to be his 'earth keepers'. The image of God is not therefore so much a static concept, referring to human reason, or free will, or other particular intrinsic qualities, but rather to the dynamic relational status of humans to God, in particular regarding those delegated responsibilities. These moral responsibilities are given not just to a few individuals but to the whole of humankind. A severely disabled infant, for example, may never be able to contribute very much, if anything, individually to fulfilling these delegated responsibilities, but nevertheless is part of the human community that as a whole carries this moral obligation on its shoulders.[5]

It is this relational basis for ethics which might help us when we consider issues of life and death. Instead of getting bogged down over abstract questions of 'personhood': 'Is this one before me (a foetus or comatose individual) someone who should be accorded the same rights of protection as myself?' We should think of ourselves, like Israel, as being people thrown together by covenantal relations. I relate to this person as a mother, doctor, son, brother, sister and so on. Such relationships are based on trust and entail obligations. If a woman miscarries, especially late, she feels she has not lost a conceptus, but a baby. Even after death and one is left holding the hand of a loved one, we recognise that the body echoes the person. As Stanley Hauerwas entitled one of his essays, 'He may not be much of a person, but he is still my Uncle Charlie'. The identity and worth of an individual is grounded in relationship with others, as was the identity and worth of Israel and indeed Jesus himself - their relationship with God the Father.

One of the reasons why we find ourselves with rootless ethics in the West and cannot sustain the notion of the sanctity of human life for much longer, is because we are losing the notion of covenantal relationships. There is the increased move towards cohabitation away from marriage. There is the breakdown of the family and so a weakening of relationships and with that a sense of responsibility, why else is it difficult for the Child Support Agency to get absentee fathers to give? There is the breakdown of community - the only community that seems real for most people outside of their family, is the workplace. The city and the town do not necessarily help to foster the notion of belonging. And now virtual communities are being constructed in cyberspace

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with chat rooms and the like. This is all accentuated by the over preoccupation with the self, but even this is disappearing fast in our postmodern world, as the concept of 'self' is being deconstructed. Man is simply disappearing and with him the notion of the sanctity of life.

The challenge for members of the redeemed community is to demonstrate that there is a better way. This means that we must teach on these issues. The Bible is not just concerned with 'personal morality' as we have seen the commandments come to us within the context of a redeemed community. As local churches reflect the redeemed community of the heavenly church, then that is where people in our disintegrating world should be able to look and say as, the surrounding nations of Israel should have said, 'Look, these *are* a wise and understanding people'. We should be providing as much support as possible for those of our members in the so-called caring service, not only in helping them to think these matters through biblically, but also to support them emotionally as they will often feel drained and battered. We, however, must also demonstrate to, and remonstrate with the world that we are willing to get our hands dirty - maybe helping with pregnancy counselling, post abortion counselling, visiting and supporting the terminally ill. These are some of the practical implications of the sixth commandment.

Is the commandment 'You shall not murder' applicable today? The obvious answer is 'yes'. The drive towards getting rid of unwanted lives increases as each year passes. given that we have no real reasons for valuing a human being. Christians, however, can point the world to an alternative - the only alternative which will save us from our continued descent into barbarism.

Towards the end of his life, the great evangelical thinker, Dr Francis Schaeffer devoted himself to a project entitled 'Whatever happened to the human race?'. In this book he sought to encourage Christians to stem the drift towards more abortion infanticide and euthanasia. He ends the book with these words:

Future generations will look back, and many will either scoff or believe in Christ on the basis of whether we Christians of today took a sacrificial stand in our various walks of life on these overwhelmingly important issues. If we do not take a stand here and now, we certainly cannot lay any claim to being salt and light in our generation. We are neither preserving moral values and the dignity of the individual nor showing compassion for our fellow human beings. Will future generations look back and remember that at least there was one group who stood consistently, whatever the price, for the value of the individual, thus passing on some hope to future generations? Or are we as Christians going to be swept along with the trends - our own moral values becoming increasingly befuddled, our own apathy reflecting the apathy of the world around us, our own inactivity sharing the inertia of the masses around us, our own leadership becoming soft? [\[6\]](#)

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The challenge is still very much with us. After all, the commandment *is* clear 'You shall not murder'.

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[2] Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

[3] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 88, 169, 171-72.

[4] For an excellent development of this thesis see, Gordon Preece, 'Ethics and the End of Life' in *The Ethics of Life and Death*, (Lancet, 1990, ed. B.G. Webb).

[5] Denis Alexander, *Rebuilding the Matrix* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2001), 466-67.

[6] Francis A Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980).



# On Barth's Denial of Universalism

**Oliver Crisp**

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It is notorious among theologians that Karl Barth defends doctrines of election and atonement that *appear* to lead to universalism, but that Barth steadfastly maintained did not lead to universalism. As Jüngel records it, Barth emphatically claimed, 'I do not teach it (universalism), but I also do not teach it'.<sup>1</sup> There have been many who are willing to defend Barth in this matter. For instance, John Colwell claims that:

[I]f some of Barth's critics refuse to take this divine freedom seriously with respect (especially) to Barth's doctrine of election and consequently suspect him of implicit universalism then that is their problem rather than his and probably says more about them than it says about him.<sup>2</sup>

Similar views can be found among other barthians both present and past. Thus, for example, Joseph Bettis says that 'for Barth, one can reject both Arminianism and double predestination without having to accept universalism'.<sup>3</sup>

There, however, have also been those voices raised in opposition to this view. For instance, Hans Urs von Balthasar says:

It is clear from Barth's presentation of the doctrine of election that universal salvation is not only possible but inevitable. The only definitive reality is grace, and any condemnatory judgement has to be merely provisional.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, A Theological Legacy*, (trans.) Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1986), 44–45. Compare also *Church Dogmatics* IV/III, 477–78.

<sup>2</sup> John Colwell, 'The Contemporaneity of the Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of Universalism' in Nigel Cameron (ed.) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967): 423. Compare George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, (trans.) John Drury (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 163.

Similarly, G.C. Berkouwer observes that:

In original universalism, the issue is a universal offer because Christ died for all, and election remains in the background for the moment. But with Barth, Christ's death touches precisely upon the election of all, which election has become manifest in Christ's death. The universality of the message is no longer at odds with the fact of election, for it is based on the universality of election.<sup>5</sup>

Even Geoffrey Bromiley, one of the translators of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* into English, and a theologian sympathetic to Barth's account of election, nevertheless closes his own overview of Barth's doctrine of election with these words: 'The ambivalence at this decisive point – will all be saved or not, and if not, why not? – by no means outweighs the solid merits of Barth's presentation.'<sup>6</sup>

So what is the logic of Barth's position? Does his view yield a version of universalism or not? In this essay, I will attempt to show that Barth's doctrines of election and atonement do indeed yield a version of universalism, despite the protestations of both Barth and his defenders to the contrary.

### Barth's doctrine of atonement and election

The argument depends upon a number of theological terms pertaining to universalism which it might be helpful to explain at the outset. First, I take it that the term 'universalism' refers to a family of similar views which share in common the notion that all humanity will be saved by God. None will be finally damned to hell. In the current literature these different versions of universalism have been categorised into two groups: necessary and contingent universalism. Necessary universalism is the view that it is not just true, but *necessarily* true that all humanity will end up in heaven. By contrast contingent universalism states that, although a human being *could* be consigned to hell, as a matter of contingent fact no-one *will* end up there.<sup>7</sup>

Second, I will use the terms 'elect' and 'reprobate' to refer to two groups of humanity. The former term denotes that group which God decrees to save; the latter, that group which God decrees to damn.

With these clarifications in mind, let us turn to Barth himself. I take it that Barth's denial of universalism depends upon his doctrines of election and atonement in particular. In the argument that follows, I will show that Barth's denial of universalism is either disingenuous (he was a universalist), or just plain muddled (his position is not coherent). There is a third option: that Barth did not see the logical implications of his position. However, this seems unlikely, so I will ignore it. Either result means Barth's

<sup>5</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, (trans.) Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 229.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 97.

<sup>7</sup> See Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74, for these distinctions.

Himself when He elected fellowship with man, then we can answer only that He elected our rejection. He made it his own. He bore and suffered it with all its most bitter consequences.<sup>9</sup>

We can express his argument for the atonement of Christ in the following way:

1. Given A1 and A2, Christ's death atones for the sin of all human agents.

By this Barth seems to mean that:

2. Christ's death is sufficient and efficient for all human agents.

That is, Christ's death is not simply *potentially* universal in scope (it could save all humanity); it is *actually* universal in scope (all humanity are saved by it). It might be argued that Barth's position is merely that the atonement is universal in scope, not effectiveness. However, that Barth's position does involve a universally efficient atonement can be seen from passages such as the following:

There is no-one who does not participate in Him [Christ] in His turning to God. There is no-one who is not ... engaged in this turning. There is no-one who is not raised and exalted with Him to true humanity. 'Jesus Christ lives, and I with Him.'<sup>10</sup>

We shall return to this issue at a later point. For the present, let us assume that Barth does endorse something like 2 above. From here we move to:

3. This work is completed at the cross.
4. This work is appropriated not via the traditional Reformation formula: 'If you repent and believe, you will be saved; if you do not repent and believe, you will not be saved', but by agents coming to realise that, 'this is what God in Jesus Christ has done for your sake. Therefore repent and believe.'<sup>11</sup>

This raises a question. It is this: if the atonement is universally effective, according to Barth, then how does this tie into his doctrine of election? To answer this, let us lay out

<sup>9</sup> CD II/2, 164.

<sup>10</sup> CD II/2, 271.

<sup>11</sup> See CD II/2, 317 ff. The two citations are from George Hunsinger's *How To Read Karl Barth*, 130, my emphases. Hunsinger points out the unconditional nature of the Barthian formula, observing, 'since, in Barth's understanding, God has already freely included us [in salvation], it falls to us henceforth freely to receive our inclusion as the gift it is proclaimed to be'. *Ibid.*, 130-31.

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6. Christ is the Reprobate One. (That is, the set of the reprobate comprises one member, Christ.)

