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What Is Contemplative Spirituality and Why Is It Dangerous?

A REVIEW OF BRENNAN MANNING'S *THE SIGNATURE OF JESUS*

JOHN CADDOCK

Winchester, OR

The Never-Ending Review

Little did I know when I began to read *The Signature of Jesus* the time and effort that would be involved in understanding it. I am not a theologian by training. My background is in technical management in electronic component manufacturing. However, I stumbled onto something that I became convinced was very dangerous and little understood.

One reading was not enough for me to understand *The Signature of Jesus*. I found that it was like reading a book in a foreign language. I read many new expressions like *contemplative prayer, centering prayer, centering down, paschal spirituality, the discipline of the secret, contemplative spirituality, celebrating the darkness, mineralization, the Mineral Man, practicing the presence, the interior life, intimacy with Abba, the uncloistered contemplative life, inner integration, yielding to the Center, the bridge of faith, notional knowledge, contemporary spiritual masters, masters of the interior life, shadow self, false self, mysterium tremendum, existential experience, and the Abba experience*.¹

I also encountered many writers I have never read before, including Kasemann, Burghardt, Merton, Van Breeman, Brueggemann, Moltmann, Nouwen, Küng, Steindl-Rast, Rahner, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Camus.

¹ See pp. 209-27, 218, 94, 115-36, 185-96, 216, 137-58, 58-59, 58, 94, 94, 170, 102, 111, 112, 30, 29, 219, 94, 224, 224, 231, 65, and 168 respectively.

I had to read the book three separate times before I was confident that I understood what Manning was saying. I even read it a fourth time for good measure.

Reading this book led me to read a number of other books and articles by and about leading mystics/contemplatives. I learned about the heart of Manning's message, *centering prayer*.

Ultimately I felt I had to meet the man. I attended one conference he conducted. In addition, I purchased the tapes of another conference he conducted and pored over them.

Altogether I spent hundreds of hours trying to understand what Manning is saying. Why did I do this? Well, I *began* this study because three Free Grace Christian leaders whom I know endorsed Brennan Manning in his earlier book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. These men are bright, well educated, experienced in ministry, and heads of major works. Yet I had read a cautionary review of that book,² and I wanted to read Manning for myself.

I *continued* the study because what I found frightened me and because I felt others needed to be warned. The teachings of Manning are very dangerous.

There is a seductive quality to his writings. He reports grappling with and overcoming fear, guilt, and psychological hang-ups and difficulties, including alcoholism. He gives the impression that he has a very intimate relationship with God and that he has insight to a superspirituality. He regularly meditates and reports having many visions and encounters with God. He is an extremely gifted writer who is able to tug at the emotions of the reader while at the same time introducing ideas that the reader would immediately reject if they were not cloaked within this emotional blanket.

He promises readers that if they apply his teaching they too will gain this same intimacy with God as well as freedom from fear, guilt, and psychological hang-ups and difficulties. This is very attractive. Manning's prescription to achieve this is not by traditional prayer and by the reading and application of the Bible. Rather, the means to this end is a mixture of Eastern Mysticism, psychology, the New Age Movement, liberation theology, Catholicism, and Protestantism.³ This mixture will not

² Reviewed by Robert N. Wilkin in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1994), 74-75.

³ One of the keys to this spirituality is a meditation technique called *centering prayer*, which isn't really prayer at all. It is an emptying of the

deliver intimacy with God. It no doubt will lead to special feelings and experiences. Those practicing Manning's methods will likely *feel* closer to God. However, in the process they will actually move away from Him as a result of a counterfeit spirituality.

The Ragamuffin Mystic Monk

Speaking at a conference, Brennan Manning summed up his view of the essence of his ministry and the core of the good news: "In healing our image of God, Jesus frees us of fear of the Father and dislike of ourselves." This is a radical departure from the good news of Jesus Christ. Eternal life and the forgiveness of sins is replaced with psychological healing.

Ordained a Franciscan priest, Manning earned degrees in philosophy and theology. He had training with a monastic order which included seven months of isolation in a desert cave. Years later, after a collapse into alcoholism, he shifted direction and focused on writing and speaking. He became *persona non grata* among the Roman Catholic hierarchy as a result of his marriage in 1982. He now writes and speaks mainly to Protestant audiences. It is important to note that Manning is well received, even by some Free Grace people.

The Signature of Jesus was first published in 1988. The current revised edition was published in 1996 by Multnomah Books.⁴

Manning is more widely known for his bestseller published in 1990, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.⁵ Its first few chapters are emotionally gripping as he writes about God's forgiving nature and His love for the unworthy. The book promotes the freeness of God's love, but falls short because it does not present a clear gospel. It also leaves many open questions about his views. Manning's book, *The Signature of Jesus*, answers many of those questions, and raises a number of additional ones.

mind and a chanting of a sacred word or phrase over and over again. More on this shortly.

⁴Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996).

⁵Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-up, and Burnt Out* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1990).

What Is Contemplative Spirituality?

The Signature of Jesus is actually a primer on what Manning calls paschal spirituality, which is supposedly, but not actually, spirituality centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. (Chapter 6 is entitled "Paschal Spirituality.") Another name for this, a more accurate one, is contemplative spirituality. Indeed, one entire chapter is a call to "Celebrate the Darkness" (pp. 137-58)⁶ and another teaches about centering prayer, an Eastern Religion mind-emptying meditation technique (pp. 209-227). The book has a number of personal stories from Manning where he claims that Jesus or God the Father appeared to him, touched him, and spoke to him.

Manning indicates that *The Signature of Jesus* is about radical discipleship and authentic faith. Radical discipleship sounds good. So does authentic faith. Unfortunately, the book isn't about following Jesus Christ or having faith in Him. It is about following "the masters of the interior life" (pp. 94, 219).

In Manning's view many Christians have been raised in a devotional spirituality which focuses "more on behavior than on consciousness...on doing God's will and performing the devotional acts that please him than on experiencing God as God truly is" (p. 216). Contemplative spirituality, on the other hand, "emphasize[s] the need for a change in consciousness, a new way of *seeing* God, others, self, and the world" (p. 216) which leads to a deeper knowledge of God.

Thus Manning sets up a battle between two views of the Christian life. One he paints as traditional, cold, intellectual, ritualistic, unemotional, unloving, uncaring, insensitive, unattractive, and obsessive. The other he presents as new, warm, free, emotional, loving, caring, sensitive, attractive, and liberating. While he acknowledges that there is a place for Bible study and corporate worship, he argues that the key is "practicing the presence" through a special form of prayer we will discuss more fully later, centering prayer. Manning writes,

Herein lies the secret, I believe, of the inner life of Jesus. Christ's communion with Abba in the inner sanctuary of His soul transformed His vision of reality,

⁶Manning tells of literally sitting in a dark room with one solitary spotlight shining on a crucifix (p. 47): "Prostrate on the floor, I whisper, 'Come, Lord Jesus' over and over."

enabling Him to perceive God's love and care behind the complexities of life. *Practicing the presence* helps us to discern the providence of God at work especially in those dark hours when the signature of Jesus is being traced in our flesh. (You may wish to try it right now. Lower the book, *center down*, and offer yourself to the indwelling God.)⁷

Daily devotions consisting of Bible study, meditation, memorization, and traditional prayers are of limited importance in the contemplative spirituality of Manning. A type of prayer derived from Eastern Mysticism is what is really important. Practice the presence. Center down. What is really needed is freeing the mind and having an existential experience with God.

Contemplative spirituality is the teaching that spiritual growth and true spirituality occur by contemplation not of Scripture or even of scriptural themes, but contemplation of God through emptying your mind.

The Origins of Contemplative Spirituality

This movement began in the Roman Catholic Church, where there has been an important shift over the last thirty years. *Devotional spirituality* is a pejorative term coined by some within Roman Catholicism who reacted against the prewar, pre-Vatican II Church, with a devotion to saints, doctrine, frequent reception of the sacraments, and approved devotional practices.

Some Roman Catholics began to advocate *the new theology*⁸ which Francis Schaeffer warned of in his classic *The God Who is There*.⁹ Schaeffer pointed to Hans Küng and Karl Rahner (both influential in shaping Manning's views) and Tielhard de Chardin as the leading progressive thinkers who were following

⁷ *The Signature of Jesus*, 94, italics added.

⁸ Schaeffer seems to have used the phrase broadly to avoid clumsiness in his discussion of how modern shifts in philosophies have effected theology. The expression *new theology* as Schaeffer uses it, encompasses neo-orthodoxy, strongly rationalistic liberal theology, theologies following Kierkegaard's *leap of faith*, and theologies following in the footsteps of the religious existentialism of Heidegger. Since Manning and the contemplatives drink from all of these fountains, I have used this expression a number of times in relation to Manning and the contemplatives.

⁹ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968).

in the path of Heidegger, the existentialist philosopher. To the new theology, language is always a matter of personal interpretation and therefore the language of the Bible can be used as a *vehicle* for continuous existential experiences. A given verse can have thousands of different interpretations as each person has an encounter with God.

Schaeffer warned that if the "progressives" consolidated their position within the Roman Catholic Church, they would have both its organization and linguistic continuity at their disposal. They would then be in the position of supplying society with an endless series of religiously motivated "arbitrary absolutes" applying any sociological or psychological theory at their discretion.

Schaeffer predicted that the new theology would lead to mysticism. Karl Rahner showed the truth in Schaeffer's prediction when he wrote "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all...By mysticism we mean a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence."¹⁰ But Schaeffer had a different definition of mysticism than Rahner's: "Mysticism is nothing more than a faith contrary to rationality, deprived of content and incapable of communication. You can bear witness to it but you cannot discuss it."¹¹

Since Schaeffer's remarks thirty years ago, there has been a growing interest in contemplative spirituality. In an article titled "The Changing State of Spirituality" in the November 27, 1993 issue of *America*, a Roman Catholic Journal, some observations were made about the trend in books being published. In 1968, the top ten Roman Catholic books were predominantly from authors attempting to apply the new theology to spirituality. In 1993, the top ten were predominantly from authors attempting to apply Eastern religious teachings as well as psychology to spirituality. The new theology is free, as Schaeffer warned it would be, to draw upon any teaching in order to achieve its goals.

¹⁰ John B. Healey, "The Journey Within," *America* (February 19, 1994).

¹¹ Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, p. 61.

The Contemplatives

In *The Signature of Jesus*, Manning quotes Catholic saints, medieval mystics, and monks, including Charles deFoucauld, Francis DeSales, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena. The most frequently cited sources are part of the community of Roman Catholic clergy who are instrumental in promoting modern contemplative spirituality: Thomas Merton, Anthony DeMello, William Shannon, Henri Nouwen, Peter Van Breemen, William Reiser, David Steindl-Rast, and Basil Pennington. Although the word contemplation brings to mind a monastic life dedicated to penance and cloistered within the walls of the monastery, not so with these *New Monks*.¹²

The New Monks critique the current state of Christianity by arguing that since God is holy and is a "wholly other," He cannot be defined by systems of doctrine. They maintain that western rationalism has crushed the knowledge of God and that we must return to a more intuitively received knowledge. We must move beyond the intellect, beyond doctrine, and beyond words to a deeper union with God. Their writings contain rather complex discussions on the nature of being and share common themes of universality, mystical union with God through contemplation (wordless "prayer"), social justice, and non-violence.

The New Monks maintain that all religions should immerse themselves in the myths of their tradition because there is power in the "collective unconscious"¹³ of the tradition to shape the experience of its followers. So, for the New Monk, the use of

¹²I coined this term since these priests promote mysticism for the common man through the use of their interpretation of monastic ideas and meditation. For them every man should be a mystic and every man should be a true monk. A "true monk" is a social activist. There are even self help books on how to be a mystic, for example, *Why Not Be a Mystic?*, by Frank X. (Tuoti, New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1995).

¹³This phrase is from Carl Jung, whose teaching is highly influential to the New Monks. Manning also favorably cites him in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 153 and *Abba's Child*, p. 41. Jung, a psychologist who was a disciple of Freud, believed one could become whole by integrating the unconscious with the conscious, however, this process requires embracing the darkness of the unconscious. Jung was known to even use occultic techniques to facilitate this. Jung interpreted Christian doctrine from a mythic perspective. He maintained that religious myth and symbol was an expression of the "collective unconscious" of the human race. Jung defined God as "whatever cuts across my will outside of myself, or whatever wells up from the collective unconscious from within myself."

biblical language has great power within the Christian tradition. For example, the call to salvation¹⁴ is actually a call to a transformation of consciousness to be psychologically awakened to the unity and oneness of all creation. For the New Monks all religions at their deepest mystical level use myth and symbol to say the same thing.

The New Monks believe we are born into a duality between self (the ego) and oneness (being). The ego is driven by fear of death and alienation, and is the source of all suffering and woundedness. The fall, a mythical story, has a deeper more "universal truth," which is intended to shed light on present human experience. We have fallen from oneness and harmony of paradise into alienation and a sense of separation. We must simply realize that the gulf that appears to separate "sinful" humanity from a righteous God, has never existed, we are and always have been one with God. For the New Monks this is God's unconditional love and grace.

Thomas Merton, who is frequently cited by Manning, is the forerunner of the New Monks. He became a Roman Catholic monk at age 26, just three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Having accepted so much of the new theology, Merton remained involved in the Roman Catholic Church only by a thin affirmation of a God in Nature and a reverence for tradition. He popularized Jungian Psychotherapy in his writings about spiritual healing, agreeing with Jung's mythic perspective of biblical doctrines.

¹⁴ A further example of how biblical language and themes are distorted by the New Monks is found in the writings of Alan Jones, favorably cited by Manning in *The Signature of Jesus*, pp. 11, 148, 198, 207 and in *Abba's Child*, p. 55.

In his book *Journey into Christ* (Trinity Press Intl., 1992) Jones writes about the meaning of the cross on p. 114: "The Christian Life is one of sacrificial love. At the heart of our story is a tree, or rather two trees; one of Adam and the other of the new Adam, Christ. The cross is the tree under which Adam is buried. Both trees are double-sided. They are bearers of life and death. In other mythologies too, there is a double-sided tree; one side green and alive, the other side dead and dry. There comes a time when 'it is the dry branches and not the green, of the universal tree, that must be grasped and painfully climbed' [quote from Joseph Campbell, author of *The Power of Myth*]. It is the same tree but there are moments on the journey when our climbing has to be on the dry and dead side. So also with the dreadful and yet life-giving mother-goddess Kali [of Hinduism]: the blood from her left side brought death and that from her right side, life."

Merton traveled to Asia on a quest to redefine what being a monk entailed and apparently found it in Buddhist and Hindu teachings. There he discovered great similarities between monastic contemplation and Eastern Meditation and determined that they were both in touch with the same mystical source. He felt that the emphasis on experience and inner transformation rather than doctrine would be the ecumenical meeting place between East and West.

Merton advocated moving the practice of contemplation from its marginal state of use by only the Catholic monks behind the cloistered walls to a broader use by the common man. Dedicated to civil rights, antiwar, and liberationist activism, he came to call his fellow activists "true monks." Embraced by progressive Catholics, some say he was most influential in the shift from devotional spirituality to contemplative spirituality.

In *The Signature of Jesus*, Manning precisely echoes the themes of contemplative spirituality. It appears to be his intention to bring to Protestants what Thomas Merton brought to many Roman Catholics.

Contemplative Spirituality Promotes Universalism

Both the new theology and contemplative spirituality emphasize ecumenism. Hans Küng (whose book *On Being Christian*, Manning says is "the most powerful book other than Scripture that I have ever read," p. 153) is the author of the document, *Declaration of a Global Ethic*, which personifies the push toward religious pluralism among progressives. The document, intended to be an agreement among the world's religions, does not contain the word *God*, Küng explains "because including it would exclude all Buddhist and many faith groups with different views of God and the divine."¹⁵ Most Evangelicals are familiar with ecumenism within Christendom only. However, those who hold to the new theology, and more explicitly those who hold to contemplative spirituality believe in an ecumenism which includes non Christian religions and all "faith groups." This is a logical step for those who divorce themselves from the

¹⁵ John R. Coyne, Jr., "Ultimate Reality in Chicago," in *National Review*, (October 4, 1993).

gospel of Scripture and who adopt the view that all are saved (universalism).

Since universalism is not appealing to many Evangelicals, and Manning is attempting to reach them, he does not make blatant statements advocating it. He shows, however, that he is indeed a Universalist in two ways.¹⁶

First, the people whom Manning approvingly cites believe in universalism. David Steindl-Rast is a Roman Catholic priest who promotes contemplative theology. In a 1992 article he said, "Envision the great religious traditions arranged on the circumference of a circle. At their mystical core they all say the same thing, but with different emphasis."¹⁷ Manning cites him approvingly twice in *The Signature of Jesus* (pp. 210, 213-14).

The New Monks frequently use the phrase "unconditional love" to express universality. Their push to a beyond-words, beyond-thoughts meditation experience in order to fully experience a loving deity, misses entirely that apart from faith in Christ for eternal life, there can be no adequate discussion of experiencing God's love.

Matthew Fox, cited approvingly in Manning's books *Lion and Lamb* (p. 135) and *A Stranger to Self Hatred* (pp. 113, 124) is an excommunicated Catholic priest who is a contemplative. He gives us another example of the universalism of the contemplatives whom Manning cites:

Remember that 15 billion years of the universe loved you and brought you forward. And it loved you unconditionally...We were loved before the beginning... God is a great underground river, and there are many wells into that river. There's a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a Christian well, a Goddess well, the Native wells—many wells that humans have dug to get into that river, but friends, there's only one river; the living waters of wisdom."¹⁸

¹⁶ Manning doesn't like being called a Universalist, and when charged with being one in some of his speaking engagements, he denies it. He does so by quibbling over the definition of universalism, not by saying that only those who believe in Jesus Christ have eternal life. This type of response is unconvincing and suggests that he dislikes the label because if it were widely known that he was a Universalist, his outreach to Evangelicals would be greatly damaged, if not destroyed.

¹⁷ David Steindl-Rast, "Heroic Virtue," *Gnosis* (Summer 1992).

¹⁸ Fox, highly influenced by Merton, is the author of *Original Blessing* (the title is intended to be set in contrast to the phrase, "original sin") and

Merton says one can work within the Christian traditions but view universalism as the broader truth: "[The contemplative] has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unites them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity."¹⁹

Second, Manning makes statements which imply universalism. In *The Signature of Jesus*, for example, he says that contemplative spirituality (which he calls *paschal* spirituality) "looks upon human nature as fallen but *redeemed*, flawed but in essence good" (p. 125, emphasis mine). For Manning the life, death, and resurrection of Christ mean that *all* are redeemed. There is nothing to be done to gain the life of God. Everyone already has it:

He has a single, relentless stance toward us: he loves us. He is the only God man has ever heard of who loves sinners. False gods—the gods of human understanding—despise sinners, but the Father of Jesus loves all, no matter what they do. But of course this is almost too incredible for us to accept. Nevertheless, the central affirmation of the Reformation stands: through no merit of ours, but by his mercy, we have been restored to a right relationship with God through the life, death, and resurrection of his beloved Son. This is the Good News, the gospel of grace (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 18).²⁰

The Cosmic Christ. (Fox believes that the "second coming" of the Cosmic Christ, an awakening to mysticism, will usher in a global renaissance that can heal Mother Earth and save her by changing human hearts and ways.) Fox is founder of Creation Spirituality.

It may appear that I am selecting the most extreme of the contemplatives to serve as an example, but it should be noted that Fox is admired by other contemplatives. For example, Steindl-Rast says of Fox, "He's right in pointing out that we have spent too much time and energy on redemption centered spirituality and we have to look into a creation centered spirituality" ("Heroic Virtue," *Gnosis Magazine*, Summer 1992, p. 42). Steindl-Rast is also favorably cited by Manning in *The Signature of Jesus*, pp. 211, 214. Steindl-Rast is currently Scholar-in-Residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, CA.

¹⁹ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), 207-208.

²⁰ See also his approving citation on the previous page of Fyodor Dostoevsky's suggestion that God will accept into heaven sinners of every stripe (drunkards, weaklings, vile beings), including those who have taken the mark of the beast. The latter is a direct contradiction of Rev 14:9-11. The former is only true of those who have been washed in the blood of Christ

Manning says that God loves "all." He is not speaking here merely of the compassion God has for the world which moved Him to send His Son to die for us (John 3:16). He is saying that God has *already* restored all people to a right relationship with Him. Notice that he first says "he loves us" and then "he loves all." Clearly *us*, the first person plural pronoun, in this context includes everyone. Then, in the same context Manning goes on to say that "*we* have been restored to a right relationship with God." *We* there is the same group as the *all* mentioned earlier. All have been restored to a right relationship with God. Manning wants us to overcome our psychological fog so that we can realize it. The Good News is that *everyone is already saved*. The biblical view that all are lost and that only when a person trusts Jesus Christ as Savior he passes from death to life (John 5:24) is foreign to Manning and contemplatives.

The last chapter of *The Signature of Jesus* is all about a revelation which Manning supposedly received from God about final judgment. More will be said about this later. However, the illustration mentions by name some of the most vile men of all time, including Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Saddam Hussein, and implies that all of them, indeed all who have ever lived, will get into heaven.²¹

It should be noted, however, that there are statements in *The Signature of Jesus* and in the writings of other contemplatives which can be easily misconstrued to imply that there is salvation only for those who believe in Jesus. For example, Manning writes, "In any other great world religion it is unthinkable to address almighty God as Abba." He then supports this point by approvingly quoting Peter Van Breemen,

Many devout Moslems, Buddhists, and Hinduists are generous and sincere in their search for God. Many have had profound mystical experiences. Yet in spite of their immeasurable spiritual depth, they seldom or never come to know God as their Father. Indeed,

by faith. Yet Dostoevsky and Manning put no qualifier on which sinners get into heaven. *All* go to heaven.

²¹ In a 1995 sermon given at Greenbelt Seminars in Sheffield, England, entitled "In Bed with God" (what kind of title is this!), Manning says, "Do you see why the revelation of Jesus on the nature of God is so revolutionary? [Do you see] why no Christian can ever say one form of prayer is not as good as another or *one religion is not as good as another*?" If all religions are equally good, then universalism must be true.

intimacy with Abba is one of the greatest treasures Jesus has brought us (p. 170).

It is important to realize that when contemplatives speak of knowing God as your Father/Abba, they are not referring to regeneration. They are referring to achieving a level of intimacy with God, "intimacy with Abba." They view all people as heaven bound. The issue for them is becoming a mystic whose experience of God transforms the life and hence the world. Their ultimate aim is to usher in a new world.²²

There are statements in *The Signature of Jesus* which could be misconstrued as teaching Lordship Salvation as well. He denounces "cheap grace" (pp. 118, 128) and says,

In the last analysis, faith is not the sum of our beliefs or a way of speaking or a way of thinking; it is a way of living and can be articulated adequately only in a living practice. To acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord is meaningful insofar as we try to live as he lived and to order our lives according to his values. We do not need to theorize about Jesus; we need to make him present in our time, our culture, and our circumstances. Only a true practice of our Christian faith can verify what we believe (p. 33).

However, Manning is not talking about salvation from hell. He is speaking of deliverance from fear and shame. He is speaking here of coming into an intimate knowledge of God in one's experience, not of how we gain eternal life. Manning does not believe in Lordship *Salvation*; he believes in Lordship *liberation*, liberation from our psychological hang-ups and fears.

Centering Prayer

As mentioned above, the key to spirituality, according to Manning, is a special type of prayer which he calls "contemplative prayer" or "centering prayer."

²² Manning twice indicates we are "involve[d] in building the new heavens and the new earth" (p. 18) and that our "mission" is "building the new heavens and the new earth under the signature of Jesus" (p. 194). While this is a startling claim for those who know the biblical promise that it is God who will introduce the new heavens and the new earth (e.g., Rev 21:1ff.), it is consistent with the emphasis of contemplatives.

For the uninitiated, this may not seem ominous. It may sound like what God calls us to do in His Word. It is not. It is ominous. It is a practice derived from Eastern mysticism.

In *The Signature of Jesus*, Manning writes, "The task of contemplative prayer is to help me achieve the conscious awareness of the unconditionally loving God dwelling within me" (p. 211). He also says, "What masters of the interior life recommend is the discipline of 'centering down' throughout the day" (p. 94).

Manning attempts to head off the charge that centering prayer comes from Eastern mysticism and the New Age movement by saying:

A simple method of contemplative prayer (often called "centering prayer" in our time and anchored in the Western Christian tradition of John Cassian and the desert fathers, and not, as some think, in Eastern mysticism or New age philosophy) has four steps... (p. 218).

He instructs the reader in the practice of centering prayer, which is a type of contemplative wordless "prayer" a technique that involves breathing exercises and the chanting of a sacred word or phrase. Manning begins "the first step in faith is to stop thinking about God at the time of prayer" (p. 212)! What biblical support is there for this idea?

The second step, according to Manning, is to "without moving your lips, repeat the sacred word [or phrase] inwardly, slowly, and often" (p. 218). Once again, where is the biblical support for this practice? None is cited, because none exists.

The third step concerns what to do when inevitable distractions come. The answer is to "simply return to listening to your sacred word...Gently return your mind to your sacred word" (p. 218).

Finally, "after a twenty-minute period of prayer [which Manning recommends twice daily] conclude with the Lord's Prayer, a favorite psalm, or some spontaneous words of praise and thanks" (p. 219). While he doesn't say how long this concluding recitation or spontaneous words might last, it seems he only expects this to be a minute or two, since the Lord's Prayer and most of the Psalms are short and easy to read in a minute or so. This concluding recitation seems to be an afterthought, something put in to make the "prayer" seem Christian. Yet even

this fourth part is biblically suspect. Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do" (Matt 6:7). Any routine prayer repeated each prayer session will soon fall into the category of "vain repetition," even if it is Scripture. The Lord's Prayer is a sample of the way we should pray, and not some prayer we should memorize and repeat back to God daily.

The instruction utilizes odd jargon such as the "false self" and "crucifixion of the ego" and a curious mix of spiritual and psychological terms. To understand his language one would need to have a more candid overview of centering prayer, which I found in an unusual—for me, not for New Agers—non Christian source called *Gnosis Magazine*. The following is a condensation of the article titled "From Woundedness to Union" (*Gnosis*, Winter 1995, pp. 41-45). The author is a Ph.D. who was tutored by the inventors of centering prayer:

Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington [who Manning credits for teaching him this prayer form] were exploring how to achieve a more concentrated experience on the general model of a Zen sesshin, having been quite experienced in sesshins. During these experiments they came upon a form of meditation from which tears, repressed memories, deep intuitions all came to the surface in a jumble, along with a sense of catharsis and bonding among the participants.

From his years as abbot, Keating recognized that this technique accelerated the sensitizing of the unconscious which is the goal of the contemplative life. He recalls, "I saw people going through in ten days what it might have taken twenty years to go through at a monastery." He believes that this unloading of the unconscious is a purification process at work to which he attaches traditional Christian terminology as the struggle against sin. This is called "Divine Therapy."

The main goal is to dismantle the "false self," the needy, driven, unrecognized motivations behind untransformed human behavior. They suggest the false self as a modern equivalent for the traditional concept of original sin. The "true self" is buried beneath the accretions and defenses. A huge amount of healing has to take place before our deep and authentic quest for union with God is realized. This, in essence, constitutes the spiritual journey.

The most fruitful connection here [for the author of the article] is the linking of the "dark night" of the traditional apophatic path and the psychological

process, the “darkness” of the psyche. If psychoanalysis represents “cataphatic therapy”—using words, concepts, and awareness to illuminate the darkness of our inner ground—centering prayer presents a kind of “apophatic psycho therapy” (“apophatic” meaning that which points one towards the ineffable, beyond all words, concepts, and forms).

Periods of psychological ferment and destabilization are signs that the journey is progressing, not failing. The results can often be horrifying to ourselves. As trust grows in God and practice becomes more stable, we penetrate deeper and deeper down to the bedrock of pain, the origin of our personal false self. In response to each significant descent into the ground of our woundedness, there is a parallel ascent in the form of inner freedom, the experience of the fruits of the spirit and beatitude.

By interweaving the contemporary language of psychological healing with the traditional language of Christianity a new synthesis is born.²³

Chapter seven is entitled “Celebrate the Darkness” (a title that is decidedly not only unbiblical, but even *antibiblical*; darkness is always presented negatively in Scripture, see, for example, 2 Cor 6:14; Eph 5:8, 11; 1 Thess 5:4-5; 1 Pet 2:9; 1 John 1:5-10). Manning writes “the ego has to break; and this breaking is like entering into a great darkness. Without such a struggle and affliction, there can be no movement in love” (p. 145). He goes on,

With the ego purged and the heart purified through the trials of the dark night, the interior life of an authentic disciple is a hidden, invisible affair. Today it appears that God is calling many ordinary Christians into this rhythm of loss and gain. The hunger I encounter across the land for silence, solitude, and centering prayer is the Spirit of Christ calling us from the shallows to the deep (p. 149).

In centering prayer the word *sin* becomes a religious word attached to a method of psychological therapy, and the biblical presentation of true moral guilt is omitted.²⁴ It is a system

²³ Interestingly Basil Pennington started his own foundation to further centering prayer called the Mastery Foundation. His cofounder is Werner Erhart of EST fame.

²⁴ Manning gives us better insight into the contemplatives’ view of sin in his book *Abba’s Child* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 163. He writes, “As Julian of Norwich [a Catholic mystic] said, ‘Sin will be no shame, but

completely open to the manipulation of the inventors who feel the liberty to use the biblical language any way they see fit. Manning attempts to give it the validity of tradition by saying that it is has been rooted in Catholic monastic practices since the 5th century: "It is a comfort to know that this is a path that others have tracked before us" (p. 149).

The practice of centering prayer is expanding in many parishes and is now moving beyond Catholic boundaries as many are coming to it from the Recovery Movement. The Catholic Church does not have an official position on this form of prayer, but some Catholic scholars refute the mind-emptying techniques. They also call for psychological studies because of the reported occurrences of depression among practitioners of New Age type meditation.

The result of this mystical practice is that the practitioner becomes less interested in objective spiritual knowledge found in the Bible and more interested in the subjective experience which is found through centering prayer. This may account for the antagonistic attitude toward traditional forms of faith. Manning speaks of "several local churches I have visited, [in which] religiosity has pushed Jesus to the margins of real life and plunged people into preoccupation with their own personal salvation" (p. 193). Of course, centering prayer requires no interest whatsoever in one's own personal salvation since it

honor.' The dualism between good and evil is overcome by the crucified Rabbi who has reconciled all things in himself. We need not be eaten alive by guilt. We can stop lying to ourselves. The reconciled heart says that everything that has happened to me had to happen to make me who I am—without exception."

This is very typical of Manning, to edge up to the contemplative view, but not to complete the thought. Gerald May, whom Manning cites, gives us the complete thought. "We have proposed that all polarities, including the problems of good and evil, exist only as a direct consequence of dualistic thinking. During unitive experiences no dichotomies are made between good and evil, light and dark, creation and destruction...the world and all within it, are One" (*Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, Harper: San Francisco, 1982), 249. By *dualism* Manning and May seem to be focusing on what they feel is a problem of characterizing the world as a warfare between good and evil. For them "good and evil...are One." This certainly seems to suggest, in keeping with Eastern Religious thought, that God is both good and evil. The unitive experience appears to be their solution: give up thinking that good and evil, light and darkness, creation and destruction, are opposites. View them instead as a unity.

Such a view cannot be harmonized with the Word of God which says "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

presupposes that all are already saved. That is what we discover when we “center down.” Manning’s attitude toward the Bible seems to be markedly different from that of Calvin and Luther, for example, or of anyone who has a high regard for it as the very Word of God:

I am deeply distressed by what I only can call in our Christian culture the idolatry of the Scriptures. For many Christians, the Bible is not a pointer to God but God himself. In a word—bibliolatry. God cannot be confined within the covers of a leather-bound book. I develop a nasty rash around people who speak as if mere scrutiny of its pages will reveal precisely how God thinks and precisely what God wants (pp. 188-89).

In *The Signature of Jesus* Manning rarely cites Scripture. Why should he, when the truly important knowledge of God comes from *his experience* of centering down and not from the Bible? Remember “God cannot be confined within the covers of a leather-bound book.” While Manning would acknowledge that some elementary truths of God can be found by reading the Bible, intimate knowledge of God only comes through centering prayer.²⁵

A Parable of Contemplation

It seems appropriate to mention Manning’s latest book, *The Boy Who Cried Abba: A Parable of Trust and Acceptance*.²⁶ It is a small book that appears to be written to the young as well as to adults. Although he does not announce his intentions, it is most emphatically a parable about contemplative spirituality.

²⁵ In his first chapters of an earlier book, *Gentle Revolutionaries* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1975), Manning indicates that we all have seven “centers,” three bad (security, sensation, and power) and four good (love, acceptance, self awareness, and unitive). The unitive center is the “highest level of consciousness” (p. 104). None of this, of course, is found in the Bible. It is all consistent with centering prayer and contemplative spirituality, neither of which depends on being anchored to the Bible.

²⁶ Manning, *The Boy Who Cried Abba: A Parable of Trust and Acceptance*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).