In this way, Barth's doctrine fuses the so-called 'double decree' of Calvinism in the person of Christ, who is both the Elect and Reprobate One. But the way in which this is applied to the set of human agents is asymmetrical.

7. All human agents are elect only in the derivative sense of having a saving relation to the set of the elect and its single member, Christ.

And:

8. The sin of all human agents is atoned for by Christ, the Reprobate One, who is the only member of the set of the reprobate.

Rather than 8, it might be tempting to construe Barth as saying something more like:

- 8\*. All human agents are reprobate only in the derivative sense of having a relation to the set of the reprobate and its single member, Christ.

But this would entail:

9. All human agents are simultaneously members of the sets 'elect-in-Christ' and 'reprobate-in-Christ'.

This *which* is incoherent, for then, all humanity would be derivatively elect and reprobate simultaneously, and, presumably, co-terminously. This would, of course, be absurd. (Compare the idea that someone could simultaneously be both an associate member and non-associate member of a country club.) I suggest that Barth must mean 8 rather than 8\*, in order for his argument to make sense. Let us proceed on this assumption. Then, given 8, we have:

- 9\*. All human agents are members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

On this understanding of Barth's doctrine of election, the relation between election and reprobation is asymmetrical. Christ takes on the sin of all humanity, becoming the Reprobate One, whose death atones for that sin, and Christ is also the Elect One whose death brings about the (derivative) election of all humanity.

The problem with this is that it seems to entail some form of universalism. But a universalism of what kind? This depends on Barth's understanding of, among other things, free will. And it is not entirely clear whether Barth wishes to endorse a



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This seems the most straightforward way to understand the compatibility of 1–4 and 5–8 and 9\*. Barth claims, however that, his views are not universalistic. Instead, he seems to believe something like the following conjunction:

- 10\*. All human agents are elect in Christ, the Elect One, by virtue of his universally efficient atonement and:  
 11. A human agent may reject Christ, and may, ultimately, not be saved.

This seems fallacious. For, given 1–4 and 5–8 and 9\*:

12. If a human agent is a member of the set 'elect-in-Christ', then a human agent will inevitably be numbered among those who are saved.

This, once again, yields a version of universalism. Perhaps another way of looking at Barth might not yield the same problems. Let us try a different tack. Barth has already allowed that:

- i Christ's atonement is universal in scope and efficacy (from 1–4).
- ii Christ is the Elect One and therefore the sole member of the set 'elect', in whom all human agents are elected (from 5–8 and 9\*).
- iii Christ is the Elect One whose atonement for the sin of human agents is universal in scope and efficacy, and all human agents are members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

The problem is that this appears to mean that all the members of the set 'elect-in-Christ' will be saved, since it is not possible that the Elect One's atonement will not be effective for all members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

But why is this so? Because, as previously noted, Christ's death is not merely *potentially* effective, according to Barth (as it is for, say, traditional Arminians). It is *actually* effective for all human agents. This understanding of Barth is reflected in the fact that he labours the point that (according to 4), the appropriation by a human agent of the benefits of Christ's death now is a matter of coming to realise that one is already saved, and in the light of that knowledge, turning from sin to salvation. (Recall also, Barth's claim that the attempt to reject God is pointless, since, 'this is the very goal which the godless cannot reach, because it has already been taken away by the eternally decreed offering of the Son of God to suffer in the place of the godless, and cannot any longer be their goal.'<sup>15</sup>)

Therefore, on Barth's model, Christ's atonement is both universal in scope and efficacy, and potentially and actually universally effective. But if Christ's atonement is like

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hope of eternal life, if he ever thinks he can and should seek and find these things anywhere but at the place where as the act and work of God they are real as the forgiveness of his sins, as his divine sonship, as his hope, anywhere but in the one Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Passages such as this appear to mean that Christ's death applies unconditionally to every human being, such that all human beings are justified (as per 4). Points 10\*\* and 4 together mean that the atonement is still applied to a particular human agent on the condition that it has not been consciously refrained from by that particular human agent.

This, however, will not work as a solution to the universalism dilemma Barth faces, for two reasons. First, it is not clear what this view means. Barth does not mean simply that the atonement is universal in scope (potentially all human agents could be saved), but not necessarily in its effect (actually, not all human agents are saved, because they have libertarian freedom and some choose not to be saved). This looks like a traditional Arminian view of the atonement. Instead, he means something more like: the atonement applies unconditionally to all humanity, such that all humanity is justified before God, but, given 4, the atonement is only applied on the condition that it has not been consciously refrained from, or opted out of, by a human agent. The problem here is that this is not a solution to the universalism dilemma that is any more coherent than the alternatives already outlined. For, if this is Barth's position, then a person can be both derivatively elect in Christ, such that their sins are atoned for by Christ, whose death has already justified them before God (as per 4), and, at the same time, be able to opt out of this justification and election in Christ, which appears, *prima facie*, to be contradictory. For how can a person be both justified and (derivatively) elect, and yet be able to reject that status?

There are two strengths to Barth's position here. He could mean, (a) a person might be justified and derivatively elect at one moment, and reject that status the next. Or he could mean, (b) a person can be in a state where they are both justified and rejected simultaneously. But how could a person be both justified and rejected at one and the same time? This seems to be confused, if not incoherent. To illustrate: it would be a strange state of affairs indeed if a subject was ennobled by their king, and given a place of prominence at court, and *at the same time* turned out of the court, and banished from the realm. But this is what (b) amounts to.

Nor does (a) fare any better. The problem with (a) is that it makes for a strange doctrine of election if one can opt out of election, and the status it confers on an individual, at any moment. What is more, this does not seem compatible with Barth's position laid out in 5-8 and 9\*.

Secondly, this does not seem to be in agreement with what Barth says elsewhere, about the pointlessness of persisting in rebelling against God, when one's election is

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But what Barth is claiming at this juncture in his argument is something like:

- iv Because God is free, the eschatological destiny of all humanity is uncertain.

The problem is that iv simply does not appear to be consistent with i-iii. In fact, it seems to contradict i-iii. One cannot consistently hold both that all humanity have been (derivatively) elected, so that all their sin has been efficaciously atoned for by Christ, *and* that the soteriological status of all humanity is uncertain, any more than one can hold both that all the Conservative candidates fielded have been elected to Parliament, so that they may all return to their offices in the Palace of Westminster, *and* that the future candidacy of all Conservative parliamentary candidates fielded is uncertain. Either their future candidacy is uncertain, or it is not. If they have been returned to Parliament, then their future candidacy simply cannot be uncertain.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, either the question of whether all humanity are (derivatively) elect and efficaciously atoned for by Christ is uncertain, or it is not. If all humanity have been (derivatively) elected and efficaciously atoned for by Christ (as per i-iii), then their soteriological status simply cannot be uncertain (as per iv). This seems fatal to the consistency of Barth's position.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Of course, a parliamentary candidate who has been returned to parliament might withdraw from their position, or may withdraw at some later date. But that is beside the point. My claim here is about the consistency of saying the future candidacy of a particular Conservative MP is *at one and the same time* a settled question (they have been returned to Parliament), and an open question (it is not clear whether this MP has retained their seat or not). Whether that MP, having been re-elected, then withdraws or not, is a separate issue.

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# The Last and Next Christendom: Implications for Interpreting the Bible

## Robert W. Yarbrough

Robert Yarbrough is Associate Professor and New Testament Department Chair at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. This is a slight revision of a lecture delivered in February 2003 at Károli Gáspár Reformed University, Budapest, Hungary.

The thesis of this essay is that world Christianity is exploding so dramatically that biblical interpretation needs to make sure it is keeping pace, without sacrificing either the essential content of the biblical message or the intellectual rigour of scholarly interpretation. I will be making the following points.

1. World Christianity is changing rapidly, with implications for how biblical interpretation in centres of learning and training ought to proceed.
2. The culturally dominant mode of academic interpretation worldwide, which for convenience we will term the 'historical critical method',<sup>1</sup> has despite its contributions consistently failed to interpret the Bible in a sufficiently Christian way for over two centuries now.
3. Biblical interpretation of the 21st century must be careful to respond to the demands of a growing church without capitulating to mere local fervour and pragmatism. At the same time it must strive to escape its Babylonian captivity to scholarly trends that too facily reject the core of the Christian message.

## The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity

The heading of this section is the title of Philip Jenkins' important recent book<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a concise characterisation see Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 78. For critical analysis see, amidst a vast literature, Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove/Lexington: InterVarsity Press, 1996), esp. 221ff.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.



(parenthetical page numbers in the text below refer to this work). In it he documents convincingly the Copernican shift that Christianity has undergone in the last century. While European and what Jenkins calls 'Northern' Christianity has for the most part been decreasing in numbers and strength, 'Southern' Christianity has seen spectacular growth.<sup>3</sup> The new arrivals in the church are largely people of colour and in poverty, which also describes the majority of the world population. Kenneth L. Woodward wrote in *Newsweek* two years ago that Christianity is spreading more rapidly now than at any time or place since the NT era.<sup>4</sup> He points out that in many of the lands where this is happening, conversion requires 'enormous courage' because of social rejection and often outright persecution.<sup>5</sup> And the engine fuelling this powerful emergence is a Bible-believing, literal hermeneutic. What is being preached and believed is not the social or political or 'critical' religion that has taken over many Western churches who no longer believe in things like Jesus' divinity or his virginal conception or blood atonement or bodily resurrection or the authority of the Bible as God's inspired Word. As Jenkins writes, 'the dominant current in emerging world Christianity is traditionalist, orthodox, and supernatural' (8; cf. 217–20).

Here are some indicators of the growth to which Jenkins refers. The number of Christians in Africa has gone from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million in 2000 (4).<sup>6</sup> Two-thirds of all Protestants in the world live outside North America and Europe. There are 20 million baptised Anglicans in Nigeria alone (59). There are only 2.8 in the USA, where the number of Episcopalians has been spiralling downward for decades.<sup>7</sup> England claims 25 million Anglicans (94), but fewer than one million ever attend church even at Christmas or Easter (87); most have no practical tie with the church at all. (By contrast, 70% of Christians in the Philippines regularly attend church.<sup>8</sup>) In fact Great Britain has become a mission field; 'it plays host to some 1,500 missionaries from fifty nations' (205). While Lutherans declined in numbers in the US 1980–2000, they grew in many countries of South America, Africa, and Asia, in some places at the rate of over 250%.<sup>9</sup> People are responding to the message of salvation in Christ all over the world. In Jenkins' words, 'Amazing as it may appear to a blasé West, Christianity exercises an overwhelming global appeal, which shows not the slightest sign of waning' (39).