The book jacket has endorsements by Amy Grant²⁷ and Max Lucado which is sure to help it sell to evangelicals.²⁸

The parable takes place in a town near the Rio Grande. It is the story of a boy who is rejected by other children. He is scared and unloved. He finds kindness from a Medicine Man, El Shaddai [which is a Hebrew name for God, meaning *God Almighty*, see Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11], who gives him medicine to take daily. The medicine for self acceptance—oil which he rubs on his heart—becomes too difficult for him to take. His grandmother, who is named Calm Sunset, urges him to go to the cave of Bright Darkness where he will be alone and will face great difficulty. While in the cave, he continues to take the medicine as hurtful memories begin to come to the surface. In the end El Shaddai appears to him and asks the boy to accept acceptance. When he does he is healed of his scars.

Psychological salvation comes by centering down, getting away with “God” in a cave or closet. Unfortunately, it is not God that people meet in the darkness, “God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

²⁷ Amy Grant appears to have been influenced by contemplative spirituality and by Manning. In an interview in the August-September 1997 issue of a magazine called *Aspire*, she refers three times to developing a “rich interior life” and once to “one of the richest interior experiences I had” (p. 25). These terms are not found in the Bible or in normal Christian literature; however, they are common in Manning and in contemplative writings. Perhaps she is unaware of exactly what Manning is teaching. On p. 65 of that issue of *Aspire* under the heading “Amazing Grace,” a glowing review is given of *The Boy Who Cried Abba*, indicative of the notoriety Manning is receiving.

²⁸ I was even more surprised to see that Dr. Larry Crabb, a Free Grace advocate, endorsed Manning's 1994 book, *Abba's Child*. It would be hard to be much more laudatory than this: “Brennan is my friend, walking ahead of me on the path toward home. As I watch him from behind, I am drawn to more closely follow on the path, to more deeply enjoy Abba's love. Thanks, Brennan.” It is not clear whether he is referring to Manning being older or more spiritually mature. However, what is clear is that he considers Manning to be not only a believer, but one who is well grounded and orthodox in the faith.

The Bridge of Faith?

Manning believes that there is a chasm between belief and experience. Belief is one type of knowledge; experience is another. This is the old two-story approach to knowledge. This chasm is crossed through the contemplative experience: "Contemplative prayer bridges the gap between belief and experience because it is the bridge of faith" (p. 212).

The early mystics were revered because of their visions. Throughout the book Manning recounts some of his own peak experiences which come as a result of persevering in contemplation. He recounts that Jesus appeared to him and said "Look carefully at what you most despise in yourself and then look through it. At your center you will discover a love for Me beyond words, images, and concepts, a love you are unable to understand or contain. Your love for me is fragile but real. Trust it" (p. 181).

Manning devotes four pages (pp. 239-42) to recounting a dream about judgment day. In the dream he sees people going before the Lord Jesus to be judged. The people come in by twos. Each pair has one person most would say is good, and one whom most would say is bad. "I see Sandi Patti step forward followed by Madonna. I see Saddam Hussein and Mother Teresa. Next came Adolph Hitler and Mohandas Gandhi. Idi Amin and Billy Graham...The prophet Amos and Hugh Hefner...and Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt" (p. 241). Finally Manning comes before the Lord, trembling and fearful, but God does not judge.²⁹ The result? "He takes my hand and we go home" (p. 242). Implied, of course, is that Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Hugh Hefner, Stalin, and Hitler all went to heaven as well. Manning's universalism is evident in this dream.

²⁹ Manning frequently recycles his material throughout his writing. This revelation was also recounted in *Gentle Revolutionaries*, p. 138. In this telling of his revelation, he stands before God awaiting his judgment. God says "I am not your judge." This quote is left out of his 1996 version. Other details are also different. For example, Madonna and George and Barbara Bush appear in the 1996 version, but not in the 1975 version. Nelson Rockefeller, Howard Hughes, Dorothy Day, and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Burton appeared in the 1975 version but were omitted in the 1996 edition. Either he has had the revelation twice or the story is changing with the times.

This dream is not an educated guess by Manning. It is a revelation from God which is on par with Scripture! After describing the dream he says, "The content of this dream is more real than the book you are holding in your hand...The dream is neither the product of a vivid imagination nor a comatose religious fantasy..." (pp. 242-43). Manning's dream is loosely based on the Bible's account of the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15), but misses very important details. For example, everyone at the Great White Throne Judgment will be condemned to the *Lake of Fire*. There won't be *any* believers there. The remarkable thing here is that Manning bases his understanding of judgment day not on the Bible, but on a vision he had. And he expects the reader to do so as well, delivering his dream with a sense of prophetic authority.

Although Manning does make occasional use of the Scripture, it is impossible to miss that Scripture has been attached to devotional spirituality but not to contemplative spirituality. In this way the authority of Scripture is diminished.

Contemplative Spirituality and Postmodernism

Although Manning has, for the most part, adopted the language of evangelicalism, his presuppositions are clearly from contemplative spirituality which denies that there can even be a set of true propositions from the Bible which could be proved literally, objectively, and historically.³⁰ It has been noted here that several modernist philosophies have come into alignment in Contemplative Spirituality. For example consider this clear statement of Existentialism from William H. Shannon,

³⁰ As a further example of Manning's embrace of the existential method of evaluating historical truth, he favorably cites Walter Wink (*The Signature of Jesus*, p. 72) and Marcus Borg (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 25). Both of these men are liberal scholars, among the 74 Fellows that comprise *The Jesus Seminar*, founded in 1985 to identify the "historical" or "true" Jesus. They also claim to be evaluating whether any of the traditional books of the canon or parts of those books should be dropped. To date they have determined that the entire Gospel of John should be excluded because it differs too much from the Synoptics and portrays Jesus as the world's only Savior. They also contend that only 18% of the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels should be retained as authentic (*SCP Journal*, Vol 21 [1997]: 1-2). (Be aware that the *SCP Journal* does not seem to be particularly friendly to the Free Grace view.)

a contemplative which Manning cites approvingly in *The Signature of Jesus* (pp. 211, 216):

To call God mystery is to remind ourselves that all the knowledge of God comes from some human experience of God. The heart of the mystery is this: the words we possess are able to express only the human experience, not the divine reality experienced."³¹

This language is far away from a biblical understanding of truth and how we can know about truth. In addition to expressing familiar modernist philosophies, Contemplative Spirituality is also parallel in many respects with what is called Postmodernism. According to postmodern theory, truth is not objective or absolute, it is socially constructed, plural, and inaccessible to universal reason. Yet its most ominous concept is that language itself must be "deconstructed." This is echoed by contemplative spirituality in the assertion that ultimate truth is "beyond words," "beyond doctrine," it is "ineffable" and can only be known experientially through "wordless prayer." They say this is a renewal of the path of the Catholic mystic.

The article by Zane Hodges in this journal titled "Post-Evangelicalism Confronts the Postmodern Age" (*JOTGES*, Spring 1996, pp. 3-14) makes this relevant observation:

Postmodernism has taken the final step and has dismissed language itself as a legitimate conveyor of truth. To the postmodernist, all communication is theory-laden and can never point to ultimate reality of any kind.

Discussing the deconstruction of truth he goes on to note:

It is plain that such an approach to the Scriptures robs them of any inherent authority and places the interpreter above the text rather than under it. What the interpreter will hear is not the voice of the Lord, but his own voice. And in postmodernism that is all the interpreter really wants to hear! From one point of view postmodernism is the ultimate attempt to place man in authority over the Scriptures rather than place the Scriptures in authority over man.

³¹ William Shannon, *Seeds of Peace* (New York: the Crossroads Publishing Co., 1996), 33.

Radical Discipleship?

As mentioned earlier, Manning claims that his book is about radical discipleship. And what is a radical disciple? It is one who is the "fully integrated person" (a contemplative term which has something to do with being integrated psychologically). This is important because the New Monks are seeking to usher in a non-violent, environmentally-conscious (healing the earth's woundedness) society. Ultimately Manning expects to usher in the new heavens and the new earth (pp. 18, 194).

The theme of nonviolence has the genius of framing broad indictments of society. Not only does non-violence cover pacifism ("The pragmatic wisdom of 'self defense' and 'national security' masks our childish fantasies of revenge..."p. 83), but even job stress comes under its umbrella.

Throughout his other books Manning gives examples of individuals that he specifically refers to as "radical disciples," including Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners*, a leftist Christian magazine. (Wallis must have startled even the secular left with his assertion that the Vietnamese boat people set sail because of their addiction to western goods.) Another example is Walter Burghardt. Manning approvingly cites David H. C. Read who says, "In my opinion, no one today can equal Walter Burghardt in expounding the Gospel..."³² And who is Burghardt? He is coordinator of "Preach the Just Word," a program sponsored by the Woodstock Theological Center to assist priests in being more effective in preaching *social justice*. Evidently for Manning, like liberation theologians,³³ "expounding the gospel" is preaching social justice.

³² *The Signature of Jesus*, p. 250, f.n. 1 for chap 9.

³³ Manning favorably cites Jürgen Moltmann who has been credited for helping to provide the theological roots used by Latin American liberation theology. In addition, Manning himself bluntly advocated liberation theology in an earlier book, "The Church as the visible body of the Lord is committed to global freedom, to active participation in the construction of a just social order, and to stimulating and radicalizing the dedication of Christians. *The holy alliance* [...] *between charismatic spirituality* [which he later came to call paschal or contemplative spirituality] *and liberation theology serves to vitalize the Church's action in the world* and to make its commitment to the Lordship of Jesus deeper and more radical" (*Gentle Revolutionaries*, p. 112, italics added). In this book Manning cites Gustavo Gutierrez, author of *A Theology of Liberation*. He also cites Enrique Dussel, author of *Philosophy of Liberation* and *History and the Theology of Liberation*.

Another example of radical disciples according to Manning is the Berrigan brothers, well-known during the Vietnam War period, but more recently active in Plowshares, an organization committed to anti-military activism.

Conclusion

Manning speaks much of God's grace and love but these precious biblical concepts are actually replaced by vague notions of wholeness through an eastern religious meditation technique, Centering Prayer. Many of the contemplatives assert that this constitutes the spiritual journey and is the same process as integrating the conscious with the unconscious as described by Jungian psychotherapy. Throughout the course of this book some of the most crucial biblical truths, such as sin and forgiveness, are reinterpreted in the light of therapy. The irony is that a clear biblical gospel, if believed to be true, will produce assurance that has truly profound psychological benefits.³⁴ There is no place for centering prayer in discipleship. Meditation is to be on God's Word, not on nothingness.

Contemplative spirituality is dangerous. Christian leaders should warn their people about it. Those who are interested in a comprehensive biblical understanding of true biblical spirituality and of the gospel of Jesus Christ should be warned that Manning is traveling on a wholly other path.

³⁴ See "The Psychological Effects of Lordship Salvation," by Frank Minirth in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1993), 39-51.

WHEN ASSURANCE IS NOT ASSURANCE

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I. Introduction

There are many people today who say that *assurance* of salvation is possible, but that *certainty* is impossible. Unless one is very familiar with that way of thinking, this argument is puzzling. How can one have assurance and yet not be certain? Isn't assurance certainty?

As we shall see, the answer for many is No. Assurance is *not* certainty.

II. Various Ways of Explaining an Assurance Which Is Not Certain

A. Uncertainty with Jesus Is Better than Any Other Option

Dr. R. C. Sproul is a very articulate spokesman for the view that assurance is not certainty. A few years back he described his own struggles with assurance, and in so doing he explained his view of assurance:

There are people in this world who are not saved, but who are convinced that they are. The presence of such people causes genuine Christians to doubt their salvation. After all, we wonder, suppose I am in that category? Suppose I am mistaken about my salvation and am really going to hell? How can I know that I am a real Christian?

A while back I had one of those moments of acute self-awareness that we have from time to time, and suddenly the question hit me: "R.C., what if you are not one of the redeemed? What if your destiny is not

heaven after all, but hell?" Let me tell you that I was flooded in my body with a chill that went from my head to the bottom of my spine. I was terrified.

I tried to grab hold of myself. I thought, "Well, it's a good sign that I'm worried about this. Only true Christians really care about salvation." But then I began to take stock of my life, and I looked at my performance. My sins came pouring into my mind, and the more I looked at myself, the worse I felt. I thought, "Maybe it's really true. Maybe I'm not saved after all."

I went to my room and began to read the Bible. On my knees I said, "Well, here I am. I can't point to my obedience. There's nothing I can offer. I can only rely on Your atonement for my sins. I can only throw myself on Your mercy." Even then I knew that some people only flee to the Cross to escape hell, not out of a real turning to God. I could not be sure about my own heart and motivation. Then I remembered John 6:68. Jesus had been giving out hard teaching, and many of His former followers had left Him. When He asked Peter if he was also going to leave, Peter said, "Where else can I go? Only You have the words of eternal life." In other words, Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realized that being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option.¹

According to this way of thinking, certainty is not an option. The very best option available is "being uncomfortable with Jesus."

B. Assurance Includes Doubts

Dr. Richard Belcher, author of *A Layman's Guide to the Lordship Controversy*,² spoke a few years ago on a Dallas radio talk show. I called in and asked a few questions about assurance. The following is a transcript of my questions and his answers:

BW: Is it possible for any Christian to have 100% certainty that they are saved and that they can't lose it if the quality of my lifestyle has something to do with my assurance? In other words, can I be absolutely sure that I'm saved?

¹ R. C. Sproul, *TableTalk* (Nov 6, 1989), 20.

² Richard P. Belcher, *A Layman's Guide to the Lordship Controversy* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1990).

RB: Well, the question is, can anyone have 150% definite, positive you know [assurance].

BW: Right, that's my question.

RB: Well, my question is, can even the one who is walking with the Lord and knows the Lord and is submitted to the Lord and is full of God's Spirit [have such absolute certainty]?—He will have *an* assurance but that is not to say that there will never be any questions of doubt. But the Spirit of God overcomes the questions of doubt and grants assurance. See, what you're doing is putting assurance in the category of percentages and I don't like to do that.

BW: Are you 100% completely sure that you are going to Heaven?

RB: I have *an* assurance that I am saved, but I am still in this body and I am human and in the passing of time there can be some questions in one's mind, but the Spirit of God witnesses to my spirit that I'm saved.

BW: Is it possible that you're not saved?

RB: Well, there are various means whereby I look at my life to see if I give evidence of salvation. Not only the witness of the Holy Spirit, but there are other means whereby I look to see if I'm saved, like Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13: "Examine yourselves whether you're in the faith." And I seek to do that as well as the witness and testimony of the Holy Spirit.

If good works are indispensable for assurance as Belcher believes, then certainty is indeed impossible. No matter how godly one is today, he is not, as Belcher acknowledges, perfect: "I am still in the body and I am human." We are left with assurance that includes doubts.

C. Assurance Is Subjective

In the September 1993 issue of *Dispensationalism in Transition*, Dr. Kenneth Gentry wrote:

Assurance is subjective, rooted in the heart of the believer. If we say assurance is essential to saving faith, then we are ultimately saying no man is saved

in Christ until he has come to believe that Christ has saved him forever. This would not involve faith in Christ for salvation, but faith in faith. R.L. Dabney rightfully notes that this requires a revelation beyond the Scriptures because *the Bible does not specifically speak to the individual in question*. Nowhere in the Bible do we learn, for instance, that Ken Gentry is among the elect" (emphasis added).³

Gentry is not alone in this view. A seminary professor I debated agreed that there were people in the Bible who knew for sure they had eternal life because Scripture directly indicated that they were saved by name. But he said that unless your name were specifically recorded, you couldn't be sure.

If assurance is subjective, as Gentry suggests, then he is right, certainty is impossible.

D. Only God Knows Who Is Truly Saved

Walter Chantry writes a small book which analyzes the gospel in light of Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler.⁴ One of the chapters is on assurance of salvation. Chantry argues there that no one can be sure that he himself is born again. Only God knows for sure. He begins by decrying the approach of linking assurance with God's promises:

So many Christian workers feel compelled to do the Holy Spirit's work of giving assurance in their evangelism...A sentence is added to the 'salvation liturgy' which is not so much addressed to God as to the sinner who is repeating the prayer. 'Thank you for coming into my life and for hearing my prayer as you promised.' Then the personal worker is to open his Bible to John 3:16 etc., and replace the word 'world' with the sinner's name. Then the misguided counselor is to assure the sinner with all the authority of God that he has been saved. A warning is added not to sin against God by ever doubting his salvation, for that would be to call God a liar.⁵

³ Kenneth Gentry, "Assurance and Lordship Salvation: The Dispensational Concern," *Dispensationalism in Transition* (September 1993).

⁴ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

He continues,

This heretical and soul-destroying practice is the logical conclusion of a system that thinks little of God, preaches no law, calls for no repentance, waters down faith to 'accepting a gift', and never mentions bowing to Christ's rule or bearing a cross. The very practice of trying to argue men into assurance with a verse or two, and the ridiculous warning, 'Don't call God a liar' shows that even 'accepting the gift' requires only an outward response and a verbal prayer...⁶

After discussing a number of things which may *hint* that one is saved, but which can't *prove* it with certainty, Chantry concludes:

Few today seem to understand the Bible's doctrine of assurance. Few seem to appreciate the doubts of professing Christians who question whether they have been born again. They have no doubt that God will keep His promises but they wonder whether they have properly fulfilled the conditions for being heirs to those promises. There is no question that God will give eternal life to all who repent and believe. But they are discerning enough to know that walking an aisle and muttering a verbal prayer does not constitute faith. The [Westminster] Catechism's doctrine has raised valid questions concerning their personal experience of grace which cannot be brushed aside. They are asking a legitimate question, 'Have we believed and repented?' 'Are we the recipients of God's grace?'

Since the human heart is 'deceitful above all things' (Jeremiah 17:9), this is a valid inquiry.

Since we read of self-deceived hypocrites like Judas, it is an imperative question. 'What must I do to be saved?' is an altogether different question from, 'How do I know I've done that?' You can answer the first confidently. Only the Spirit may answer the last with certainty.⁷

If it is impossible to be sure that one has done what is necessary to be saved as Chantry suggests, then certainty is clearly impossible.

⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁷ Ibid., 75-76.

E. Assurance Is a Lesser Type of Certainty

In an article entitled, "Some Thoughts on Lordship Salvation," Dr. James Sawyer criticizes me for suggesting that assurance is certainty akin to the certainty that $2 + 2 = 4$. His answer is instructive:

Certainty falls into several categories. (1) Mathematical certainty: In the abstract theoretical and ideal world, we can know things with absolute certainty. There are no contingencies to qualify a reality, thus, there can be certain knowledge in the truest sense. (2) Empirical certainty: This is demonstrated by the scientific method in the real world, as opposed to the ideal world of mathematics. (3) Legal certainty: This involves proof by evidence, given by witnesses. It, however, admits the possibility of error depending on the truthfulness and credibility of the witnesses. (4) Moral certainty: This is the realm of psychological certainty. It is obvious that nearly all human knowledge outside of the realm of mathematics fails the test of absolute certainty. Likewise, salvation is not something which can be analyzed in the test tube, thus it does not fall in the realm of scientific certainty. Salvation falls in the realm of contingent reality, the variety of which cannot be tested. Thus, it is impossible from a psychological perspective to achieve the mathematical level of certainty for which Wilkin seeks.⁸

For Sawyer all "certainty" outside of mathematical certainty is less than "certain knowledge in the truest sense." In other words, what he calls *moral certainty* is not really certainty at all.

Since all biblical truth falls into Sawyer's fourth category, if he is right, one cannot be certain of *anything* reported or promised in Scripture. In that way of thinking, we aren't sure that Jesus rose from the dead. Or that He is God. Or that the Scriptures are without error. Or that there really is life beyond the grave. Or that the gospel is true. The mathematician is lucky. He can be certain. The theologian, evidently, is not so fortunate. He is reduced to "the realm of contingent reality."⁹

⁸ Available on the internet at <http://members.aol.com/mjsawyer/Lordship.html>.

⁹ "Contingent reality" is an interesting choice of words. *Contingent* means something which is "a possibility, liable to occur but not certain" (*Oxford*

III. Assurance Which Isn't Certain Isn't Really Assurance

A. Uncertainty with Jesus Isn't the Best Option

There is one option better than uncertainty with Jesus. The best option is certainty with Jesus. When Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," he did not mean that he doubted his salvation and was hoping Jesus would tell him how he could have eternal life. Peter already knew he had eternal life (John 2:11; 4:10ff; 6:47). The Lord Jesus was teaching the disciples more about the life which He had given them. He wanted them to have life more abundantly (John 10:10). Peter's point was that it makes no sense to leave the Messiah who was instructing them on the life within them.

B. Assurance Doesn't Include Doubts

If you believe, as Belcher and others do, that assurance of salvation is not the certain knowledge that you are eternally saved, then assurance can include doubts. Assurance for such people is hope-so, not know-so.

Belcher's comments are those of a man walking a theological tightrope. He is struggling to stay on the wire. On the one hand he doesn't want to say that he isn't sure he is saved. On the other hand, he doesn't want to suggest that he is certain he is saved. Thus his comments go back and forth, avoiding the expression or absolute denial of certainty. Instead he has assurance with doubts.

The idea that assurance includes doubts is like saying that belief includes unbelief.¹⁰ Let's say your boss promises you a raise but you doubt that he will follow through because twice

American Dictionary, 138). A "contingent reality" is thus a *possible reality*.

¹⁰Support for this novel approach is sometimes found in Mark 9:24, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." However, there is no true support there. The speaker there was the father of a demon-possessed boy. Jesus had just said, "If you can believe, all things are possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23). The man's response, "Lord I believe," shows that he believed that Jesus could heal the boy. That he believed this is confirmed by the fact that Jesus immediately healed the boy (v 26). The father's plea, "help my unbelief," was a request for Jesus to help him in the areas he did not believe. Believing God in one point does not mean that we believe God in all that He has said.

before he has promised you raises and ended up not giving them for “unavoidable reasons.” Since you doubt it will happen, you will only believe it when you see it. That may be why Belcher appeals to the fact that “I am still in the body and I am human and in the passing of time there can be some questions in one’s mind.” Until he dies, he really can’t be sure.

Jesus promises eternal life to all who believe in Him. If someone is not sure he has eternal life, he plainly doesn’t believe Jesus’ promise. Assurance does exclude doubt.

C. Assurance Is Not Subjective

Since Jesus is completely trustworthy, assurance is as simple and as objective as simply taking Him at His word. Assurance is not subjective. It is not rooted in me at all. Assurance is rooted in the trustworthiness of the One making the promise, the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus asked Martha if she believed Him when He said that whoever lives and believes in Him will never die spiritually, she responded with confidence, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:27). She knew she believed Him. There was nothing subjective in this whatsoever.

D. God Isn’t the Only One Who Knows Who Is Truly Saved

The idea that only God knows who is truly saved is foreign to Scripture. Jesus told the seventy to rejoice because their names were recorded in heaven (Luke 10:20). Peter indicated that Cornelius and his household had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48). Paul indicated that the names of Clement and his co-workers were in the Book of Life (Phil 4:3). They all knew they were truly saved, as do all who believe the testimony of God (1 John 5:9-13). The only way a believer cannot know he is saved is if he stops believing the promise and loses his assurance (but not his life, which is eternal). Like Martha, all who believe know they have eternal life.

E. Assurance Isn't a Lesser Type of Certainty

The Bible knows nothing of Sawyer's four types of certainty. There is no degree of uncertainty in the deity of Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, or the guarantee that all who believe in Him have eternal life.

Scriptural promises and teachings, including assurance of salvation, are not some lesser type of certainty—whatever *that* might be! Martha was just as sure of the promise of Jesus as she was that $2 + 2 = 4$.

Logically what would uncertain certainty be? How could you have certainty which was less than "certain knowledge in the truest sense"? This way of thinking casts doubt on everything in the Bible. What would you say in evangelism (or discipleship) if you believed that the Bible might not be true?

IV. You Can Be Sure

In spite of what many theologians and pastors are saying today, you can be sure. Certainty is found in taking God at His Word.

Jesus said, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life." If you believe Him, then you know you have everlasting life. It's as simple as that.

A Voice from the Past:

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL¹

ARTHUR T. PIERSON²

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

Introduction

There is one text in the NT that has been preached from oftener than any other in the Bible. It has been the foundation of great revivals of religion, like that among the Tahitians; or that among the Telugus in India, where 2,222 people were baptized in one day, nearly 5,000 people in thirty days, and 10,000 people within ten months; and where, even during the year drawing to its close, nearly 10,000 more souls have been baptized. It is a wonderful text. Luther called it one of "the little gospels." It is this (John 3:16): "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

You will naturally wonder what there is in that old text that is new. I have found something that was very new to me, and which also may be to you. I suppose that I had read that verse tens of thousands of times, and yet, a little while ago, as I was led to preach upon that text, I sought of the Lord a clearer view of it, that I might glorify Him, by bringing forth out of His treasure things new and old. After reading these familiar words

¹ This selection is taken from a book reviewed in this issue, *The Gospel: Its Heart, Heights, and Hopes*. The paragraph titles, American spelling preferences (*honorable*, etc.), some punctuation, and one vocabulary updating are the only changes made in the text.

² Arthur Tappan Pierson (1837-1911) first caught the attention of the world-renowned English preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon in 1889 during a missionary preaching tour in Great Britain. Spurgeon, who was ill at the time, was looking for someone to assist him at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. When Spurgeon died in 1892, Pierson continued to pastor the Metropolitan Tabernacle for two more years (1892-1894).

over, perhaps a hundred times, prayerfully asking for new light and insight, there suddenly came to me this absolutely new discovery, as though one, looking up into the heavens, should see a cloud swept away from before the stars, and a new constellation revealed. It flashed on my thought that there are *ten words* in the verse that are quite prominent words, such as *God, loved, world, whosoever*, and so on. Then a little more close and careful search showed those words in a hitherto undiscovered mutual relation: *the ten words were in five pairs*. There is one pair of words that has to do with the two persons of the Godhead—God the Father and God the Son. There is a second pair of words that has to do with the expression of the Father's attitude or posture towards this world—He *loved* and He *gave*. Then there is a third pair of words that refers to the objects of the divine love—*world* and *whosoever*. Then there is a fourth pair of words that shows us what the attitude of man ought to be when God's love and gift come to his knowledge—*believe* and *have*. Then the last pair of words points us to the extremes of human destiny: the result of rejection, and the result of acceptance—*perish* and *life*.

Often as I had read this "gospel in a sentence," I had never seen before that singular relation borne by the main words in the sentence; and, so far as I know, nobody else had seen it before; for it is one of the beautiful privileges about the study of the precious Word of God that the humblest believer who asks the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in studying the Holy Scriptures, may make a discovery for himself that nobody has ever made before, or if so, without his knowledge; so that it is still his own discovery.

Let us look at this text in the light of this fresh arrangement of the thoughts which it contains. To my mind, it is one of the most remarkable discoveries that it has ever been permitted me to make in the study and exploration of the hidden treasures of the Word of God.

I. *God and Son*

In the first place, "*God* so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten *Son*." There are two of the persons of the Godhead. Many persons are troubled about the relation of the Father to the Son, and of the Son to the Father. They cannot exactly see how Jesus Christ can be equal with God if He is God's Son; and they cannot see how He can be as glorious as the Father, and how He can be entitled to the same honor and homage and worship as the Father if He proceeds forth from the Father, and comes into the world.

But let us seek a simple illustration. It is said, in the introduction of this Gospel according to John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What is a word? It is the expression of a thought that lies in the mind. The thought is not visible, the thought is not audible; but, when it takes the form of a spoken word or a written word, that thought that was invisible in the mind, that you could not see, or hear, or know about in any other way, comes to your eye on the printed page, or to your ear through the voice of the speaker. And so my invisible thoughts are coming to you now through these audible words.³ The word is so connected with the thought that it is the expression of the thought. The thought is the word invisible: the word is the thought visible. Now Jesus Christ was the invisible thought of God put into a form in which you could see it and hear it; and just as the word and the thought are so connected that if you understand the word you understand the thought, and if you understand the thought you understand the word; and as the word would have no meaning without the thought, and the thought no expression without the word, so Jesus Christ helps us to understand the Father, and the Father could not make Himself perfectly known to us except through the Son. But, again, we are told that Christ is "the Light of the world." Suppose I should say, "In the beginning was the light, and the light was with the sun, and the light was the sun." The sun sends forth the light, and the light proceeds from the sun; yet the light and the sun are the same in nature and the same in essence, and the glory of the sun is the glory of the light, and the glory of the light is the glory of the sun; and although the

³This was originally a sermon. Ed.

light goes forth from the sun, it is equal with the sun, shares the same glory, and is entitled to the same valuation. We cannot think of the one without the other.

In this text not a word is said about the love of the Son for sinners, nor a word about the Son's offering of Himself for the salvation of men. What is the common, old-fashioned notion that we sometimes find cropping up even in the conceptions of Christian people as well as unbelievers, in these days? Many think of the Father as representing justice and of the Son as representing mercy. They imagine the Son as coming between the wrath of the Father and the guilty sinner.

It is very much like the story of Pocahontas, the daughter of an Indian chief, who came between the executioner and Captain Smith, when the executioner was standing with his club up-lifted, ready to strike the fatal blow on the head of his victim.

The notion of a great many people is that God the Father is all wrath, and that we can never look at God or think of God, and that God never can look at us or think of us, except with a kind of mutual abhorrence and antagonism; and that so Jesus Christ incarnates the principle of love, and comes in between the angry God and the sinner. That is a very shallow notion indeed. Have you never got hold of the idea that the Father is just as much interested in you as the Son is, and that the Father loves you just as much as the Son does? Look at this verse. It puts all the glory of the love and the sacrifice upon the Father: "*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*" He puts it thus that you and I may understand that our notion of the Son is our notion of the Father. When Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us," Jesus answered, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, 'Shew us the Father'?"

Do you not understand my thought if you understand my word? And if my word is the right expression of my thought, how absurd it would be for somebody to say, "I understand his word well enough, but I wish that I could understand his thought." My word, being human, may not always properly express my thought; but with God the Word is the perfect expression of the thought; and so if you have understood the word you have understood the thought; and if you have understood the thought

you have understood the word. If you have seen the Son, you have seen the Father. If the love of the Son has touched you, the love of the Father has touched you. If you worship the Son, you worship the Father. If you obey the Son, you obey the Father; so that you need not be troubled about your feelings toward the Father, and say, as many a person has said to me, "I wish that I could feel towards God the Father as I feel towards Jesus. I wish that I could have those views of God the Father that I have of Jesus. I wish that I could have the freedom with the Father that I have with the Son."

Now, dismiss all that kind of trouble and perplexity from your mind; for as you think of the Son you think of the Father; as you love the Son, you love the Father; as you pray to the Son, you pray to the Father; and as you obey and serve the Son, you obey and serve the Father. The Son thinks of you just as the Father does, and the Father thinks of you just as the Son does.

"So near, so very near to God,
Nearer I cannot be;
For in the person of his Son
I am as near as he.

So dear, so very dear to God,
Dearer I cannot be;
For the love wherewith he loves the Son
Is the love he bears to me."

II. *Loved and Gave*

The second pair of words is *loved* and *gave*. He loved and gave. I have no desire to enter into nice distinctions, but with the simplicity of a little child approach this heart of the gospel. And yet a child will understand that when we use the word *love*, we sometimes mean one thing and sometimes another. For instance, suppose that you should try to get some poor criminal out of prison—a miserable, filthy, degraded, defiled man. Somebody asks you why you do it, and you say that you *love* him. Now, that would not be taken to mean the same kind of love as you bear your mother. Those are very different loves—the love that you bear to your mother and the love that you bear to some vile criminal. The word *love* has a different meaning in

different cases. The apostle John says, "We love him because he first loved us." Was not the love of God to us something different from the love that we bear to Him? I love God because I know him to be the most beautiful, the most wise, the most glorious, the most fatherly, the most tender, the most compassionate,⁴ the most gracious Being in the universe. Why did He love me? Because He saw that I was beautiful and truthful, and lovely, and honest, and honorable? Not so, says the apostle. "When we were enemies he loved us, and he commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." So there are two kinds of love. We call them the love of complacency and the love of benevolence. *Complacency* means a feeling of pleasure. You love a beautiful person, a lovely character, because you see something in the person and in the character that draws out your love.

But that is not the kind of love that we call the love of benevolence, for such love is bestowed on people in whom we do not see anything beautiful or lovely. We love them for the sake of the good that we may do them, and for the sake of the beautiful character that, by grace, we may help to develop in them. So, therefore, the love of complacency is intensive, but the love of benevolence is extensive; the love of complacency is partial, the love of benevolence is impartial; the love of complacency is exclusive and select, the love of benevolence is inclusive and universal. The love of complacency is a kind of selfish love, but the love of benevolence is a generous love. The love of complacency may be an involuntary love: we see the qualities that attract affection, and we love unconsciously and involuntarily; but the love of benevolence is voluntarily exercised. The love of complacency has to do with comparatively few of the people whom we know; the

love of benevolence takes in the whole world, and hundreds and thousands of people whom we do not know, and never saw, but whom, for the sake of Jesus, we love.

Have you fixed that in your thought? The kind of love, then, that God had for us was the love of benevolence—extensive, inclusive, impartial, universal, self-denying, self-forgetting, voluntary.