<sup>3</sup> See also Dana L. Robert, 'Shifting Southward', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24/2 (2000) 50–58; G.C. Waldrep, 'The Expansion of Christianity: An Interview with Andrew Walls', *Christian Century* August 2–9, 2000, 792–95.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church', *Newsweek*, April 16, 2001, 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tite Tiénou, 'The State of the Gospel in Africa', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 2001) 154–56, 161–62.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Peter Brierley and Heather Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 16. See also R. William Franklin, 'Lambeth 1998 and the Future Mission of the Episcopal Church', *Anglican Theological Review* 81/2 (1999), 261–69; Robert, 'Shifting Southward,' 53.

<sup>8</sup> Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church,' 48.

<sup>9</sup> Brierley and Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity*, 20.

Now we must be cautious about this growth. Jenkins defines 'Christian' as anyone who calls himself one and who affirms that Jesus 'is not merely a prophet or an exalted moral teacher, but in some unique sense the Son of God, and the Messiah' (88). This is classification that undoubtedly includes many whose complete system of belief and practice may not be very recognisably Christian. In this schema, for example, Mormons are Christians (66, 86, 104). Yet Jenkins does not take the most wildly optimistic projections of Christian numbers (223–24, notes 2 and 3). In the end he arrives at a fairly conservative assessment of current church memberships, their rate of growth, and their likely sizes over the next half century or so. Of course there is sure to be unforeseen change, and some of what Jenkins predicts will turn out different than he visualises. Jenkins admits as much (e.g., 80–81; cf. 13–14, 89). He is, however, likely to be more right than wrong.

Some more statistics will underscore the change that is underway. Already in the 1960s, Christians came to outnumber Muslims in Africa (56).<sup>10</sup> As historian Adrian Hastings puts it, 'Black Africa today is totally inconceivable apart from the presence of Christianity' (quoted in Jenkins, 56).<sup>11</sup> The most recent calculated rate of growth was about 23,000 new Christians every day (56). While liberal Western thought had expected that the end of colonial domination would mean an Africa returning to indigenous religion, or embracing Marxism or Western secularism, what has happened is a return to something resembling apostolic Christian faith and practice. Today Uganda is 35–40% Anglican (60) and 35% Catholic (91) for a total of 75% Christian population; Nigeria is 40% Christian (89); Botswana is 50% Christian (69). Overall, the Christian presence in Africa may be placed at about 46% of the total population (56).

In Asia, there are nearly twice as many Presbyterians in South Korea as in the USA (71) or perhaps even four times as many.<sup>12</sup> In Communist Vietnam, 9% of the population is listed as Christian. This is sure to be too low because it only counts officially registered churches; for instance, the province of Lao Cai, is not counted. The Christian population there went from zero in 1991 to perhaps 60,000 by 1998 (71). If we take a conservative estimate of 50 million as the number of Christians in China, that means there are more practising Christians there than in either France or Britain (70). The US State Department estimates there are 100 million Christians in China; while this may be inflated, if it were correct then 8% of the total population is Christian, the same percentage as Buddhists in that nation.

<sup>10</sup> For an assessment of the broader Arab world see Tarek Mitri, 'Who are the Christians of the Arab World?' *International Review of Mission* 89 (2000) 12–27.

<sup>11</sup> For historical perspective see Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Africa to the Present* (Grand Rapids/Lawrenceville, N.J.: Eerdmans/Africa World Press, 1995); Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The figure given in Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church', 48.

All over the world Pentecostal numbers are increasing at the rate of around 19 million each year (63). The largest Pentecostal denomination in the US, the Assemblies of God, has 2–3 million members. This is dwarfed by that group's 12 million members in Brazil alone (64).

Meanwhile, twenty years ago we were told that West Germany was about 45% Protestant and 45% Roman Catholic. Today in unified Germany, only one-third is Protestant in any sense, and fewer than 1 million 'demonstrate any regular religious participation' (95). That is less than 2% of the overall population. Roman Catholic participation is not much higher. Meanwhile, 25% of Germans 'claim no religious affiliation, not even a residual Christianity' (95). This 'Christian' nation has obviously moved dramatically in the direction of non-Christian conviction.

The picture is clear and to many will be startling. The Christianity of Europe and North America is waning in comparison to its robust growth in developing nations. Overall, populations in developing nations are also climbing, whereas they are stagnant or in decline in many parts of Europe. Only God knows the future, but to the extent that we can plot trends, 'Southern' Christianity appears poised to continue to expand rapidly, while 'Northern' Christianity (particularly in the secularised or 'liberal' forms favoured by most intellectuals) will continue to shrivel, at least in numbers and quite possibly in influence. All this amounts to a new climate, a new culture, for interpreting the Bible today.

### The Decaying Dominance of Western Academic Interpretation of Scripture

Lamin Sanneh, Professor of History at Yale, points out the irony that theological education goes on today in the West 'largely uninterested in Christianity's unprecedented expansion around the world'.<sup>13</sup> He adds: 'Standard theological sources and methods have failed to show any awareness of the Copernican shift that has taken place in the religious map of the world.'<sup>14</sup> And he comments:

Christianity has become a genuinely multicultural world religion, thriving profusely in the idioms of other languages and cultures, marked by a lively cross-cultural and interreligious sensibility, unburdened by the heavy artillery of doctors and councils, and otherwise undaunted by the scandalous paucity of money, trained leadership, infrastructure, and resources. Nothing better demonstrates the newness of world Christianity than the fact that has ceased, or is ceasing, to be weighed down by its missionary past.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 'Global Christianity and the Re-education of the West,' *Christian Century* July 19–26, 1995, 715.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 716.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* 717.

Meanwhile, dominant academic institutions of the West continue to teach the same methods and principles for Bible interpretation that have contributed substantially to the widespread abandonment of Christian belief in 'Northern' Christianity. A recent book on the history of NT interpretation illustrates this. *William Baird's History of New Testament Research*, volume two: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*<sup>16</sup> devotes by far the bulk of its attention to movements like rationalism, the Tübingen school, liberalism, and the history of religion school. Each of these movements jettisoned key elements of historic Christianity in the interest of current trends in thought and in that sense abandoned the Christian faith (despite the frequent insistence that they were simply making it palatable for a new generation). The result is that many university-trained pastors, and most of their professors in large domains of academe, came to deny the Christian faith as confessed in the creeds down through church history – and as professed by the 'Southern' churches of the new millennium.

Now in the context of a Western and particularly Hungarian university, an august institution of higher learning with a rich and noble scholarly heritage, none should deny the inherent importance of academic study in the highest sense. It is right that biblical interpretation in the church be informed by disciplines like Greek and Hebrew language, biblical studies, church history, systematic and historical theology, and so on as its ministers are trained in the knowledge and skills passed along by their learned professors. At the same time, it has become clear that there is an ecclesia of academia with its own dogmas. It is not only the traditional church that has passed along certain doctrines uncritically.

For example, the rationalism of Lessing<sup>17</sup> had huge unprovable assumptions that make sense in a Kantian philosophical framework but are not self-evident in most cultures around the world today. Lessing confessed scepticism toward facts of history. While of course mere historical facts are not God, Christians today need not feel the same compulsion to genuflect to his prejudice against them as they witness to the plausibility and indeed truth of the Christian message. The methodological agnosticism of Ernst Troeltsch<sup>18</sup> has served respectable historiographical aims, but Western universities have too facily taken its informing premises on faith. For instance, while it is generally true that we should suspect singular events of the past, there is nothing

<sup>16</sup> Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> See Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> Troeltsch wrote prolifically, but his outlook is conveniently summarised in his essays 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', in Gregory W. Dawes, ed., *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Quest for the Jesus of History* (Louisville/Leiderdrop: Westminster John Knox/Deo, 1999), 29–53; 'The dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule', *American Journal of Theology* 17 (1913) 1–21; and 'Historiography', in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 716–23. For a useful response to Troeltschian criticism, see Alvin Plantinga. 'Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship', *Modern Theology* 14/2 (1998) 243–78.

Troeltsch says that proves that Jesus might not have come to earth from God and risen from the dead following his crucifixion for the sins of all who believe on his name. He just rules it out by methodological decree drawing on warrants ubiquitous in the German university climate of his age.<sup>19</sup>

German scholar Gerhard Maier is one of many who came to see through the pretence of what Adolf Schlatter called 'atheistische Methoden in der Theologie':

I had my first formative experience in the encounter with critical theological hermeneutics when I switched to theological studies after completing training in the field of law. At that time practically everyone in German theology was speaking of the 'significance' of this or that biblical account. At the same time the 'facticity' of those accounts was widely denied. As a lawyer I had learned that the facts must be ascertained before their significance can be assessed. In German Protestant theology the procedure was precisely the reverse. But is such spiritualizing legitimate? Can the historicity of the Christian message be placed in question and its authority and significance still upheld?<sup>20</sup>

A second far-reaching experience was the transition from pastoral work to academic theological instruction. As a pastor, in entirely normal circumstances with neither charismatic nor other unusual factors at work, I had preached and prayed, shared people's awakening to faith, observed the effectiveness of God's Word, and learned increasingly to trust that Word. The 'critical' vantage point of theology in the 60s and 70s, however, stood diametrically opposed to this burgeoning trust. Now, which basic posture was correct? Trust or doubt? Confidence or scepticism?

Striking connections and confirmations of the biblical reports became evident in that moment when I honestly and openly wrestled with the possibility that the biblical Word – even with respect to historical events – could be true. This was not the world of legends, of contrivances, of fictions. Rather I detected here 'the scent of truth', as Wolfgang Schadewaldt once put it. I therefore opted for a basic posture of trust, of remaining open to the possibility that the biblical reports are reliable. All my subsequent work followed from this basic posture.