⁴ The original word was *pitiful*, which now has a negative meaning.

Now, it is the characteristic of *that* kind of love that *it gives*. We call it the love of benevolence, and *benevolence* is another word for *giving*; and such love keeps nothing, but gives everything that it has, and gives to everybody. Of course, if God loved us after that sort He had to give. He could not so love if He did not give, any more than the sun could be the sun without shining, or a spring of water could be a spring without flowing out into a stream. And so these words, *loved* and *gave*, naturally go together. You could not have the one without the other. There could not be this wonderful giving without this wonderful loving; and there could not be this wonderful loving without this wonderful giving.

III. *World* and *Whosoever*

Now let us look at the third pair of words—*world* and *whosoever*.

It need not be said that those are both *universal terms*. *World* is the most universal term that we have in the language. For instance, we sometimes mean by it the whole earth on which we dwell; sometimes the whole human family that dwells on the earth; and sometimes the world-age, or whole period during which the whole family of man occupies the sphere. That is the word that God uses to indicate the objects of His love. But there is always danger of our losing sight of ourselves in a multitude of people. In the great mass individuals are lost, and it becomes to us simply a countless throng. But when God looks at us, he never forgets each individual. Every one of you stands out just as plainly before the Lord as though you were the only man, woman, or child on earth. So God adds here another word, *whosoever*, that is also universal, but with this difference between the two: *world* is collectively universal, that is, it takes all men in the mass; *whosoever* is distributively universal, that is, it takes everyone out of the mass, and holds him up separately before the Lord. If this precious text only said, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son," one might say, "Oh, He never thought of me. He had a kind of general love to the whole world, but He never thought of me." But when God uses that all-embracing word *whosoever*, that must mean you and me; for whatever my name or yours may be, our name is

whosoever, is it not? John Newton used to say that it was a great deal better for him that this verse had the word *whosoever* in it than the words *John Newton*; “for,” he said, “if I read ‘God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that when John Newton believed he should have everlasting life,’ I should say, perhaps, there is some other John Newton; but ‘whosoever’ means this John Newton and the other John Newton, and everybody else, whatever his name may be.” Blessed be the Lord! He would not have us forget that He thought of each one of us, and so He said, *whosoever*. You notice the same thing in the great commission, “Go ye into all the world” (collectively universal) “and preach the gospel to every creature” (distributively universal).

Before I leave this pair of words, let me illustrate what a precious term this word *whosoever* is. It reminds me of the great gates of this Tabernacle,⁵ that spring open to let in poor souls that want to hear the gospel. This word *whosoever* is the wide gateway to salvation, and lets in any poor sinner who seeks to find for himself a suffering but reigning Savior.

In the South Seas, in the beginning of the present century, was a man of the name of Hunt, who had gone to preach the gospel to the inhabitants of Tahiti. The missionaries had labored there for about fourteen or fifteen years, but had not, as yet, a single convert. Desolating wars were then spreading across the island of Tahiti and the neighboring islands. The most awful idolatry, sensuality, ignorance, and brutality, with everything else that was horrible, prevailed; and the Word of God seemed to have made no impression upon those awfully degraded islanders. A translation of the Gospel according to John had just been completed, and Mr. Hunt, before it was printed, read from the manuscript translation, the third chapter; and, as he read on, he reached this sixteenth verse, and, in the Tahitian language, gave those poor idolaters this compact little gospel: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

A chief stepped out from the rest (Pomare II), and said, “Would you read that again, Mr. Hunt?” Mr. Hunt read it again. “Would you read that once more?” and he read it once more.

⁵ Pierson preached this at the famous Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

"Ah!" said the man, "that may be true of you white folks, but it is not true of us down here in these islands. The gods have no such love as that for us." Mr. Hunt stopped in his reading, and he took that one word *whosoever*, and by it showed that poor chief that God's gospel message meant *him*; that it could not mean one man or woman any more than another. Mr. Hunt was expounding this wonderful truth, when Pomare II said, "Well, then, if that is the case, your book shall be my book, and your God shall be my God, and your people shall be my people, and your heaven shall be my home. We, down on the island of Tahiti, never heard of any God that loved us and loved everybody in that way." And that first convert is now the leader of a host, numbering nearly a million, in the South Seas.

Reference has already been made to the fact that this was the great text that Dr. Clough found so blessed among the Telugus. When the great famine came on, in 1877, and the missionaries were trying to distribute relief among the people, Dr. Clough, who was a civil engineer, took a contract to complete the Buckingham Canal, and he got the famishing people to come in gangs of four thousand or five thousand. Then, after the day's work was over, he would tell them the simple story of redemption. He had not yet learned the Telugu language sufficiently to make himself well understood in it, but he had done this: he had committed to memory John 3:16 in the Telugu tongue. And when, in talking to his people, he got "stuck," he would fall back on John 3:16. What a blessed thing to be able at least to repeat that! Then he would add other verses, day by day, to his little store of committed texts, until he had a sermon, about half-an-hour long, composed of a string of texts, like precious pearls. I have sometimes thought that I would rather have heard that than many modern sermons. So, once again the great text that God used for bringing souls to Christ was still Luther's little gospel: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

IV. *Believe and Have*

Now we come to the fourth pair of words, *believe* and *have*. You will see how important these words are. If God so loved that He gave, what is necessary on the part of man? Only this, that he should *take* and *have*. That is very plain. If God loved you and the whole world, and gave you all that he had to give, all that remains for anybody to do is so to appreciate the love of God as to take the gift that God bestows, and so to have the gift that he takes. *Believing is receiving*. John, at the beginning of this Gospel, tells us in what sense he is going to use the word *believe*. That word occurs forty-four times in the Gospel according to John, which is the great Gospel of "believing." You do not find the word *repent* in it once, but it is constantly repeating believing, believing, believing, and having life. In the twelfth and thirteenth verses of the first chapter, we read: "To as many as *received* him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." "To as many as *received*, even to those that *believed*." That little word *even* indicates that to *believe* is equivalent to *receive*. You may, in any one of those forty-four instances in this Gospel, put the word *receive* in the place of the word *believe*, and still make good sense. For example: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever received him might have everlasting life."

You *have* what you *take*, do you not? It is a very simple thing to take what is given to you, and so to have it. That is, practically, *all there is in faith*. We may make faith obscure by talking too much about it, leading others to infer that there is in it some obscurity or mystery. Faith is very simple: it is taking the eternal life that is offered to you in Christ. If you can put forth your hand and receive a gift, you are able to put forth your will and receive the gift of God, even Jesus Christ, as your Savior.

I heard of an old lady, who was starting on a railway journey from an American station, out of which many trains move, although in different directions. Not having travelled much on the rail cars, she got confused. The old lady I speak of was going up to Bay City, Michigan, and she was afraid that she was, perhaps, on the wrong train. She reached over, and showed her ticket to somebody in the seat immediately in front of her, and said, "I want to go to Bay City. Is this the right train?" "Yes madam." Still, she was not quite at ease, for she thought that

perhaps this fellow-passenger might have got into the wrong train too; so she stepped across the aisle of the car, and showed her ticket to another person, and was again told, "Yes, madam, this is the right train." But still the old lady was a little uncertain. In a few moments in came the conductor, or, as you call him, the *guard*,⁶ and she saw on his cap the conductor's ribbon, and she beckoned to him, and said, "I want to go to Bay City; is this the right train?" "Yes, madam, this is the right train." And now she settled back in her seat, and was asleep before the train moved. That illustrates the simplicity of taking God at His word. She did nothing but just receive the testimony of that conductor. That is all; but that is faith. The Lord Jesus Christ says to you, "I love you; I died for you. Do you believe? Will you receive the salvation that I bought for you with My own blood?" You need do no work; not even so much as to get up and turn around. You need not go and ask your fellow-man across the church aisle, there, whether he has believed, and received, and been saved. All that you need to do is with all your heart to say, "Dear Lord, I do take this salvation that Thou hast bought for me, and brought to me." Simple, is it not? Yes, very simple: yet such receiving it is the soul of faith.

And what is assurance but consciously *having* what you *take*? Somebody comes and offers me, tonight, some freewill offering. It costs me nothing. All that I have to do is to take what is given to me, and have it for my own. Faith is the *taking*, and the assurance is the conscious *having*; and that is all that I know about it.

V. *Perish and Everlasting Life*

There remains another pair of words. Would to God that I might impress the meaning of those terms, *perish* and *everlasting life*! What does *perish* mean, and what does *life* mean?

When the prodigal son went into the far country, and had wasted his substance in riotous living, he came to himself; and he came back to his father, and he said, "Father, I have sinned." And the father said, "This my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found." A son that is lost to his father is dead

⁶The largely British congregation he was addressing. Ed.

to his father, and a son that is found by his father is alive to his father.

God said to Adam, "In the day that thou eatest of the forbidden fruit, thou shalt surely die." It did not mean that Adam should that day die, physically. It meant something worse than that. He *died to God* when he ate. One proof that he died to God when he ate that forbidden fruit is that, when the Lord God came down to walk in the garden as the companion of Adam in the cool of the day, our first parents shrank from the presence of the Lord, and hid behind the trees of the garden, when they heard His footsteps and the sound of His voice. They were dead to sympathy towards God, dead to love towards God, dead to pleasure in God: and so they tried to get out of the way of God—as if it were possible to put a veil between them and Him. How do you know you are dead to God? You want to get out of His way. You do not love the things that God loves; you would like to be independent of God's rule. You would like, if possible, to get into some corner of the universe where there is no God.

You are like the men in America who went across to California, when the golden gates of that country were first opened, that they might enrich themselves. They tried to do without God, and there was a horrible state of sensuality and criminality there; and though there were, nominally, Christian families, and even Christian churches, these gold-seekers had left God on the other side of the Rocky Mountains, if not still further off, on the other side of the Alleghenies. They sought to get where there was no sanctuary, Bible, or family altar, and no restraint of Christian government, or recognition of a God above. The Psalmist twice says, "The fool hath said in his heart, *there is no God*"; and if you leave out the italicized words, which are not in the original, it reads like this: "The fool hath said in his heart,—No God!" That is, "I wish that there were no God." The impious man hates God. It is an uncomfortable thing for him to think that there is a Sovereign of all the earth who will judge all the works done in the body. It is uncomfortable to think that beyond the grave there lie the great assizes of the judgment day, and that one is unprepared to go into that judgment, and meet the Judge. And so people try to make up their minds that there is no hereafter or judgment, and that there is no God. It is a sign that you are "dead" when you would like that there should

be no God, and you do not want God to have any rule over you. And what is the sign that you are alive? You come to yourself, and then you come to the Father? You would not have God out of the universe if, by a stroke of the hand, you could annihilate Him. You would not have the judgment-seat out of the universe, for that is the place where all wrongs are righted. You would not have heaven blotted out, for that is where

The quenched lamps of hope are all re-lighted,
And the golden links of love are re-united;

and where there shall be no more sin, nor sorrow, nor sighing, nor tears; and where every shadow shall flee away. Paul says that the "woman who lives in pleasure is dead while she liveth."⁷ That is to say that, while she exists, she is so wrapped up in fashion, in ornaments, in the plaiting of the hair, and the putting on of gold and of gorgeous apparel—living for this world and her own indulgence, that she is dead to the things that are alone worth living for, and that take hold of the invisible, divine, and eternal.

Now, let us once more hear the word of the living God. God so loved you that He gave the best that He had to give, and all that He had to give; and while He gave to the whole world, He singled you out as the object of His love, and said, "whosoever"—"every creature." And now that that gift is given to you, and there is no more to be given, God can do no more. He does not ask you to pay the one-thousandth part of a farthing for the priceless values represented in the Son of God. All that God can do now is to say to you that the very fact that you reject His dear Son is a proof that you are spiritually dead. Even though you dispute the fact, you are dead; as a deaf man may not understand how deaf he is, and a blind man may not understand the glories of sight, so a dead man cannot understand the energies of the living. And so the very fact that you think that you are not dead is another proof that you are. You have no sensibility even to the fact that you are spiritually without life. God comes and says, "Come back to Me, My prodigal and wandering son. You shall have the robe; you shall have the ring; you shall have the shoes. I will give them all to you with the absoluteness of an infinite love, and you shall take them, and have them because

⁷First Timothy 5:6.

you take them.” Just the moment that you turn toward God, and say, “My Father, I take the robe and the ring, and the shoes, and the place of a restored son in the Father’s house,” you will live again; for you recognize your Father, and yourself as His son. You recognize His right to command, and your duty to obey. You recognize that the only place for a son is the home and the heart of his father. That is the proof that you are once more alive.

“Tell me how long it would take to change from death unto life?” Just as long, and no longer, as it takes you to turn round. Your back has been on God. You turn, and your face is toward Him. It will take no longer for a sinner to become a living son of God than that. Just put your heart into your acceptance of Jesus. Cast your whole will into the acceptance of the Fatherhood of God, renounce your sin and your rebellion,⁸ and take the salvation that is given to you as freely as the sun gives its light, or the spring gives its stream; and before you turn round to go out of that church door, you may have this salvation, and perhaps enjoy in yourself the consciousness that you are saved!

⁸ Unfortunately, Pierson introduces a new concept, renouncing sin, here in the conclusion. John 3:16, of course, doesn’t say anything about renouncing sin. Earlier Pierson himself said the only condition is believing in Christ.

DOSTOEVSKY AND HIS THEOLOGY

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I. Introduction

Alfred Einstein stated: "Dostoevsky gives me more than any other thinker."¹ Nicholas Berdyaev was professor of philosophy at the University of Moscow until he was expelled by the Communist regime in 1922. Berdyaev testified that Dostoevsky "stirred and lifted up my soul more than any other writer or philosopher has done...when I turned to Jesus Christ for the first time."² Some would assert that either *The Brothers Karamazov* [pronounced *kare-uh-MAHT-tsov*] or *Crime and Punishment* is the greatest novel ever written. Some thinkers within the Christian camp would claim Dostoevsky as one of our own, thereby lending added value to such a study as this.

II. A Brief Biography

Fyodor Dostoevsky³ (1821-1881) was the son of an ultra-strict Russian Orthodox father who was a medical doctor. He would call his sons names (e.g., stupid) when they got their recitations wrong. He compelled his sons to stand at attention when they spoke to him. Thus, the

young Dostoevsky did not receive a very accurate mirror image of God the Father from his harsh human father.

When Dostoevsky was 18 years old, one of the most formative events of his life occurred. His severe father was brutally murdered by his own Russian serfs. The corpse lay out in the field for two days, and the police never conducted an investigation or made any arrest. There is evidence that young Dostoevsky

¹ William Leatherbarrow, *Fedor Dostoevsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 169.

² Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 7.

³ Both of Dostoevsky's names are transliterated several ways.

felt something of a guilty complicity in this murder—if only, perhaps, as a death-wish. All four of Dostoevsky's major novels revolve around a murder, and *The Brothers Karamazov* is constructed around parricide.

Dostoevsky hit the jackpot with his first novel, *Poor Folk*. Russia's leading literary critic, Belinsky, announced a new star had arisen on the literary horizon. However, because Dostoevsky's following works were more personally psychological than social commentaries, the radical Belinsky and other Russian writers began to be more severe in their criticism.

Eventually Dostoevsky became involved in the sociopolitical ferment of his era. He joined a group known as the Petrashevsky circle, which contained atheists and revolutionaries (during this pre-Communist period). They planned to publish anti-government propaganda on a secret printing press. Then the police stepped in. Dostoevsky was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and a four-month investigation was conducted. Twenty-one of this group were sentenced to die.

On December 22, 1849, at 8 a.m. Dostoevsky and his compatriots were bundled away to be taken before a firing squad. They were to be executed three at a time. At the last moment a rider from the Czar came galloping up and announced that their sentence had been commuted. It was as if the writer had been granted a new life.

However, four years in a Siberian camp awaited him. Ten-pound iron chains were placed on his ankles. The prisoners' sled was driven for two weeks—sometimes in minus-40-degree centigrade temperature—across Siberia to the Omsk prison. Dostoevsky reminisced about that lice-infested, filth-ridden cemetery-of-the-living in *The House of the Dead*. His release was followed by four years of enforced military service near the border of China. The only book Dostoevsky was permitted in prison was *The Gospels* which he retained to his dying day.

After approximately ten years in Siberia, Dostoevsky returned to society. He authored a dozen novels, often while he was in debt or bordering on starvation. In 1880 he gave a major address in honor of the poet, Pushkin. To his second wife, Anna, he announced the very day of his death. On that day he called for his prison copy of *The Gospels*, and the family read the parable of the prodigal son. Between 30,000 and 40,000 people

attended Dostoevsky's funeral, the first state funeral to honor one of Russia's writers.

III. Four Major Novels

Dostoevsky's literary offering included four masterworks. They are, in order of appearance: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* may be among the world's top ten novels, as mentioned above.

Crime and Punishment is a kind of commentary on the NT concept of a functioning conscience. It reveals a person mentally tormented by his crime until he finally confesses it. Raskolnikov is a poor ex-student who murders a despised woman pawnbroker. In the process he is also forced to do away with the pawnbroker's weaker, more likable sister by means of an ax.

Raskolnikov had convinced himself that his desperate sister, Dunya, and mother really deserved the stolen money more than the "louse" of a pawnbroker. Prior to the murder he had also written an article dividing the world into ordinary people and gifted heroes (like Napoleon) who are above the ordinary laws. Raskolnikov executed his crime under the guise of his victim's classification in this unworthy group of people.

Oddly, Raskolnikov's "savior" is a young woman, Sonya, driven to prostitution by her alcoholic father's impoverished family. One of the classics in the novel is the reading of the story of the raising of Lazarus to Raskolnikov the murderer by Sonya the humble prostitute.

Through the persistent pecking away of the Columbo-like detective Porphyry and the gentle persuasion of Sonya, Raskolnikov eventually confesses his guilt and is sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia, where he is faithfully accompanied by Sonya.

The Idiot began as a story by Dostoevsky about a Christ-figure, the ideal man. Like Don Quixote, however, this honorable and considerate man (Prince Myshkin) is often treated as an idiot. (Our term *idiot* really doesn't quite capture the flavor of the Russian title.) The prince is somewhat socially inept, unpretentious, naive, overly friendly, and innocent. He also possesses Dostoevsky's own social stigma: he is an epileptic. Nevertheless,

he is courteous, kind, gentle, and more—a veritable string of boy-scout qualities.

Prince Myshkin is attracted to the portrait of Nastasya Filippovna, a beautiful “kept woman.” Upon returning from a Swiss sanitarium he makes connections with the Epanchin family, and eventually the issue arises as to whether he will marry their daughter Aglaya. Nevertheless, he is still drawn to the mentally suffering Nastasya. However, at her wedding to Prince Myshkin, a wealthy scoundrel named Rogozhin carries Nastasya away. The book ends strangely—with Prince Myshkin and Rogozhin (her murderer) sitting in the same room grieving over the woman’s corpse. Eventually, however, the apparent Christ-figure collapses and reverts again to his former state of inadequacy (both physically and mentally).

Demons (whose title is also variously translated as *The Devils* or *The Possessed*) is Dostoevsky’s most political novel—directed against nihilistic revolutionaries. Stepan Verkhovensky is an aristocratic liberal of the 1840s. His neglected son, Petr, is a nihilist agitator of the 1860s. Petr Verkhovensky admires a young man named Stavrogin, who had been taught by Petr’s father. Stavrogin is a mysterious, cool axis around whom other characters in the novel revolve. The others he has influenced are Kirillov (an intellectual who has pronounced himself god and commits suicide) and Shatov (who wants to get out of the revolutionists’ cell group and so is murdered by the rest).

All of the revolutionists are arrested for the murder of Shatov—except the chief catalyst, Petr Verkhovensky, who escapes to Europe. His father, who has become disillusioned with the revolutionary ferment, likens the situation to the Gospel account of the demons that are cast into the pig herd (hence, the novel’s title).

Dostoevsky’s books were first serialized, but one section of *Demons* was not permitted into a serialized family journal. It is Stavrogin’s confession of the rape of an under-age girl and her consequent suicide, which ultimately resulted in Stavrogin’s own suicide.

The Brothers Karamazov is one of the leading candidates for top honors as the world’s greatest novel. (However, this does not

mean that all of that novel is streamlined reading. Instead, one analyst spoke of the "dishevelment of [Dostoevsky's] prose."⁴

Although Alyosha is—according to the author himself—the chief character of the novel, of his four great novels, this one comes closest to putting forward an entire collection of chief characters. The Karamazov family consists of four brothers: Ivan is the intellectual atheist. Dmitri is the emotional womanizer. Alyosha is the most lovable—a temporary monk. Smerdyakov is their father's illegitimate child, who is treated as a family servant.

Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov is a debauched and neglectful father. He totally neglects his boys and virtually maintains a harem at home. Dmitri (who is most like his father) comes to hate him. The main reason for the hatred is that they both want the same woman, Grushenka. Because Dmitri had threatened to kill his father and because he *appears* to have made off with his father's bribe-money (for Grushenka), he is accused of his father's murder. However, Smerdyakov, the lackey, is the real killer.

In the bosom of the novel is one of the greatest anti-God arguments in literature, set forth by Ivan Karamazov. In addition to the atrocities recited by Ivan that have been perpetrated against helpless children, he presents a classic concerning the temptations of Christ. It is called "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor." Also commended to the reader is that touching chapter entitled "The Medical Experts and a Pound of Nuts."

Though he is technically not guilty of the murder, Dmitri Karamazov is pronounced guilty by jury trial. Like Raskolnikov and Dostoevsky himself, Dmitri is sentenced to Siberia. In some fashion all the brothers acknowledge their collective guilt in the murder.

⁴Thais Lindstrom, *A Concise History of Russian Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 186.

IV. Theological Evaluation

At this juncture we will assess five major pillars in Dostoevsky's theological framework. Dostoevsky, of course, was not a systematic theologian by profession, so he is even less systematic than a theological thinker such as John Wesley in the way he formulates truth.

A. His View of God

In general, Dostoevsky's doctrine of God appears to be orthodox. He exhibits no maverick views, as did his contemporary Leo Tolstoy, who was anti-Trinitarian. Intriguingly, the principal atheists in Dostoevsky's novels (Stavrogin and Kirillov in *The Idiot*, Ivan and Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Svidrigaylov in *Crime and Punishment*) all commit suicide. It is as if Dostoevsky is saying that because these characters have forsaken Life—the One who is life—they see no meaning in this life and so end their earthly lives.

In *Demons* the author says that "faith in [God] is the refuge for mankind...as well as in the hope of eternal bliss promised to the righteous..."⁵

God was the fundamental datum beneath all of Dostoevsky's writing. That is not to say that Dostoevsky did not wrestle with that reality over and over. As a matter of fact, he admitted that he would deal with doubts to his dying day. In his five-volume masterpiece on the famed novelist Joseph Frank commented: "Dostoevsky was to say...that the problem of the existence of God had tormented him all his life; but this only confirms that it was always emotionally impossible for him ever to accept a world that had no relation to a God of any kind."⁶ As hinted earlier, the type of unkind father Dostoevsky had experienced in early life probably contributed significantly to the breeding of his later doubts.

In filtering out the novelist's theology from his writings, one must take into account the fact that not all Dostoevsky's characters enunciate *the author's* personal beliefs. In fact, Dostoevsky,

⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 663 (Part III, chap 7).

⁶ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 43.

"as an artist, accord[ed] equal rights to his atheists," and "it is the atheists in his novels who do most of the theological talking!"⁷

One character in *The Brothers Karamazov* who reflects an aberrant view of God is a semi-crazy monk named Father Ferapont who makes an unbiblical distinction between the Holy Spirit and the Holy Ghost. Nevertheless, the overall eccentricity that Dostoevsky accords this character makes it abundantly plain that the writer himself does not hold this bizarre view.

No major analyst has really raised any serious questions about the orthodox view of God that Dostoevsky apparently held.

B. Christ

While Dostoevsky does not express himself on every occasion explicitly in the terminology of a modern evangelical theologian, there seems to be no significant data for not accepting the novelist as orthodox in his views on the person of Christ. Dostoevsky did not hesitate to speak of Christ as the "God-man." Even the anti-theist character Ivan Karamazov refers to the orthodox position on Christ as being "the One without sin" and indicates that "Christ...was God" (Part III, Book V, chap 4). Also his brother Dmitri owns that "Christ is God" (Part I, Book III, chap 5). Joseph Frank asserted concerning our author's novels and letters: "Unless we entirely reject their veracity, they reveal Dostoevsky to be a believing Christian in his own way, inwardly striving to accept the essential dogmas of the divinity of Christ, personal immortality, the Second Coming, and the Resurrection."⁸

On more than one occasion Dostoevsky expressed a view which would strike an evangelical ear strangely. He says that if it came to a showdown between rejecting Christ and the truth, he would side with Christ over against the truth! For those who take John 14:6 at face value, the statement strikes a strange note. Probably his declaration is simply literary hyperbole in adoration of Christ.

⁷A. Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 68, 121.

⁸Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 307.

Transcribed in his notebook among Dostoevsky's notes in his final years was the plan to write a book on the life of Christ. Obviously, if he had lived to fulfill his enterprise, a more accurate determination could be made concerning the orthodoxy of his position. However, throughout the gamut of his published writing no seriously disturbing notes appear on this subject, so it seems best to assume, as even secular analysts do, that the great Russian was broadly orthodox on the deity and humanity of Christ.

C. Sin

One final book Dostoevsky had hoped to write was to have been entitled *The Life of a Great Sinner*. After Dostoevsky became famous, people wrote to him in the way they do today to Ann Landers, asking for advice. Consequently, Dostoevsky replied to one unknown mother in 1878 (concerning a problem child): "if the child is bad, the blame lies...both with his natural inclinations (because a person is certainly born with them) and with those who brought him up..."⁹ This comment certainly reveals that Dostoevsky assuredly treated sin as inborn and instinctive.

On one occasion Dostoevsky offered something of his own definition: "When a man has not fulfilled the law of striving toward an ideal, that is, has not through love sacrificed his ego to people...he suffers and calls this condition sin."¹⁰ This is hardly a formal definition to be found in a theological textbook, nor does it have a vertical (or Godward) orientation. Rather, it is an experiential crystallization he worked out amid life's nitty-gritty and is congruent with his understanding of suffering (which will be treated in the next section).

William Leatherbarrow spoke of how in the Siberian prison-camp close contact with criminals "disabused Dostoevsky of his earlier utopianism and faith in the essential goodness of man..."¹¹ Dostoevsky referred to one prisoner in the camp as a "moral Quasimodo." The stubborn reality of sin runs like a subterranean stream beneath all of the novel-writing of Dostoevsky.

⁹ Joseph Frank and David I. Goldstein, eds., *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 452.

¹⁰ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 306.

¹¹ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 23.

Homiletically, sin reveals itself pictorially in Dostoevsky's corpus in at least four features (all beginning with the letter "s"). First, sin is seen as *spite* or *spitefulness*. Dostoevsky himself was a very irritable and spiteful person. His second wife, Anna, mentions (after her husband had insulted a waiter) that "he could not restrain his spite."¹²

Dostoevsky's novels are pimientoed with the term "spite" and its cognates. In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov the murderer has a "spiteful...smile...on his lips" (Part I, chap 3). In "A Gentle Spirit," a short story, the narrator-pawnbroker remarks to a fifteen-year-old girl, "I was spiteful." In *Demons* one can find the "spite" terminology on pp. 252, 255, 340–41, 378 (twice), 441, 461, 521, 524, 533, 558, 591, 610, 612, 617, 675 (twice), 676, 693, and 701.¹³

A second figurative form that sin assumes in Dostoevsky's canon is that of "stepping over." This pictorial language immediately reminds the student of the Bible of the concept of transgression (stepping over a boundary). For instance, when Raskolnikov commits his ax-murder, the symbolical note of his "stepping over" the threshold is explicitly mentioned (as it is on other significant occasions).

A third depiction of sin takes the form of *smog*. Dostoevsky once wrote figuratively: "Sin is...smog, and the smog will disappear when the sun rises in its power."¹⁴

The fourth simile for sin in Dostoevsky is that of *schism* or splitness. The liberal theologian Paul Tillich once depicted sin in terms of "gaps and splits." The lead sinner (Raskolnikov) in *Crime and Punishment* bears in his Russian name the root *raskol*, which means "schism." Berdyaev claimed, "That cleavage (*dedoublement*) in the spirit...is the essential theme of all Dostoevsky's novels."¹⁵ As William Leatherbarrow analyzed the human condition in our subject, he stated, "Man in Dostoevsky's works, as in Genesis, is a tragic, split creature, excluded from paradise but longing for reconciliation."¹⁶

¹² Anna Dostoevsky, *Reminiscences* (New York: Liveright Publishers, 1975), 372.

¹³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*.

¹⁴ Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, 199.

¹⁵ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 26.

¹⁶ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 36.

Dostoevsky's gallery of characters consists of a parade of clinical cases in abnormal psychology. (Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* is one of the very few near normal, healthy characters in his canon of works.) This phenomenon of splitness reveals itself repeatedly throughout his stories and novels. Splitness takes the form of spite and irrationality, a desire-to-please, yet a desire-not-to-please in the so-called Underground Man (or narrator) in *Notes from the Underground*.

One of the most intriguing cases of all for Bible students is the story of "The Double." It is virtually a takeoff on the classic chapter of Romans 7. "The Double" narrates the case of an ill-at-ease civil servant whose social problems cause him to hallucinate, thereby creating his own "double personality split off from his real self." (Dostoevsky often possesses the knack of writing so that a reader can't always tell what is intended as fact and what is intended as fantasy.)

Theologian Bernard Ramm analyzed this fascinating fissure-in-the-soul, drawing out the parallels between Romans 7 and Dostoevsky's "Double."¹⁷

Like the major existentialists, Dostoevsky has done Christian theology a service by painting the portraits of people in a form that is consonant with that of Christian orthodoxy. Berdyaev asserted that Dostoevsky "uncovered a volcanic crater in every being."¹⁸ And these volcanoes are always rumbling!

D. Salvation

In *The Idiot*, on his birthday, Prince Myshkin challenges the atheists present to tell him "with what they will save the world?"¹⁹ In a general way Dostoevsky answered his character's question in a letter: "in Christianity alone...the salvation of the Russian land from all her afflictions lies."²⁰ Leatherbarrow called Dostoevsky "a novelist with a mission. There is to be no harmony without redemption, no salvation without God, and

¹⁷ Bernard Ramm, "'The Double' and Romans 7" *Christianity Today* (April 9, 1971): 14-18.

¹⁸ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 20.

¹⁹ Richard A. Peace, *Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 116.

²⁰ *Selected Letters*, 470.

no paradise on earth.”²¹ Joseph Frank evaluated: “The values of expiation, forgiveness, and love were destined to take precedence over all others in Dostoevsky’s artistic universe...”²²

First, it seems necessary to say something about the genre of literature under our scrutiny here. A novel is not designed as a super-long evangelistic tract. One of the sad dilemmas is that a Christian reader often seems to have to choose between a profound Dostoevsky (whose works may appear defective, evangelically speaking) and some modern trite “Christian” fiction all gauged about the lead character’s getting saved (and usually an overdose of romance tossed in for good measure).

From the preceding paragraph the reader may already sense that (while his doctrines of God, Christ, and sin appear reasonably orthodox), Dostoevsky’s doctrine of salvation leaves something to be desired—from a biblical standpoint. If Dostoevsky had “mission” (Leatherbarrow’s term), what was his mission? In light of a full-orbed biblical mission, Dostoevsky’s solutions come up short of the mark.

At best, Dostoevsky’s major novels might be described as pre-evangelistic. If a novelist *were* planning to offer a distinctively Christian answer, Dmitri Karamazov (in *The Brothers Karamazov*), Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*), and Stepan Verkhovensky (in *Demons*) are off-target. At the end of these three major novels all three characters are primed for conversion, but the best we are given falls under the category of hopeful hints. Boyce Gibson remarks, “In the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov avoids the Christian formula [of conversion]...”²³ Similarly, Richard Peace commented concerning Stepan Verkhovensky (in *Demons*) that his “final words... seem more in keeping with some vague theism of the [18]40s than with true Christianity.”²⁴

And what shall we say of Alyosha’s “conversion”? Alyosha (having gone through some serious doubts) threw himself onto the earth to kiss it. “Something...unshakable, like that heavenly dome above him, was entering into his soul for all eternity” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book VII, chap

²¹ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 56.

²² Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 63.

²³ Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, 89.

²⁴ Richard Peace, *Dostoevsky*, 205.

4). Alyosha articulates his experience by asserting, "Someone visited my soul at that moment." An ecstatic experience, yes. A Christian conversion? At best, an analyst must preserve an agnostic stance on the subject. It is certainly a vast cry from the "Jesus is Lord" experience of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9. There is no real propositional content or identifiable theological referent to Alyosha's mystical encounter. Who is the "Someone" Alyosha encounters?

Father Zosima is the lovable elder over the monastery (in *The Brothers Karamazov*) to which Alyosha is temporarily attached. Father Zosima says to his inquirer: "There is only one means of salvation...take yourself and make yourself responsible for all men's lives."²⁵ For a Christian what is the "only...means of salvation"? Father Zosima's response is hardly deemed the orthodox answer to the question. It seems light years away from Acts 16:31.