Maier concludes with these provocative words:

I would like to pose this question to those who prefer a different position: How can we remain Christians when we call biblical revelation in doubt? How is God's voice supposed to remain perceptible when we subject everything to the violent constraints of explanation based on the purely immanent?<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Rightly noted by William J. Abraham, 'Revelation Reaffirmed', in *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 204.

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. R. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), xi–xii. For a translation of Schlatter's original essay see Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, trans. R. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 211–25.

<sup>21</sup> Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, xii, 'Explanation based on the purely immanent' summarises the hermeneutic of much academic interpretation of the Bible in the wake of the Enlightenment and in many university circles around the world today.

These questions are being asked increasingly within academic circles at present.<sup>22</sup> They are also thrust upon us by the growth of a world church whose leaders require grounding in Christian knowledge, faith, and practice, not in the discredited scepticism of a continent and culture whose leaders have too frequently rejected the truth of the religion that many people in their churches still cling to – a religion that in many quarters, though with as yet unforeseeable results, is sweeping the globe.

### The Challenge for Reading and Proclaiming the Bible Today

It should be underscored that to affirm this is not to call for end to scholarly interpretation of Scripture, but for its renewal. Sanneh points out that by waking up to world trends:

Biblical studies could receive an infusion of new research tasks; and only through mission studies are Western biblical scholars and theologians likely to learn the work done in their own fields by their African, Asian, and Latin American colleagues.<sup>23</sup>

Biblical interpreters of the 21st century who have any sense of call to serve the church of Jesus Christ must be careful to respond to the demands of a growing church without capitulating to mere local fervour and pragmatism. The dangers of apocalyptic or prophetic enthusiasm are real in many new churches. No age or locale is free from the lure of overwrought or even heretical Christian expression. Tiénoú warns, for example, that 'an African Christianity that is wholly exotic is a betrayal of the gospel'.<sup>24</sup> Academic interpretation of the Bible (meaning, among other things, interpretation that is not ruled by current dogmatic convictions, whether 'liberal' or 'conservative' or 'Pentecostal' or something else) is absolutely necessary for the church to understand, live out, and proclaim its doctrine to this generation and to future ones. Rigorous study in itself is not wrong, as theological scholars through the centuries abundantly illustrate. It must be informed, however, by premises that are not *a priori* exclusive of Christian truth claims.

In other words, throughout the world there is an acute need for church leaders with knowledge of original languages and scholarly competencies for verifying the original texts of Scripture, their best translation, and their meaning, and their application. Pastoral leaders need grounding in the history of Israel and OT Scripture and theology, Second Temple Judaism, the first century and its history and literatures, the NT Scriptures and their theology, the patristic era, and subsequent periods, debates, issues in the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kwame Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium', *African Affairs*, 99, (2000) 303.

<sup>23</sup> 'Global Christianity and the re-education of the West', 717.

<sup>24</sup> 'The State of the Gospel in Africa', 161.

history of Christian faith – and secular conviction as well. Everywhere there is need for broad and deep understanding of world religions. Moreover, we need a grasp of the contemporary trends that are fuelling the critical theory that is dominant in the university setting and influential across the whole world of discourse in the world of science and government and education and commerce and the arts.<sup>25</sup> Christian faith throughout its history has typically (though not always) sparked interest in the world God has made, not just in spiritual matters. Modern science arose in part precisely because of biblical convictions about God and the world and their connection. The increase of world Christianity should result in an increase in literacy and learning, precisely because Christians come to faith by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (cf. Rom. 10:17), and that implies reading and analysis and synthesis, all activities calling for intelligence and reason and scholarship.

At the same time the West and the 'North' can learn from the 'South' that it is time to escape our Babylonian captivity to scholarly trends that too facily reject the core of the Christian message. Christ is our Lord, not the composite beliefs of university structures with no room for the sovereignty of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment belief in reason and the human spirit has helped give us technology, but it also gave us the bloodiest century of human history, with the carnage hardly abating thus far as a new century has got started. It is time for Christians, whether pastors or professors, to listen to the Bible as God's Word again even in the university. Our brothers and sisters in the faith, and those whom we are called to identify with and reach out to and learn from, are the people of colour and poverty who are now the majority in the world church, not just other Hungarians or Europeans or North Americans who look like us and identify with our particular Christian heritage.

In other words, to return to the title of this article, a lesson to be drawn from 'The Last and Next Christendom' is that Christian belief worldwide is no longer a projection of whatever is dominant for academic theologians or biblical studies specialists at Berlin, Oxford, the Sorbonne, and Harvard. Christian renewal around the world is reminding even sceptical Western observers that it actually never was. Since Christianity 'has become the most global of all religions',<sup>26</sup> academic discourse centred around it must rise above its parochial and still-lingering past. Today, for Christians who care to fear God, to love the gospel, and to live in the broadest possible community with fellow believers, new possibilities abound for biblical understanding and ministry, as well as new opportunities for labouring together as the church strives continually to glorify God under Christ's lordship around the globe.

<sup>25</sup> An example of this ongoing project is D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Zondervan/Inter-Varsity Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium', 307. Yet Robert states, 'What at first glance appears to be the largest world religion is in fact the ultimate local religion' ('Shifting Southward', 56). Both statements have their validity, illustrating the complexity of understanding the character of world Christianity at present.

# A Free Lunch at the End of the Universe? Sacrifice, substitution and penal liability

**Paul Wells**

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Although the language of the business world is unexpected in a theological context, Christina Baxter makes no bones about answering this question negatively in an article in the recent book of essays *Atonement Today*:<sup>1</sup> there is no free lunch not even for God.

This question may seem irreverent, but it is, in fact, the hermeneutical transposition of a fundamental issue for Christian faith. Is anything gratuitous, if God is a moral being and not an arbitrary monarch who acts according to Sartre's '*acte gratuit*'? Can there be an open door for the human race into the eternal kingdom of God without any payment? How is the door opened?

Transforming the question into more traditional language: Is atonement necessary for salvation? What is the nature and the result of atonement? Who demands payment and who pays what? These formulations of the question may not be very satisfying as they already smack of Anselm's model.

It has been said that the Canterbury theologian based his model for the atonement on *private law*, debt and honour while H. Grotius referred to *criminal law*, relaxation and remission, as a form of moral government. Calvin's theory has sometimes been classed in the penal category, but the Reformers maintained a real and not just a nominal or moral substitution. The Reformed model of atonement can be better related to associative or *federal law*, which can incorporate many elements including private and penal aspects.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's scholastic successor in Geneva, F. Turretin wrote extensively on this question<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Baxter, in J. Goldingay, ed., *Atonement Today*, (London: SPCK, 1995), published following a symposium at St John's College, Nottingham, England.

<sup>2</sup> On the complexity of Calvin's views see R.A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, ch. x-xiii).



before the likes of A.A. Hodge, R.L. Dabney and H. Bavinck and, more recently, G.C. Berkouwer, L. Morris and J.I. Packer. Reformed theology owes its particularity concerning the atonement to the fact that it has not shunned the questions raised by the notion of sacrifice and vicarious penal substitution. In fact, working backwards, it can be said of the cross in the classical perspective that without its penal character, substitution has little sense and without substitution, sacrifice has little value.

The theological evidences in the Reformed tradition are widely contested today. The history of exegesis and dogmatic theology is laden with attempts to explain the *rationale* of the death of Christ and in the last century many efforts have been made to clarify the mystery and reformulate the doctrine. More recently, it may be observed that the notion of the sacrifice of Christ has been displaced from the field of soteriology to that of christology with renewed interest in the humanity of Jesus and christology from below. At the same time, the accent in theological debate has moved away from the priestly to the prophetic office of Jesus Christ, from his messianic self-consciousness to the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Reformed theology, however, has always sought to hold together redemption accomplished and applied within a covenantal structure, and has been aware of the danger of unilateral visions of Christ's offices. As H. Blocher has pointed out, the history of theology seems to indicate that over insistence on one of the offices in isolation produces the following possible permutations:<sup>4</sup>

- *Prophet*, favours rationalism and moralism. It can be construed that this has happened in a liberal perspective.
- *Priest*, fosters pietism and mysticism. Does not much evangelicalism and charismaticism focus on the 'blood of Christ'?
- *King*, leads to utopic and apocalyptic theologies. This accent has been associated with dialectic theology. Has not J. Moltmann criticised K. Barth's monarchical view of God as absolute Subject?<sup>5</sup>

### The state of play today

Radical theologies, often of the liberationist or feminist kind, generally reject the notion of sacrifice as a suitable interpretation of Christ's death.<sup>6</sup> It is suggested that the idea of an atonement in which the Father makes the Son suffer is an unhealthy form of 'divine child abuse'. The cross is not an altar, Jesus was not a priest and he did not suffer to abolish sin. Moltmann has said that the notion of sacrifice is not appropriate as Christ's death is followed by resurrection and the sacrificial victim does not rise.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> H. Blocher, *Christologie*, II, (Vaux-sur-Seine: Fac étude, 1986), 341ff.

<sup>5</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM, 1981), 139ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J.D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), ch. 2, §2.

Without going to these lengths, attempts are made to deal with the death of Christ in terms of substitution or representation, but without sacrificial and legal categories.<sup>8</sup> J. McLeod Campbell, in the 19th century, proposed a theory of 'vicarious repentance' which has remained influential. Jesus is said to have made a confession on behalf of humanity in order to explain how forgiveness could be obtained without imputation of sin.<sup>9</sup> Others wish to reckon with what is considered the inadequacy of the traditional notions of sacrifice. In particular they seek to redefine sacrifice by removing its more unacceptable aspects and insisting on the sacrificial offering as a form of festive communion and praise.<sup>10</sup> The cultic language of sacrifice is preferred to the penal. In recent years there has been a remarkable evolution in Roman Catholic works which now place the accent on the liturgical aspects of sacrifice rather than on its penal and sin-removing character. Sometimes it is claimed that the NT teaching constitutes a 'subversion' of the OT model of sacrifice. In the field of anthropology, R. Girard has provoked a good deal of discussion by his proposition that sacrifice effects a transfer which tempers mimetic rivalry. Violence, the motor of religions, is abolished with the ultimate sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

The approach to sacrifice without penalty attracts theologians in the evangelical camp too, as the essays in *Atonement Today* illustrate. There is a serious attempt to find a basis for this view in Scripture and a redefinition of the sacrifice of Christ as a demonstration of love and identification with human misery. The cross involves incarnational identification and not forensic imputation. In this perspective, if the language of sacrifice includes legal and cultic aspects, the legal is invariably played down in favour of the cultic.

Finally, there are those who, like E. Brunner and J.I. Packer, point out that for Calvin and the Reformers the satisfaction of Christ was more than an expiation of sin, but also an act of propitiation of divine wrath. The notion of sacrifice only receives its full dimension when these are considered as its results. In this respect R. Nicole has argued convincingly against C.H. Dodd's watering-down of the NT notion of propitiation.<sup>12</sup>

Brunner went so far as to say in his classic *The Mediator* that 'as long as we continue to reject the biblical idea of the holiness of God, of his wrath and justice in punishment the *processus* of the regression of the Church will continue'.<sup>13</sup> Brunner wrote this in the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); P. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, (London: DLT, 1989), M. Winter, *The Atonement*, (London: G. Chapman, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, (London: Macmillan, 1856).

<sup>10</sup> Influenced perhaps by R. de Vaux on 'communion sacrifices' *Ancient Israel*, II, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), ch. 10. Cf. F.M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, (London, SPCK 1975), 96 – 'Sacrifice is properly treated as cult-language not the language of the law-courts and judgements.'

<sup>11</sup> P. Wells, 'Sacred violence or covenantal sacrifice?' in a forthcoming Festschrift for R. Rushdoony, *All Things in Subjection*, ed. M. Selbrede. Also R.G. Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence. Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> R. Nicole, *Standing Forth. The Collected Writings of Roger Nicole*, (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2002), chs 11–16.

1930s and his warnings have passed unheard. In the post-modern context the problems of sacrifice and penal substitution have become increasingly a question of hermeneutics.

### Some possible approaches

The Reformers appropriated Anselm's idea of satisfaction and redefined it in terms of God's law and holiness and his anger against sin. Punitive justice requires sacrifice and the office of the Mediator. These concepts, which have been termed eccentric and narrow by Socinians and liberals of all shades, are as broad as biblical history, as they imply the doctrine of the divine covenant. Socinians and their successors, whose individualism appeals deeply to the modern mentality, have never properly understood this.

Recent studies including that edited by M. Neusch, *Le sacrifice dans les religions*<sup>14</sup> have tended to indicate the universality of sacrificial practice in religion. In a Christian context, the sacrifice required has never been better encapsulated than by Augustine. Echoing Hebrews 5:1: 'Every priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin', Augustine laid the basis for the classic definition of the notion of sacrifice by indicating its four constitutive aspects:

- to whom sacrifice is offered;
- who offers;
- what is offered; and
- for whom the offering is made.

Brunner adds to these considerations an element that has sometimes been overlooked, perhaps because of the human cultic aspects of sacrifices – that if men offer sacrifice, it is not accomplished by them but *by God himself*. God it is who instituted the sacrificial system and according to Hebrews 3:2 Jesus was 'faithful to the one who appointed him'. The repeated references, including in the teaching of Jesus, to obedience and not sacrifice being primarily desired by God indicate this.<sup>15</sup> If institutionally many sacrifices were legitimate, their ethical acceptability depended ultimately on the obedience of the incarnate Son himself, prefigured by the high priest and his acts. God alone could perfectly accomplish sacrificial obedience.

Sacrifice implies some form of representation on behalf of others. This has been described by the words 'vicarious' and 'substitution'. However, both are approximations. Vicarious does not imply a representation which corresponds exactly to the need

<sup>13</sup> E. Brunner, *The Mediator*, (London: Lutterworth, 1934), ch. xix.

<sup>14</sup> M. Neusch, *Le sacrifice dans les religions*, (Paris, Beauchesne, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> 1 Samuel 15: 22, Ecclesiastes 4:17, Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:21ff, Matthew 9:15; 12:7, Hebrews 10: 5, 8 etc.

implied, but only that one is acting on behalf of others. The word 'substitution' can be taken in different senses, not all of which are penal, and the word 'representative' is even more imprecise. The reason why the notions of sacrifice, substitution, vicariousness and representation are still common currency is that they are relatively flexible and like credit cards can be used in different theological banks.

By adding the word *penal* to *substitute* things are more precise. The model of one who takes the place of another is qualified, indicating that the replacement is penal. The notion of penal substitution means that Christ acted on behalf of others in the sense of liability to punishment, judgement and retribution.<sup>16</sup> It involves the character of God who demands reparation, the need of a substitute, the anger of God against sin undergone by the sacrificial substitute and condemnation. Penal substitution effects expiation and the propitiation of God. The result is reconciliation, which must imply not only our reconciliation to God but primarily God's reconciliation to us.<sup>17</sup> These theological notions, both individually and collectively are extremely offensive to the modern mind. Our contemporaries do not like crime and punishment!

W. Pannenberg resumes the situation quite well. His point of view seems to have changed between *Jesus God and Man* and his *Systematics*:

The vicarious penal suffering, which is rightly described as the vicarious suffering of the wrath of God at sin, rests on the fellowship that Jesus Christ accepted with us sinners and with our fate as such. This link is the basis on which the death of Jesus can count as expiation for us.<sup>18</sup>

### The status of penal substitution

What is the status of vicarious penal substitution in the Christian faith? This question raises at least three important issues:

- Is there a correspondence between doctrine and the reality of what happened?
- Is this the fundamental model for atonement, or is it just an accessory, as suggested in some recent propositions?
- Why is this doctrine, if it is central, always contested?

Brunner said that the doctrine of penal substitution, like all biblical language, is parabolic (or symbolic) using natural language to describe spiritual realities, which

<sup>16</sup> J.I. Packer, 'What did the Cross achieve? The logic of penal substitution', *Tyndale Bulletin*, (1974) 1ff. Cf. D. Kidner, 'Sacrifice, metaphors and meaning', *Tyndale Bulletin*, (1982) 119-36.

<sup>17</sup> Contra Baxter's criticism of B.B. Warfield, in *Atonement Today*, 61ff. Cf. J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 33ff.

<sup>18</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, II, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 427.

implies a loose connection with the reality it describes. Packer, on the other hand, refers to the doctrine of penal substitution as an *analogical model* in which knowledge corresponds conceptually to a reality in objective but limited fashion. The doctrine of penal vicarious substitution, like any other doctrine, is an approximate model which must be verified by its correspondence with the Scripture. The paradoxical nature of penal substitution is the conjoining, in one act, of expressions of justice and love, wrath and approbation, judgement and grace, death and life. It is precisely this which many find unacceptable today. However as Packer says, penal substitution does not offer an explication of the *how* but only of the *what* of atonement. Rationalism in the formulation of penal substitution and the temptation to play the Socinians on their own ground must be avoided. Mystery surrounds atonement.

If the biblical language concerning sacrifice is very often metaphorical or symbolic, this does not imply it is mythical. Bultmann recognised that the cross is presented by the NT writers as a penal substitutionary sacrifice, but deemed this truth so time-bound as to be limited and inapplicable.<sup>19</sup> Reformed theology has affirmed that concerning the sacrifice of Christ and its meaning, the forensic language is fundamental and lasting and the surround is peripheral.

There may be many reasons why such a central doctrine to the Christian faith has not won universal acclaim, including the fact that the doctrine of Christ's priesthood implies theological discernment and that involves presuppositions. However, the forensic model for divine acceptance of sinners is fundamental and others are compatible with it in a complementary sense.

### Traditional objections

Traditional objections to penal substitution are interesting in so far as they are echoed in recent constructions, even in the 'evangelical' camp. These criticisms can be reduced to a short list. Dabney, in his book published in the last century, *Christ our Penal Substitute*, lists six and in *Atonement Today* five are presented.<sup>20</sup> The model of penal substitution is deemed unacceptable by its detractors because it is:

- ontological and objective, not demonstrative or subjective (liberalism);
- unethical, as sin and guilt are personal and non-transferable (Socinianism);
- untrinitarian, or implies tri-theistic divisions in God;
- self-contradictory, since God the Father cannot act for and against Christ at one and the same time;
- finally, a wrong interpretation of Biblical data. Sacrifice does not imply penal substitution. Various images are merged in a totalising way and the legal model

<sup>19</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I, (New York: Scribners, 1951), 46, 84f.

<sup>20</sup> R.L. Dabney, *Christ our Penal Substitute*, Harrison, Va, Sprinkle, 1985.

is given a non-biblical pre-eminence.<sup>21</sup> This proposition is influential at present in the Anglo-Saxon world.

If nearly all of these criticisms of penal substitution retain their relevance, perhaps the hermeneutic one, expressed by C. Gunton and others has become most important, and its themes are taken up in *Atonement Today*.

### Some recent objections to penal substitution

*Atonement Today* is interesting as it comes from what is thought to be an 'evangelical' stable and it shows how modern academic evangelicalism is evolving; how it is taking its distance from the classic doctrine and what criticisms of the former approach are deemed important. Any proposition which wants a hearing on the issue of penal substitution will have to reply to what is said here, particularly in the articles by J. Goldingay, S. Travis and T. Smail.<sup>22</sup>

Three criticisms are made of vicarious penalty, in the following areas: hermeneutic adequation, linguistic and exegetical plausibility and the meaning of sin and guilt.

In the field of hermeneutic adequation it is stated that owing to culture shift, talk of penal substitution is no longer intelligible. People today are not worried about sin but about suffering. It is hermeneutically impracticable in the present climate to speak of suffering for sin rather than suffering related to destiny. Human experience is not related in any meaningful way to sin and righteousness. The existential problem for our contemporaries is alienation or meaninglessness, and how it should be handled.

Smail says that contemporary society is not interested in the solution of penal substitution, because it is not even aware of the problem.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the wrath of God and punishment are really offensive to the modern mind. It is hard to disagree with this analysis. Christian preaching finds itself in difficulty when God's holiness and law, judgement against sin and eternal perdition must be mentioned. Modern individualism has led to a breakdown of universal moral law, and when moral law goes down in the cosmic computer, judicial law inevitably follows suit. When the link between moral right and wrong and judicial consequences is weakened on the social level, it becomes difficult to speak about judgement for moral wrongs, and even more impossible to understand how any man could undergo judicial consequences for the moral wrongs of others.