Ivan the intellectual cannonades Alyosha with atheistic arguments. One of Alyosha's responses is to tell Ivan to "love life above everything. To this statement Ivan rejoins, "More than life's meaning?" Alyosha responds, "Half your work is done, Ivan, you love life; now you've only got to do the second half [presumably to find life's meaning] and you're saved." Those are strange statements to any evangelical Christian.

From his other writings we know that in *Notes from the Underground* Dostoevsky had planned "to advocate Christian faith as a means of attaining moral freedom," yet "that swine of a [Russian] censor" (as Dostoevsky called him) wouldn't allow him to publish a Christian message through the voice of such an unChristian character. Dostoevsky complained that the government censor suppressed the place where from all this I deduced the need for faith and Christ."²⁶ If we had this uncensored version, we might be able to better assess Dostoevsky's soteriology.

There is one theme under this rubric, however, which is so pervasive in Dostoevsky's writings that it cannot be ignored. That is the topic of salvation through suffering. In 1960 Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of "the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive." One suspects that King was speaking of

²⁵ Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, 190.

²⁶ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 68.

social liberation. However, exactly what Dostoevsky meant by using similar language remains ambiguous.

Berdyayev declared, "Dostoevsky believed firmly in the redemptive and regenerative power of suffering: life is the expiation of sin by suffering."²⁷ When Dostoevsky put down on paper his plan for *Crime and Punishment*, he transcribed, "The criminal himself resolves to accept suffering and thereby atone for his deed."²⁸ Dunya admonishes Raskolnikov: "Suffer and expiate your sin by it" (*Crime and Punishment*, Part V, chap 4). Later the detective Porphyry remarks to the murderer, "This may be God's means for bringing you to him" (Part VI, chap 2). Raskolnikov's sister Dunya asks her brother, who is on the verge of confessing: "Aren't you half expiating the crime by facing the suffering?" (Book VI, chap 7).

In *Demons* the nearly sociopathic Stavrogin confesses, "I want to forgive myself and that is my...whole goal" (for his responsibility in a young girl's suicide). He continues: "That is why I seek boundless suffering." To Stavrogin, Bishop Tikhon offers strange advice (from a biblical viewpoint): "Christ...will forgive you, if only you attain to forgiving yourself."²⁹ Would any NT apostle have said that to an earnest inquirer?

William Leatherbarrow announced: "In *The Insulted and Injured*, for the first time in Dostoevsky's novels, the idea of the spiritually healing power of suffering is opposed to the dream of heaven on earth."³⁰ As he analyzes Dmitri's physical suffering and Ivan's mental suffering (in *The Brothers Karamazov*), Leatherbarrow concludes: "All must be redeemed through suffering."³¹ In the same novel a man who engineered a successful murder without getting caught says, "I want to suffer for my sins" (Part II, Book VI, chap 2). Finally, Alyosha owns to Dmitri (after he's convicted—wrongly—of murder): "you wanted to make yourself [a new man] by suffering" (Epilogue, chap 2). In another place Dmitri stated, "I want to suffer and by suffering I shall cleanse myself" (Part III, Book IX, chap 5).³²

²⁷ Berdyayev, *Dostoevsky*, 95.

²⁸ Leonid Grossman, *Dostoevsky* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975), 352.

²⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 711.

³⁰ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

³² Richard Peace, *Dostoyevsky*, 282.

On one occasion Dostoevsky wrote to his wife: "God gave you to me so that...I might expiate my own great sins..."³³ The repetitiveness of this salvation-through-suffering theme is far too relentless in Dostoevsky to be downplayed. Joseph Frank concluded that "the highest aim of Dostoevsky's Christianity... is not personal salvation but the fusion of the individual ego with the community in a symbiosis of love; the only sin that Dostoevsky appears to recognize is the failure to fulfill this law of love."³⁴

The book of Hebrews appears to grant some pedagogically perfecting power to suffering when rightly responded to (see Heb 2:10; 5:9; 12:2-11). God uses suffering as a teaching tool to conform us to Christ. Yet Dostoevsky (through the mouth of his characters) seemed to invest suffering with some spiritually regenerative power—and this we must repudiate. While Dostoevsky offered spiritual solutions for regeneration through his characters to other needy characters in his novels, I do not find forthcoming any clear-cut biblical prescription for salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In relation to Roman Catholicism, Dostoevsky set forth numerous virulent tirades in his books. However, it is never apparent that he is taking Romanism to task on the grounds of their unbiblical soteriology. He saw Roman Catholicism's temporal power as the principal threat to truth and viewed it as acceding to atheistic socialism.

E. Eschatology

"The end of the world is coming," wrote Dostoevsky in his notebook.³⁵ During Dostoevsky's days there was an excess of irreligion (in the form of atheism) and an excess of religion (in the form of apocalypticism). There is a considerable amount of apocalyptic talk occurring in both *The Idiot* and *Demons*.

One of the less serious characters in *The Idiot*, Lebedyev, is a "self-styled interpreter of the Apocalypse" [that is, the book of Revelation].³⁶ In line with Matt 24:6, Dostoevsky remarked that "Christ himself...predicted...that strife and development will

³³ Anna Dostoevsky, *Reminiscences*, 67.

³⁴ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 307.

³⁵ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 135.

³⁶ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 100.

continue to the end of the world..."³⁷ In *The House of the Dead* there is one discussion about the possibility of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

Revelation 6 crops up in one conversation between Lebedyev and Prince Myshkin (in *The Idiot*). Obviously the interpreter in this case adopts a historicist position by quoting events in Revelation 6 with the contemporary world of the 1800s. Lebedyev says "She agreed with me that we are living in the age of the third horse, the black one [Rev 6:5, 6], and the rider who has the balance in his hand, seeing that everything in the present age is weighed in the scales and by agreement, and people are seeking for nothing but their rights—'a measure of wheat for a penny and three measures of barley for a penny'...and afterwards will follow the pale horse and he whose name was Death and with whom hell followed...[Rev 6:8]" (Part II, chap 2). Lebedyev's apocalyptic interpretation is later called "mere charlatanism" by General Ivolgin (in Part II, chap 6). In the same book Princess Belokonskaya's name reflects the symbolic fourth horse of Revelation 6, for *belo* in Russian means "white" and *kon* means "horse."³⁸

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Ivan interprets Rev 8:11 as the heresy of antisupernaturalism manifest in the German Enlightenment—once more an example of a historicist hermeneutic. Lebedyev (in *The Idiot*) connects Rev 8:11's Wormwood—amazingly—with the network of European railroads (Part II, chap 11)!

Revelation 10:6 also appears in Dostoevsky's two chief apocalyptic novels. *Demons* informs us, "in the Apocalypse the angel swears that time will be no more" (Part II, chap 5). A dying consumptive named Ippolit wryly plays upon Rev 10:6 (in light of his secretly projected suicide) when he informs Prince Myshkin: "tomorrow there will be 'no more time'" (Part III, chap 5). Then he asks, "And do you remember, prince, who proclaimed that there will be 'no more time'? It was proclaimed by the great and might angel in the Apocalypse" (Ibid). Of course, most modern Bible versions render "time...no more" in the way the New King James Version does: "there should be delay no longer." While this retranslation undercuts the two preceding interpreter's

³⁷ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 303.

³⁸ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 102.

ideas, it nevertheless reveals Dostoevsky's familiarity with the text of Revelation.

The system of interpretation revolving around Revelation 13 and Antichrist also makes its presence felt in Dostoevsky's novels. "Is it true that you expound Antichrist?" the amateur analyst Lebedyev is asked (*The Idiot*, Part II, chap 2). Lebedyev responded that he "unfolded the allegory and fitted dates to it."

Most literary analysts concur in seeing Stavrogin in *Demons* as an antichrist figure. Stavrogin is not blatantly villainous, but he is the cold-and-bold, unpredictable polar personality around whom many of the other characters in the novel revolve. The name Stavrogin is related to the Byzantine word *stavros* (and Greek *stauros*), meaning "cross." Yet the *rog* part of his Russian name means "horn," making the student of eschatology think of Rev 13:1 and Dan 7:20-25.³⁹ Furthermore, Stavrogin's first name is Nikolai (meaning "conqueror of people") as in the name of the Nicolaitans in Rev 2:6 and 15.

Stavrogin's chief henchman is Peter Verkhovensky. In Russian *verkhovnstvo* means "supremacy."⁴⁰ Verkhovensky is the mean-spirited, nihilist revolutionary agitator in *Demons*. He says to Stavrogin, "You are my idol" and "I've been inventing you" (Part 2, chap 8). With these notions should be compared Rev 13:11-15. In the narrative Verkhovensky is an incendiary, so he—in effect—brings fire to the earth, paralleling Rev 13:13. In *Demons* the convict Fedka speaks to Verkhovensky of "every beast from the book of the Apocalypse" (Part III, chap 3).

Also in *Demons* the intellectual Kirillov talks to Stavrogin about "the man-god." To this notion Stavrogin queries, "[You mean] the God-man [by which he refers to Christ]?" Kirillov rather rejoins, "The man-god—that's the whole difference" (Part II, chap 5). Again, the Bible student cannot help but reflect upon the parody of Christ found in antichrist (as in 2 Thess 2:3-4).

In *Crime and Punishment* Marmeladov, the alcoholic father, refers to drunkards "made in the image of the beast and his mark" (Part I, chap 2). Compare Rev 13:15-17. Consequently, the thought and terminology of Revelation 13 played a significant role in the thinking of Dostoevsky.

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 129.

A parallel with Revelation 17 and 18 comes through when the Europe of the 1860s is likened to Babylon: "their Babylon is indeed going to collapse; great will be its fall..." (*Demons*, Part II, chap 5).

Joseph Frank wrote that Dostoevsky "sought to accept the essential dogmas of the divinity of Christ, personal immortality, the Second Coming and the Resurrection."⁴¹ When Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*) decides not to end his life in a canal, "he could not understand that his decision against suicide arose from a presentiment of a future resurrection and a new life."⁴²

In *Demons*, Shatov, a nationalist who supports Christianity but isn't a Christian himself, "believes that Christ's second coming will be among the Russian people, who will then bring about the spiritual rebirth of the rest of the world."⁴³ Thus, one of Dostoevsky's characters provides a most interesting locus for Christ's return.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Ivan refers to Christ's return in heavenly glory—like lightning (Part II, Book V, chap 5). Later Father Zosima's friend says, "The sign of the Son of Man will be seen in the heavens" (Part II, Book VI, chap 2) as in Matt 24:30.

The Brothers Karamazov ends on a high note. After they return from the boy Ilyusha's funeral, the youth Kolya asks Alyosha: "Can it be true what's taught us in religion that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, Ilyusha too?" To the youth's question Alyosha replies: "Certainly" (Epilogue, chap 3).

Judgment is not missing in Dostoevsky's novels. Frank notes that in the corpus of novels there is a "lurking imminence of the Day of Judgment and the Final Reckoning."⁴⁴ *Demons* refers to the Last Judgment (Part I, chap 4).

Hell would seem to be a reality in Dostoevsky. Dmitri Karamazov asks whether he will go "to Heaven or to Hell...?" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, Part III, Book IV, chap 8). Berdyaev reported that "evil for [Dostoevsky] was evil, to be burned in the fires of hell."⁴⁵ Peace claimed, "A striking feature of *The*

⁴¹ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 307.

⁴² Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, 90.

⁴³ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 123.

⁴⁴ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 64.

⁴⁵ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 94.

Brothers Karamazov...is the extent to which the characters are obsessed by hell..."⁴⁶ The debauched father (in *The Brothers Karamazov*) declared, "I believe in hell" (Part I, Book I, chap 4). Nevertheless, Father Zosima "did not literally believe in hellfire."⁴⁷

In summary, then, Dostoevsky shows an overall respect for the Bible's eschatology, although some of his characters promote bizarre interpretations. In *A Raw Youth* "Versilov speaks of the Second Coming which will end with the rapturous hymn that greets 'the last resurrection.'"⁴⁸

Thus, Dostoevsky seems to concur with historic orthodoxy that the Second Coming of Christ is that one far-off divine event toward which all creation moves (to borrow Tennyson's language).

IV. Was Dostoevsky a Christian?

The conclusion of philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev is: "I personally know no more profoundly Christian writer than Dostoevsky..." and asserts that Dostoevsky "loved Christ consumingly..."⁴⁹ Given such complimentary conclusions, some readers might consider it almost sacrilegious to raise the question that entitles this section of the article. However, since Christians are commanded to be claim-testers (in 1 Thess: 5:21 and 1 John 4:1), the question must be deemed a legitimate issue to raise—especially in light of the previously discussed defective soteriology. We shall survey Dostoevsky's religious heritage and then wrestle with the question of possible conversion points in his experience.

A. His Religious Heritage

Dostoevsky was raised within the womb of the Russian Orthodox Church. His grandfather was an archpriest, his uncle was a village priest, three aunts married village priests, and his

⁴⁶ Peace, *Dostoevsky*, 264.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴⁸ Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Dostoevsky: Works and Days* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1971), 337.

⁴⁹ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 209, 217.

father had even attended seminary for a while.⁵⁰ Also his maternal grandfather corrected proofs of theological law in Moscow.⁵¹ Dostoevsky recorded, "I came from a pious Russian family...In our family, we knew the Gospel almost from the cradle."⁵² His childhood reading primer was *104 Sacred Stories from the Old and New Testaments*. Job was one of the Bible stories that most fascinated him as a youngster. Furthermore, a deacon visited the Dostoevsky home and taught Scripture lessons "from one and a half to two hours" each week.⁵³

A later strategic item in Dostoevsky's story is his receiving a copy of *The Gospels* from three women en route to Siberian prison. One of the three, Natalya Fonvizina "knew [the Bible] almost by heart; she read the works of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church and the writers of the Catholic and Protestant churches..."⁵⁴ Dostoevsky treasured and preserved this gift of *The Gospels* to his dying day, as we have noted.

B. The Conversion Question

This is a complicated question, because Dostoevsky was a complex person with complicated writings. The question is compounded by his involvement in one of those sacerdotal types of Eastern churches. Little Fyodor said his prayers daily before the family icon of the Virgin Mary: "Mother of God, keep me and preserve me under Thy wing!"⁵⁵ His second wife reported that he said this favorite prayer with his children every evening at 9 p.m.⁵⁶ Often such churches do not stress the importance of a clear-cut conversion decision. (Of course, we might also have a tough time determining from the Gospels exactly when Peter or any of the apostles were converted.)

It is possible that Dostoevsky began to believe in Christ during his early childhood experience. Like many children growing up in a Christian family, it may be hard to trace any

⁵⁰Grossman, *Dostoevsky*, 5.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 9.

⁵²Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 43.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁵Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 44.

⁵⁶Anna Dostoevsky, *Reminiscences*, 242.

neat before-and-after date. That is one possibility for attempting to pinpoint a starting point for Dostoevsky's Christianity.

His life-sparing traumatic experience before the firing squad in 1849 left him feeling that he had been given new life—a sort of resurrection, but other documented factors would seem to militate against this event being assessed as a Christian conversion. His reported words to his brother Mikhail on that occasion were. “Now, in changing my life, I am reborn in a new form. Brother! I swear that I...will keep my soul and heart pure. I will be reborn for the better. That's all my hope, all my consolation!”⁵⁷ Note that the writer said both “I *am* reborn” and “I *will be* reborn.” Because of what Dostoevsky said earlier to another prisoner, it is best to assume that here he was simply using flowery, figurative language. He was undoubtedly rejuvenated, but unlikely regenerated at this juncture in his life. He used similar words when his ten-pound leg chains were removed upon his release from the Siberian prison (“Freedom, new life, resurrection from the dead...!”).⁵⁸

If Dostoevsky was already a Christian before he left Siberia in 1859, he “never seemed to grow as a Christian,” reported an anonymous *Christianity Today* reporter. “He had an affair. He became a compulsive gambler and lost so much money [that] he was all but bankrupt.”⁵⁹ This addiction to gambling; which placed his family in poverty, is chronicled in Dostoevsky's novel *The Gambler*.

Another experience while he was in the Siberian prison is often cited by biographers. During one Easter week in prison Dostoevsky recounted a mystical experience. Before that, he had despised the other convicts. After it his attitude was completely altered. He related: “...suddenly felt I could look on these unfortunates with quite different eyes, and suddenly as if by miracle, all hatred and rancor had vanished from my heart.”⁶⁰ However, as Joseph Frank evaluates this so-called “conversion,” it was “not faith in God or Christ...rather, it is a faith in the Russian common people. Dostoevsky's regeneration [here]...

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁹ Author unknown, “The Dostoevsky Who Might Have Been,” *Christianity Today* (August 7, 1981), 15.