The problem of hermeneutical adequation appears to be correctly stated, but have the right answers been given?

On the level of exegetical and linguistic analysis, the argument in *Atonement Today* is clear. The language of the NT is metaphorical, which implies a great diversity of ways

<sup>21</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*.

<sup>22</sup> G. Williams makes a noteworthy attempt in 'The Cross and the Punishment of Sin', D. Petersen ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Smail, in Goldingay ed., *Atonement Today*, 76.

of speaking of the death of Christ and a comparable diversity in ways of reading it. The legal metaphor, one among many for describing the death of Jesus, is not necessarily the central one and should not be separated and isolated from others in such a way as to become a controlling matrix. The metaphors for the death of Christ do not come together in a unified way in one theory. The presupposition reigning here is a disjunctive one, to use Blocher's expression.<sup>24</sup>

How does Goldingay in his article on 'Old Testament sacrifice and the death of Christ' deal with this theme? He states that sacrifice can mean the following:

- a way of giving a gift;
- a way of cleansing and restoration;
- a bridge between this world and the holy which also often requires the destruction of the offering;
- a way of handling violence in the community.<sup>25</sup>

He concludes that Jesus' death was punitive to satisfy not divine, but human justice. Goldingay sees no relation between the fact that Jesus was condemned for treason and blasphemy and that sinners are accountable to God for just such offences. In addition, he affirms that if Jesus died a cursed death, his death was not a sacrifice because he was killed by an act of violence. Sacrifice does not require cruelty or violence, a theory to which neither Girard nor animal rights activists would necessarily warm! In this way, Jesus absorbed the power of evil which is a key to peace in the world.<sup>26</sup>

This blunt summary hardly does justice to the sophistication and complexity of Goldingay's argument, but one gets the drift. If Jesus' death can be called sacrificial, it has little to do with divine retributive justice. On the exegetical level, penal substitution is not adequate to explain what happened at Golgotha – it is only one of many dimensions involved in the cross. And when it is referred to, the meaning of the cross is transformed. Does not this way of examining texts imply a non complementarity which plays off some texts against others and makes a selection of favourable models, rather than seeking a genuine analogy of Scripture in exegesis?

In addition to these formal comments, the classic doctrine of vicarious penal substitution does not escape material criticism in *Atonement Today*. What is the meaning of substitution, of sin and guilt in this perspective? In an article on 'Christ as bearer of divine judgement in Paul's thought on the atonement' Travis states that Paul expresses the results of Christ's death not its character, and that the NT is more

<sup>24</sup> Blocher's article 'The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Current Theological Situation', *European Journal of Theology*, 8:1, 1999, gives a detailed analysis and criticism of the ideas of *Atonement Today*. I have greatly benefited from this article at several points.

<sup>25</sup> Goldingay ed., *Atonement Today*, 3ff.

<sup>26</sup> The word 'absorb' was used earlier by P.T. Forsyth, C.F.D. Moule and F.M. Young in *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, London, SPCK, 1975. Cf. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 105ff.

concerned with the nature of salvation than with its means.

The traditional doctrine of atonement by penal substitution implies two notions – punishment inflicted from the outside and that of correspondence or equivalence in which the sin corresponds to the crime. Having examined the texts which could support this argument (Gal. 3:3; 2 Cor. 3:21; Rom. 3:24–26; 5:9–10), Travis says that in these passages the retributive interpretation is the most unlikely. God takes sin seriously and Christ experienced divine judgement on our behalf, but to speak of Christ suffering vicariously or undergoing the penalty for sins is to go further than Scripture allows. Paul has more than one framework for speaking about the death of Christ. The symbolism of sacrifice does not fit in with retribution.

According to *Atonement Today*<sup>27</sup> it is questionable whether Scripture presents sacrifice as propitiating God's wrath. The language of atonement, propitiation and expiation does not coalesce. Sin pollutes and stains and sacrifice deals with stain and repulsiveness. The sinner can identify with the sacrificial victim as sin is transferred to the animal and destroyed through death. God has made it possible for our stain to be dealt with. Sacrifice is not something humans do for God, but something God does for humans in removing the stain of sin. The basic language of sacrifice is not retributive but *participationist*. Paul does not imply that Christ bore retribution for our sins, which presses the legal metaphor too far. Rather, Christ experienced the destructive consequences of sin, which is different from undergoing punishment.

Sin is not judged from outside. When Paul speaks of condemnation/salvation he is speaking about relationships. Christ bore and destroyed the effects of man's separated relation with God by absorbing and exhausting sin. The cross is not primarily a case of legal status, but one of relation, and Christ in his death absorbs the mass of human condemnation.

The approach to biblical exegesis found in Goldingay and Travis is underlined in a systematic sense by the Smail's comments. Guilt and debt are not like fines incurred by one person and paid by another. The cross is not the story of forensic imputation but of Christ's identification with us. Christ did not remove sin as punishment through payment, but he removed *sinful humanity* and replaced it with new humanity. The 'for us' of the cross does not mean Christ was a substitute instead of us, although it can include this. What Christ did for us and without us concerns the goal of his suffering, which includes union with Christ and restoration of true human identity.

In résumé: as in much current theology, the fusing of the hermeneutical horizons between the biblical texts and our context is sought via an emphasis on biblical pluralism and selection of what seems adequate in the text in the light of present concerns. Sin is seen in a personalistic way and sacrifice is not considered in terms of penal guilt but as dissolution of alienation and meaninglessness. The sacrifice of Christ is the factor that removes the barrier of separation separating from new humanity.

<sup>27</sup> Baxter excepted.



In this way some sort of comprehensive view is sought between creation, sin and redemption, a triad which the authors of *Atonement Today* do not wish to deny.

## Forgotten aspects of Reformed theology

Two specific aspects of the Reformed tradition seem to have disappeared from the theological horizon that has been scanned.

In his little book entitled *Christ our Penal Substitute*, Dabney makes frequent use of the term 'relational', as do the authors of *Atonement Today* and many others. In fact few expressions about sin are more prevalent, as Blocher says, in the search for a gracious neighbour rather than a gracious God.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that Dabney uses the same word in a different sense from Goldingay, Travis et al., 'relational' being synonymous with 'federal' not 'horizontal'.

Speaking of sin, Dabney makes an important distinction between *reatus poenae* and *reatus culpae*. The first refers to sin as guilt and liability to punishment in the juridical sense, whereas the second is personal and subjective sin. The word condemnation is not writ large on the pages of *Atonement Today*. What happened? Ignoring the distinction between subjective sin and divine punishment according to the criteria of the law, subjective sin has been universalised. In other words, individual stains are generalised to describe the globally degenerate situation of humanity. Subjective-relational sin is consequently 'absorbed' by Christ who assumes the stain and wipes it away.

However, absorption is material and sin is spiritual. Christ absorbing subjective spiritual demerit does not make much sense. *Reatus culpae*, or subjective culpability, is inalienable; sinners remain such until the final redemption of the body. Subjective sin can never be dissolved or transferred to another. What was done yesterday belongs to the sinner until the final resurrection and judgement. Past memories, past sins and dreams are inescapable. Even Bruce Springsteen knows that: 'these memories come back to haunt me, they haunt me like a curse' (*The River*)!

The Reformed doctrine of *reatus poenae* can handle this problem. The dual triads: sin, condemnation and death/righteousness, justification and life are made theologically intelligible in forensic terms, not in subjective and personal ones. There is an essential distinction between sinfulness and guilt, which corresponds to Scripture's doctrine. Sinfulness is not removed subjectively during this life. Guilt, however, is removed as condemnation and judgement by the cross. Is not this the meaning of Luther's *simul justus et peccator*?<sup>29</sup>

By his sacrifice as penal substitute, Christ does not remove personal subjective sin, which will die with this body, although it is progressively limited in its vitality by

<sup>28</sup> Blocher, 'The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ'.

<sup>29</sup> In a sense, it is quite possible and logical that Roman Catholics can change their doctrine of sacrifice, with their notion of infused righteousness leading to justification. In discussions concerning justification, more reflection is needed concerning its relation to penal substitution.

mortification and sanctification through the Spirit (Rom. 8:12ff). The Mediator removes liability to penal judgement and guilt in the sense of condemnation. Thanks be to God that Jesus abolished the objective liability of sinners! This allows the Christian to get up tomorrow a justified sinner knowing, as the *Heidelberg Catechism* says, that the imputed righteousness of Christ covers all sins, past, present and future (q. 60)!

Much exegetical work would be needed to establish this point and even more to establish the second one. It concerns divine law which according to Turretin<sup>30</sup> has three qualifications in Scripture. The law of the Creator functions in a triple sense:

- moral (or natural) law, which is universal;
- federal law, which is covenantal and binds humanity to God;
- and penal law, which exacts punishment on sinners.

In covenantal theology the moral law orders the universe, because God is essentially a holy and righteous God. This implies that federal law acknowledged by obedience and penal law can never co-exist in the same individual. Whereas moral law is permanent, the federal relation of communion is not intrinsic or perpetual. Hodge put it this way:

The penal relation to the law is that which instantly supervenes when the law is violated ... the penal and federal relations to the law are mutually exclusive. The instant a moral agent occurs the penalty his federal relation to the law necessarily terminates because the end of that relation – that is his confirmation in a holy character – has definitely failed ... Adam was created under the natural and the federal relation to law. When he sinned he continued under the natural, and passed from the federal to the penal, where his non-elect descendants remain for all eternity.<sup>31</sup>

This serves to indicate the nature of the office of the Mediator. As second Adam, Christ fulfils all the federal requirements in our place by perfect obedience to the moral law. His relation to God was not penal on his own account as he suffered the judgement and condemnation of sin on our behalf. Thus God had no anger against the *person* of his Son, but against sinners in the *office* Christ executed on their behalf. It is clear that the sacrifice of Christ does not imply a crude transfer of subjective sins to the person of the Mediator. It was an undergoing of judgement for sin on our behalf, which removed the penal accusation of the law, as divine justice will not judge twice.

Thus when Scripture, as Dabney points out, refers to Christ bearing our sins in his body on the tree, we are to observe that metonymy is being used. Individual sins are not incorporated in Christ, but Christ bore our death and judgement in his body. As Morris

<sup>30</sup> F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, q. 22, 140.

<sup>31</sup> A.A. Hodge, *The Atonement*, (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, nd.), ch. vi.

has indicated, when Scripture uses the word 'blood', in almost all cases it indicates not the life of the animal, but its death.<sup>32</sup> The high priest enters the holy place with the blood, symbolising expiation and propitiation. Jesus suffered outside the city to make the people holy through his own blood, the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb. 13:12, 20). Again 'remission of sin' refers to the remission of guilt-condemnation and not to the subjective dimension of sinfulness. Ignorance of this distinction leads to a theologically unsophisticated notion of what the sacrifice of Christ involved.

The motivation for the refusal of the classic doctrine of substitution invariably lies in distaste for the penal aspect of sacrifice and the wrath of God it expresses. In some cases universalism is just around the corner.

### Some conclusions in the light of Reformed theology

It has been observed how the attack in the other team are playing in hermeneutics has been observed; also, how their defence is organised in exegesis. Many of their efforts, however, are concentrated in the mid-field of systematic theology where both exegesis and hermeneutics work hard against penal substitution. These are further discussed in the following three areas.

One: To affirm that sin is always personal and that sacrifice is not vicarious and penal in nature has as a double theological result.

Firstly, the alternatives proposed both in the past and more recently are reductions which, as Packer has indicated in his article, 'What did the cross achieve?', can be harmonised in a satisfactory way with the notion of penal substitution. There is a sense in which the suffering of Christ is exemplary as in liberalism, the cross presents a victory as G. Aulen proposed, God is justified as P.T. Forsyth argued, the judge is judged as in K. Barth, or in which Christ has paid a debt. All of these can fit in with penal substitution, but to reduce the cross to one of the other of them is to lose the essence of the work of Christ.

Secondly, Reformed theology at its best has always been attentive to contextualise the doctrine of penal substitution in terms of the relations between God and man expressed in the covenants of redemption, of works and of grace. Dabney insists repeatedly on the relational character of the work of the Son. Far from creating Trinitarian problems or veering to tri-theism, covenant theology allows substitution to be placed in the context of the eternal relations between the Father and the Son – the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world – and the historical relations with his people. Insofar as the relation to the law, not actual sin, is the locus of the transfer from the sinner to the sinless, nothing unethical is implied. Consent and free choice characterise the engagement of the Mediator (John 10:18). Furthermore, since sin and virtue are not two principles, but aspects of one and the same principle in relation to the

<sup>32</sup> L. Morris, *The Atonement*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 55. Out of 362 uses of 'blood', 203 refer to a violent death.

Holy God, Christ's sin bearing is not to be considered theologically apart from the fact that he is the source of righteousness, justification and life. Penal substitution through sacrifice implies at the same time:

- moral the substitution of the innocent in the place of the guilty;
- moral the transfer of guilt;
- moral satisfaction by vicarious death;
- moral and forgiveness through the imputation of justice.

On the other hand a denial of penal substitution will invariably raise questions about divine providence, God's distributive justice, the nature of original sin and everlasting punishment.

Two: Concerning the biblical metaphors and the allegation that penal substitution is non-fundamental and inadequate, is it possible to demonstrate that the forensic metaphor is fundamental and pervasive in Scripture? The legal aspect does not minimise the relational, as the authors of *Atonement Today* would have us believe. Rather the legal is the foundation of all that is relational, as everyday experiences demonstrate. Blocher affirms the centrality of legal language in the following terms:

The legal and sacrificial metaphors in Scripture have such frequency and regularity, they constitute such a stable network, with predictable usages, they are so consistent, that they cannot be dealt with as 'mere' metaphors ... there are concepts attached to linguistic signs.<sup>33</sup>

Paul says in Romans 8:32, 'God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all'. The terms 'sparing' and 'giving up' have almost a technical sense in Scripture (the one sacrificial and the other legal). The expression 'not sparing' is used in the LXX to describe the sacrifice of Isaac and in Acts 2:23 we read that Christ was 'given over' by God's decision and foreknowledge. This technical language fits in well with Romans 8:32 – God sent his own son to be a sin offering. It is not exegetical forcing to see in this passage that Christ's death was judicial, divinely ordained and substitutionary.

It is to be regretted that theologians of the calibre of Gunton and Goldingay doubt that penal substitution is present in Isaiah 53, where penal language and sacrificial language effectively come together. Legal metaphors are not isolated from others in many Scriptural passages. Blocher refers to Romans 3:24–26 and affirms that here forensic, ransom and sacrificial language are mixed. In the light of this it is difficult to follow Goldingay when he states that the languages of atonement-propitiation-expiation and divine wrath do not come together in Scripture. Such a position can only

<sup>33</sup> Blocher, 'The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ'.

lead to impoverishment and the invention of crude non-biblical metaphors, such as sin being absorbed, to describe how it is dealt with at Golgotha.

Three: There remains the question of hermeneutics. As the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* argue,<sup>34</sup> many of the correlates of incarnation are incomprehensible to our day.<sup>35</sup> Since they wrote, post-modernism with its critique of meta-narratives and the deconstruction of the person have appeared; both render the biblical notion of sacrifice irrelevant.

Hermeneutically, why not reply: Well, so what? For two reasons: first, the ancient Greeks would never have thought of making Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven and was chained up by Zeus, their mediator with the gods. The cross will always be a folly. Second, in so far as 'dynamic equivalences' for the cross and sacrifice are concerned, have there ever been any at all? The cross is absolutely unique and belongs, as Brunner said, not to the realm of general but to that of special revelation.<sup>36</sup> In that respect it cannot be reproduced, without reducing Christianity to the level of other religions and the cross to that of other religious acts. To do so is to liquidate the gospel. For that reason the theology of the cross must remain central in preaching, in spite of the offence it inevitably causes.

There is no free lunch at the end of the universe, because Christ proposed to pay for us. If the marriage supper of the lamb was costly for him it is the foundation upon which invitations are free. 'Come all you who have no money, come buy wine and milk without money and without cost' (Is. 55:1).

<sup>34</sup> J. Hick, ed., London, 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also J. Hick in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London, SCM, 1993, ch. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Brunner, *The Mediator*, ch. i-iii.

# Carl Trueman's Interview with Manuel Ortiz

**Mauel Ortiz** is Professor of Ministry and Urban Mission at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. A church-planter with wide experience, he currently combines his academic position with pastoring a church in an urban area of Philadelphia. Professor Ortiz has a passionate concern for bringing the gospel to the poor and the marginalised, as reflected in his ministry and in his writings. He is author of *The Hispanic Challenge: Opportunities Confronting the Church*, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* and (with Harvie Conn) *Urban Ministry* (all with IVP) and a festschrift for Harvie Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World* (edited with Susan Baker, Presbyterian and Reformed). *Themelios* is delighted that he was willing to take time from his busy schedule to grant the following interview.

**CRT: Manny, I wonder if you could start by outlining something of your own life history?**

MO: I come from a Roman Catholic family, as would be expected of most Latinos in the 1950s and 1960s. I struggled with having a better grasp on the subject of a personal relationship with God. I had a number of things that were working for me, such as a bar and restaurant in New York City, but found nothing but emptiness in all of these endeavours. My father had come to know the Lord as his Saviour and was very passionate about the eternal state of his family and wanted to see his children and wife come to know Christ. To cut a long story short, after various attempts, he wrote a letter asking a pastor to visit me and that began a process of my being awakened by God's Spirit. Soon after that I saw my wife, Blanca, come to know Christ as well.

**CRT: Would you describe the kinds of ministry in which you are involved?**

MO: I have a three-fold ministry with numerous implications. One is certainly my work at Westminster Theological Seminary as Coordinator of the Practical Theology Department and Director of the Urban Mission Programme. This is divided into teaching,

administration, and the advising of students. The last is a wonderful way of intruding into their lives and helping them to see something greater than themselves in matters of service. I see my work at the seminary as being a means to kingdom transformation in the lives of both the students and the institution.

The second part is my pastoral work which is similar to my seminary work in many ways. They are that I bring the gospel to bear on the hearts of people to lead them to a changed worldview that has God at the centre. It also is a ministry that is designed to motivate them towards compassion and social justice. It is a ministry of equipping and providing a vision for what we call parish ministry. We work from the one to the many, and therefore our attempts are focused at a very local level which will hopefully have national effects for the kingdom of God.

Thirdly, and closely connected with the other two, is my church planting ministry. I am convinced that one way in which cities can be won for Christ will be through the planting of small and varied models of churches. This involves both vision and preparation.

Combining the three, therefore, allows me to write from both theoretical and practical aspects of ministry. It is often through the literature that we can capture the thoughts and ideas of others and combine them in the mission of winning cities for Christ. All three also require not only careful administration but also personal care for God's people. Because of all of the above, I am constantly confronted with the challenge of assisting other ministries and local pastors in matters of their questions and struggles in the urban context. This can take the form of consultations with individual churches or speaking at various conferences.

**CRT: You mention social justice, something which I know is very close to your own heart. Could you elaborate on exactly how you address issues of social justice in the practical ministry of your church?**

MO: Much of this is reflected in the role of advocacy which my church plays in the local community. This has taken a number of forms. In terms of education, we are involved in helping with the kind of literacy and communication issues raised by the fact that the community around the church is bilingual. We are also involved in prison visiting and providing legal help and representation for those who are in trouble with the law or in prison. It is strange and somewhat sad to have to report that, in this context, most of the help we receive as a church comes from those lawyers who are Jews and socialists, rather than those who are professing Christians.

**CRT: You also mention the development of varied models of churches for promoting church growth in urban environments.**

MO: Yes. I think that the church is at a point in time when she needs to think carefully

about her nature and location. At a simple level, there is the issue of whether we should have a church building or opt for a house-church approach. At a deeper level, I am convinced that it is important that church location reflects the need to identify with those who are suffering and marginalised. In my own church, our location in urban Philadelphia has placed the church in a position to reach out to areas of the community, unreached by the classic suburban model of evangelicalism. We have a church which is recognised as a centre which helps to build the community. We have also established important contacts with Muslims which will help with the bringing of the gospel to unreached sections of American society.

In broader terms, I think the urban church also needs to face up to the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic nature of city life, and to find models of organisation which reflect this. And we must not forget the power of prayer: the church has an obligation to pray, to be a community of prayer, particularly for that place in which it is located.

**CRT: Who/what have been the major influences on your thinking?**

MO: At the very outset of my Christian experience God provided an African American pastor, Rev. Detolian Davis, who opened my eyes to the reality of injustices within both the Christian community and society at large. Another pastor from the African American community, Rev. Clarence Hilliard, enhanced my understanding of the gospel and its power in society towards justice and righteousness. Dr Harvie Conn, my late colleague at Westminster, in his writings and my intimate relationship with him over the years, profoundly reshaped my thinking and development of the Word of God. I was privileged to be with Harvie in Chicago shortly after his return to the United States from Korea. During that time we had some serious discussions about Reformed theology and missions. His well-rounded education and his probing of numerous disciplines was very challenging and stimulating. Harvie was able to move from mission history into the social sciences working with numerous passages of Scripture and showing how they all fit together. He had a great ability to retain information and could, in his gentle way, share material that he had read without drawing attention to himself. In some ways it was a precursor to his valuable volume, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*.<sup>1</sup> He was very demanding and, in some ways, a perfectionist who expected hard work and excellence from his colleagues. Harvie was a true missiologist but was interdisciplinary and able to teach in numerous other areas. Another person in the line of Harvie Conn is Dr Orlando Costas who, as a missiologist, provided inspiration and critical thinking in matters of theological reflection and world analysis. His book, *Christ Outside the Gate*,<sup>2</sup> was invaluable to me.

1 Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

2 Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982.



**CRT: What do you see as the major opportunities or dangers facing evangelicalism at this time?**

MO: This is an exhaustive request. I would venture to say that individualism and privatism have become obvious, not only in the world but also in the church. This will eventually bring about both overt and subtle lawlessness which will culminate in a serious nominalism giving way to a generation that will become great sceptics and enemies of authority concerning the Word and the church of Christ.

I would also include in that a growing interest in materialism as the fulfilment of God's glory in our lives. In other words, materialism will be synonymous with God's presence and God's involvement.

Finally, there is the lack of a church movement that would carry on the very nature of the church as a missional agent of change and sending in the line of great missionary activity throughout the world.

All of this has to deal with secularism, self-centredness, and lack of assurance that there is one God.

**CRT: I take it from this answer that you regard consumerism as a major problem for the church in the West?**

MO: Absolutely. Consumerism feeds individualism. It focuses attention on 'I'-centred needs, and drives a kind of mentality which is lethal to church commitment and growth. Church and gospel become simply two more items in the commercial marketplace. People 'shop around' to find the preacher who suits their needs or style, rather than using gospel criteria for choosing a church. In other words, preachers, church, gospel – all become just more commodities which the consumer can buy or leave on the shelf as they choose.

**CRT: Is this one reason why the major growth in the church today is taking place in the southern hemisphere, and there in the poorer sectors, such as Africa and South America?**

MO: Yes, without a doubt. The people there are, humanly speaking, weak and powerless. They know what it means to be totally dependent upon others for their very survival. What the gospel gives them is power and strength – not power in any crude, worldly sense, but power in the true, biblical sense. They have access to God, to God's power in the cross of Christ. There, the gospel is true liberation theology, empowering individuals in their weakness, and manifesting itself in concern for the poor, for the disenfranchised and the marginalised – the very people to whom Christ himself went with words of mercy and forgiveness. The church in these areas has modelled this divine strength through its weakness. That is, humanly speaking, one of the reasons for its

amazing effectiveness.

**CRT: One of my own hobby-horses is the failure of traditional evangelical Protestantism to develop Luther's insights into the theology of the cross, the idea that God's strength is always revealed through weakness and that this should be a model for the church and for Christian witness today. I take it you would agree with my take on this?**

MO: Very much so. This is a central part of the biblical message but one that does not sit well even at a theoretical, let alone practical, level in the modern western church. Weakness is not a very marketable commodity, which has implications for our attitude toward the cross of Christ. We find this note, the emphasis on cross and weakness, being struck in some modern authors, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but it is rare in evangelical literature. John Stott's discussion of suffering as a function of our fidelity to the gospel of the cross is an exception, an important exception to this general neglect in evangelical circles. We certainly neglect something very valuable when we fail to pick up on such insights into the cross.

**CRT: Given the significance of the issues you raise and yet the comparative lack of evangelical reflection in many of these areas, which non-evangelical authors do you think evangelical students should be reading?**

MO: The list could be massive but here are some of the most significant volumes with which anyone interested in urban ministry and in issues relating to poverty, justice and oppression etc. should come to grips:

Cone, James, *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

\_\_\_\_\_, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

\_\_\_\_\_, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum Press, 1989).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Pedagogy of the City*, trans. Donaldo Macedo (New York: Continuum, 1993).

Gutierrez, Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Míguez-Bonino, José, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

Ryan, William, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

Takaki, Ronald, *A Different Mirror* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993)

Takaki, Ronald, ed., *From Different Shores* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

West, Cornel, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

Wilson, William Julius, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

**CRT: How has your own thinking changed/developed over the years?**

MO: I think I have developed a greater understanding of how the evangelical faith, particularly in its Reformed manifestation, can be extremely powerful in a society that has so many needs. When you speak of the Reformed faith, you are speaking about the whole gospel for the whole person and the whole world. It is enough to say Reformed without having to make any other descriptive notations about its ministry. I am also greatly saddened by the fact that often our understanding of our faith has not led us to become bolder in our concern for the world, knowing this great gospel that God has given to us. I am also deeply displeased with the church's fortress mentality and neglect of those who do not conform to our stereotypes of what Christians should be like while yet claiming to be evangelical and reformed.

I would also find change in my thinking in my interest in developing leadership which includes serious research for both the student and teacher concerning the mission of the church as a vehicle of God's kingdom for transforming the whole of life.

**CRT: Many thanks, Manny, on behalf of our readers for a fascinating and stimulating interview.**

# The Last Word

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## On Christology

I overheard a well-seasoned student of mine giving a bit of advice to a student who was in my class for the first time. 'Just remember, with her, it's always about Jesus. It's all about Jesus, who he was, what he did.' I smiled and thought what a fine theologian this elder student was becoming! Because it is 'all about Jesus'. Yes it is.

Christology ultimately matters to the extent that it is all about the historical Jesus. What's the difference between a scholarly apologetic that hides behind 'the Judeo-Christian faith' and one that comes right out and quotes 'what Jesus said'? Christology can be the reason for the church's first Council or a congregation's last schism. Christology can anchor our only hope for eternal life or set us adrift in a mental sea of Gnostic gymnastics. Christology can be reduced to just an idea that we argue or an idol we defend, or a seminar we research. But, Christology matters because Jesus was real. Christology matters because in Jesus, God took on our flesh through the virgin's womb; lived in our flesh through his life, baptism, temptation, and sinful community; suffered in our flesh through dying and death; proved the reality of our redemption's fullness in his resurrection; and recapitulated our humanity in his ascension. Beyond its own ontology, however, Christology matters because of who Jesus is, and what Jesus did for us tells us who we really are.

Christology is the defining substance of our soteriology. Our Christology, how we define Jesus, tells us how we really see ourselves. Anselm's *quantum ponderis peccatum*, how mighty was our sin, leads us to recognise our need for a mighty Saviour. The disciples refused to leave Jesus for a more comfortable call because they came to believe and know that Jesus alone was the source of eternal life, the Bread of Life, the Holy One of God (John 6:66ff). Arius lost his argument with the theologians at Nicaea more on the soil of very Jewish soteriology than Greek philosophy. Arius lost the battle for popular opinion in the reality of worship liturgy, the recognition of sin reflected in prayer, confession and repentance. Why worship someone who was not God, and if Jesus wasn't God, how can be we saved?

Our Christology is the bedrock of how we really see our sin. Attempts to qualify, demythologise, rationalise, deny, modify, erode, explain away, ignore, or avoid who Jesus is as God Incarnate, say more about the demotion of how we see our own sin than

the status of our Saviour. When we are convinced that our righteousness is a filthy rag, that our best efforts do not aid grace, that faith is pure gift and that we are utterly without hope apart from Jesus, then our Christology will reflect the truth of God found in Jesus Christ.

If we have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father. If we follow Jesus, we share his suffering on the way to sharing his glory. If we abide in Jesus, we know and obey his word. If we are known by Jesus, we are indwelt by his Spirit. If we pray in his Name, the Father responds affirmatively to the will of the Son reflected in our own prayer. Knowing God as our Father is all about knowing Jesus as God's Son. Our relationship with God as Father is mediated by how Jesus the Son related to God as Father. Our dependence on God the Holy Spirit is only possible because of the redemption gained for us in the work of Jesus Christ. It's all about Jesus because there is no salvation apart from his person, life, work, word, hope, promise, intercession, obedience or love.

If the cross becomes a place of a martyr and not the obedience of God the Son, we are left in our hopelessness with a unique example. And our understanding of sin necessarily shrinks to meet our own expectations. If Jesus as the Son was not God, not begotten but made, not one in being with the Father, then the resurrection necessarily devolves to works-righteousness. We then become more religious to compensate for our loss of imputed righteousness. If Jesus has not ascended to the right-hand of God the Father, with the fullness of our embodied and redeemed humanity, then there is nothing to do but stand around and look toward heaven. And we get tired and weary because the Christian life must be lived on our own energy witnessing to nothing more than our own history because the Spirit has not been sent to empower us to see Jesus and tell his story.

My student was right. 'Remember, with her, it's all about Jesus.' I can think of no finer accusation for a Christian theologian and a sinner to hear. It's all about Jesus or nothing else matters.