⁶⁰ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 123.

centered primarily on his relations with the people..."⁶¹ This was a social rather than strictly spiritual conversion.

The principal problem with Dostoevsky's salvation is his doctrine of salvation as expressed (or unexpressed) in his novels. There is such a stress upon a salvation by suffering that this theme raises real questions about an authentic Christianity in the famous author himself. Dostoevsky unquestionably believed he had a religious mission in his writing, but any message of clear-cut conversion—and how to become a Christian—fails to come through in the great novels. At best, they serve a pre-evangelistic purpose, which is indeed a valuable function. At the climax of his novels Christianity comes through more as a flickering light at the end of a dark tunnel. Even the Dostoevsky-praising philosopher Berdyaev observed that the famed Russian "did not tell us how to acquire [freedom of spirit], how we may attain spiritual and moral autonomy..."⁶²

In an 1875 letter Dostoevsky advised N. L. Ozmidov: "Wouldn't it be more to the point...if you read somewhat more attentively the epistles of St. Paul?"⁶³ Ah, we could only wish that Dostoevsky had heeded his own admonition when it came to the subject of soteriology!

Thankfully, there is some evidence to be adduced on the positive side of the fence. We have Dostoevsky's own utterance: "If you believe in Christ, then you believe you will live eternally."⁶⁴ His wife Anna also narrated a visit to a monastery where her husband was asked point-blank by a Father Ambrosius whether he was a believer. To him Dostoevsky responded that he was.⁶⁵ When Dostoevsky was about to be shot in 1849, a fellow prisoner named F. N. Lvov documented that Dostoevsky exclaimed to Speshnev: "We shall be with Christ."⁶⁶ (The problem here is that Speshnev was a known atheist!) William Lyon Phelps, a Christian professor at Yale University, acknowledged that

⁶¹ Ibid., 125.

⁶² Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 224.

⁶³ *Selected Letters*, 446.

⁶⁴ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 303.

⁶⁵ Anna Dostoevsky, *Reminiscences*, 294.

⁶⁶ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 58.

Dostoevsky “found in the Christian religion the only solution of the riddle of existence...”⁶⁷

V. Conclusion

There is much valuable grist for a Christian’s mental mill to be found within the sterling novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. His presentation of God, Christ, and sin are generally aligned with the theological thought of Christian orthodoxy. Sadly, however, his crystallizations that relate to the subject of salvation in his novels often appear defective. Do we suffer for our sins, or (as the NT declares) has Christ sufficiently suffered for our sins (Heb 9:26-28; 1 Pet 2:21-24; 3:18)? Dostoevsky almost seemed to embrace an in-this-life purgatory. Suffering here on earth is purgative, regenerative for him, which does not square with NT teaching. Suffering *did* prove personally beneficial in Dostoevsky’s own life, so he probably read his NT through this experiential grid. But experience will not necessarily be prescriptive for exegesis.

On this salient subject Dostoevsky is considerably less than a student of the NT could wish. However, just as we can profitably read the monumental works of the Arian John Milton or sing the hymns of another Arian—Isaac Watts, so a Christian does well to wrestle with the world-class novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

⁶⁷ William Lyon Phelps, *Essays on Russian Novelists* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 169.

BOOK REVIEWS

No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance. By Michael Eaton. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995. 261 pp. Paper, \$16.99.

In a postscript to his commentary *Ecclesiastes* (IVP), Eaton cited Luke's words in Acts 17:32-34: "*Some...sneered...Others said, 'We want to hear you again,'...A few...believed.*"

I believe his book will produce the same diverse responses. Many will sneer; others will want to know more. Still others will consider the evidence and believe this scholar from the Reformed tradition who takes on both Calvinism and Arminianism on the theology of assurance. In doing so he defends unlimited atonement, demonstrates a "resistible" link between justification and sanctification, and sharply distinguishes salvation from inheritance.

Michael Eaton serves as the Senior Pastor of Lusaka Baptist Church, in Nairobi, Kenya. He received his B.D. from Tyndale Hall, Cambridge; and his Ph.D. from the University of South Africa (this book is a revision of his doctoral thesis presented to the University of South Africa in 1989 under the title *A Theology of Encouragement—A Step Towards a Non-Legalistic Soteriology*).

Eaton states that Arminians must not "assume the continuance of their faith, and scholastic Calvinists must not assume the reality of theirs. In the one case awareness of sin threatens the Arminian's confidence about continuance in the faith; in the other case awareness of sin threatens confidence about the reality of salvation" (p. 20). Although some may believe this goes too far, he says, "Is it not a fact of history that the Calvinist has tended to have less assurance of salvation than the Arminian? The Arminian is at least sure of his present salvation. As the result of the high Calvinist doctrine, the Calvinist often doubts his present salvation and thus has a less contented frame of mind than his evangelical Arminian friend" (p. 20).

So where is the Calvinist's assurance? Eaton believes "it has died the death of a thousand qualifications" (p. 23). He believes the more one knows the complete teaching of what he calls "scholastic Calvinism," the more that person will question his or her own salvation which he calls introspection. "This is the snag of scholastic Calvinism. It leads into an abyss of ever-increasing *introspection*...The introspective variety is decidedly not totally derived from the New Testament, and its all-pervasive view of the law needs reconsidering" (p. 25).

When he compares Arminianism and Calvinism he sees little difference between the two on assurance:

Arminian theology takes the warnings of Scripture as relating to salvation and as warning against apostasy or forfeiture of salvation. Final salvation hinges upon the Christian's good works. Calvinism likewise has also taken the warnings of Scripture as relating to salvation. If a high Augustinian doctrine of perseverance is maintained, then the Calvinist sees the warnings of Scripture as addressed to the danger of pseudo-salvation...Both assume that salvation and good works are tied together. In the one case salvation requires good works; in the other salvation inexorably and irresistibly produces good works. In both theologies salvation and good works stand and fall together (p. 38).

Eaton's goal is to present a "non-legalistic" theology in which a person's assurance is found in Christ's completed work on the cross:

What I am urging, on the basis of this biblical material, is that there may be an approach to security and admonition that does not imply justification by works and yet which does not have the in-built legalism and introspection of developed Calvinism (p. 185).

As Eaton sees it, the Christian position is one of "invincible assurance of salvation combined with awesome warnings concerning forfeiture of blessing (but not of salvation itself). There are both reassuring and admonitory aspects" (p. 37).

The Christian's security, as a biblical doctrine, relates to salvation, to justification, to a secure position in grace, to freedom from condemnation, and to eternal membership among God's people. Eaton does not believe the admonitions of Scripture addressed to Christians relate in any way to gaining or losing

salvation. To him, salvation is so completely and solely of grace, that to the one who has already believed admonitions concerning losing or gaining salvation—in the sense of regeneration or justification—are entirely unnecessary and not found in Scripture at all. Instead, the admonitions of the NT “relate to present experience of the blessings of God’s kingdom, to reward in this life and beyond, to usefulness in God’s kingdom” (p. 39).

Eaton’s position concerning the grace theology comes through very clearly as he concludes his writing with the following statements:

Surely the New Testament balance is one of absolute freedom, an assurance that one will “never thirst again,” a knowledge that “nothing in all creation is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.” Yet from this basis of radical assurance spring profound challenges, the challenge to accept responsibility, the challenge to work out one’s salvation, the challenge to lay up treasure in heaven, the knowledge that there is something to be “laid hold of,” rewards to be won. Yet all along the way there is no need to fear that I am working for my eternal salvation...What paradoxes! Amazing grace and profound challenge; incredible assurance yet awe-inspiring responsibility; freedom to be myself yet the knowledge that Jesus achieves all in me. Here is a theology that motivates but does not discourage—a theology of encouragement. But is not this the gospel? I believe it is (p. 221).

I recommend this book as a Free Grace, “non-legal” approach to assurance.

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Jesus Under Siege. By Gregory A. Boyd. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995. 140 pp. Paper, \$4.99.

Jesus Under Siege is a popular defense of the authenticity of the Gospels and a refutation of the conclusions of the so-called Jesus Seminar. It is a summary of the author’s more detailed

book, *Cynic Sage or Son of God: Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995).

The Jesus Seminar is a group of 74 scholars who have published the conclusions of their research in several books, as well as in major magazines and newspapers. They contend that Jesus was a Cynic philosopher who taught radical egalitarianism. They also decided by vote that 82% of what the Bible attributes to Jesus was not spoken by Him.

Boyd uses a two-pronged approach to refute the "Cynic Sage" thesis. First, he points out inconsistencies of that position with the existing evidence we have. Second, he presents the evidence for the reliability of the Gospels and Acts.

The fact that the gospel writers had a theological purpose in writing the Gospels does not preclude them from being historically accurate. Archaeology frequently establishes that the writers of the Gospels and the book of Acts were reliable historians.

The members of the Jesus Seminar rely on the criterion of dissimilarity to determine authentic sayings of Jesus. This criterion states that only those sayings which cannot be explained as coming from the early Church or Judaism are from Christ. This is absurd. Since Jesus was Jewish it would be odd if He said nothing that reflected His heritage! It would also be very strange if Jesus never said anything to influence the future Church which He was building on His teachings.

Jesus Under Siege is an excellent popular summary of the issues involved in the debate. I highly recommend this book to anyone desiring to understand the issues involved in the recent Jesus Seminar conclusions and their refutation.

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The Gospel: Its Heart, Heights, and Hopes. Three Books in One. By Arthur T. Pierson. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978, 1996. 702 pages. Cloth, \$29.99.

This volume, originally three separate books, is over 100 years old. Originally published in 1892, 1893, and 1896, they are derived from sermons Pierson preached at Charles Spurgeon's church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. Pierson began preaching there in 1889 when Spurgeon was in ill health, and after Spurgeon's death in 1892 became his successor.

Pierson was an American involved in Britain's Keswick deeper-life movement. He had a heart for missions, which is evident in this book, and was a good friend of D. L. Moody.

There is much to like about this book. It is filled with wonderful illustrations which are almost as powerful today as they were a century ago. Pierson repeatedly conveys a love for God, for His Word, and for serving Him. While reading his words you are transported to an earlier time and a different place. You can almost hear him preaching these sermons and see the great throng of people in the Metropolitan Tabernacle listening with you.

There are a number of places where Pierson is quite clear in his presentation of the gospel. For example, in a sermon entitled, "The Lesson of Pentecost," using Peter's sermon to Cornelius as his text, he calls the readers to believe in Christ and be saved. He homed in on Acts 10:43 and the parallel verse in Acts 11:15 saying,

"To Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins'...Peter never finished that sermon. He got far enough to declare the conditions of salvation, and the Holy Ghost—may I say it with reverence!—was so divinely impatient to save those hearers that He would wait no longer. He crowded Peter aside, as though He would say to him, 'You have said enough: the gospel is given to these people,' and immediately 'the Holy Ghost fell on them that heard the word. Now the same gospel is preached in your ears. How simple it is to receive it!'" (Book One, pp. 18-19).

Similarly, in a sermon entitled, "The Heart of the Gospel," he says,

"You need do no work; not even so much as to get up and turn around. You need not go and ask your fellow-man across the church aisle, there, whether he has believed, and received, and been saved. All that you need to do is with all your heart to say, 'Dear Lord, I do take this salvation that Thou hast bought for me, and brought to me.' Simple, is it not? Yes, very simple: yet such receiving is the soul of faith" (Book One, pp. 35-36).

Pierson was not speaking and writing during a time such as today when a gospel debate is raging. We might prefer Pierson not to speak of "conditions [plural] of salvation," (evidently he was thinking of believing and receiving), since believing in Christ is the only condition, as his own sermon makes clear. We might also cringe a bit when he speaks of saying a sinner's prayer "with *all* your heart." That introduces a subjective fog that is inconsistent with the rest of his sermon. However, I suspect that were Pierson on earth preaching today, he would be a solid Free Grace advocate and would eliminate such unguarded phrases, perhaps because of the influence of men like Chafer and Hodges.

One minor complaint. The pagination of these three books does not run sequentially. After the first 236 pages, the numbering starts over again in Book Two and again in Book Three. Thus there are three pages called 20, three pages called 125, etc.

I recommend this book.

Robert N. Wilkin

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Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

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Lordship—What Does It Mean? By R. Alan Day. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993. 118 pp. Paper, \$8.99.

The author, Alan Day, is the pastor of a 3,500-member congregation, the First Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. He has also been an instructor in theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

This book is well written, easy to read, and easy to understand. The chapters are short and they cover many of the important issues in the gospel debate, including saving faith, repentance, discipleship, Christ's lordship, the question of carnal Christians, legalism, and assurance.

While the author adopts a Lordship Salvation view of the gospel, his style is less vitriolic than some who have written on this subject. His views are a bit softer as well. For example, he not only admits that backsliding and failure are *possible*, but concludes that Samson and even Demas (2 Tim 4:10) were both examples of believers who fell away from the Lord (p. 83).

As many other Lordship Salvation writers have done, Day is forced to equivocate on many points. Three examples concern commitment, assurance, and perseverance. While he most often suggests that *total* commitment is needed to be saved, he sometimes suggests that something *less* than total commitment is sufficient. While he often implies that uncertainty and doubt are a part of every believer's experience, he acknowledges that it is possible to be sure that you are eternally secure. While arguing that true believers *rarely* experience spiritual setbacks, that these setbacks don't last *long*, and that the course of their lives is *always* toward greater Christlikeness, he also allows for the possibility that true believers may backslide terribly and for a long period of time.

There is almost no effort at exegesis in this book. When the author is faced with the interpretation of a passage, he states his view and assumes that its correctness is obvious. (E.g., "Language could not be plainer," p. 56. "Nothing could be plainer," p. 64.) If he feels that proof is needed, he quotes some pastor or theologian who agrees with his view. He dismisses the interpretations and views of those who disagree with him—citing Hodges and Ryrie most often—with comments like "Hodges' interpretation makes no sense at all" (p. 65). He fails to show via a careful explanation of the Scriptures that his view is correct, or that the views of those who hold to what he calls "Easy Believism," are incorrect.

I found no references in the book to a colleague of Day, Dr. Charles Stanley, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta. Since Stanley is a fellow Baptist who espouses the same views as Hodges and Ryrie (see his book *Eternal Security*), it would

seem that he would be an even more familiar name in Southern Baptist circles than the other men mentioned. Possibly the reason why he failed to make this connection is because of the enormous popularity of Stanley. However, in the interest of truth, it seems to me that the reader should be told this to show that his is not the position of the SBC or even of some of the best known SBC Pastors. (He does indicate that one of his seminary professors held to the "Easy Believism" position. See pp. 61ff.)

There are a few interesting apparent misstatements in the book. Commenting on Matt 7:21, which says "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven," Day says, "What we need to say to our generation is that not everyone who calls Jesus Savior and Lord will be saved, but only those *who are seeking to do His will* (Matt 7:21)" p. 36, italics added. The text says they must *do* His will, not *seek* to do it! Possibly Day felt that no one really does the will of the Father, so he softens the requirement to *seeking to do His will*.

Talking about the necessity for a change of life, he criticizes the so-called Easy Believism position by saying, "The issue for the proponents of 'easy believism' is simply: 'believe the gospel'" (p. 14). That is an amazing admission. Day is saying that believing the gospel is not enough! I will grant that the author probably didn't realize the significance of what he was writing. While that is probably an unguarded statement, it is very telling. That is indeed the position of Lordship Salvation, though it is not often openly admitted, that believing the gospel is not enough for one to be saved.

I recommend this book for the well-grounded believer who wants a short, easy-to-read primer espousing the Lordship Salvation position.

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Repentance Versus the Heresies of Curtis Hutson & Jack Hyles: An Open Letter (dated Dec. 12, 1996) to Dr. Shelton Smith, Editor of Sword of the Lord. By Roland Rasmussen. Published in pamphlet form by Faith Baptist Church of Canoga Park, CA. 21 pp. \$1.00.

Having written my doctoral dissertation on repentance and salvation, I read this booklet with keen interest. As the title suggests, this booklet could hardly be described as irenic; it is a strong attack on the Free Grace view of the gospel.

Its thesis is that faith alone is not sufficient to save anyone. According to Rasmussen, sorrow for sin and turning from sins are also required for salvation.

This raises a problem for anyone who believes in justification by faith alone. How can justification be by faith alone if remorse and “abandonment of sin” (p. 13) are also required? However, seemingly unaware that what he is saying contradicts justification by faith alone, Rasmussen rebukes the late Dr. Hutson for teaching that faith and repentance are synonyms. Hutson advocated the change-of-mind view also held by such men as Drs. Lewis Sperry Chafer and Charles C. Ryrie. Rasmussen directly states that “faith and repentance are not the same” (p. 19, though no page numbers appear in the booklet). Clearly there can be no other conclusion than that for Rasmussen there are at least two (or even three) conditions of salvation: 1) faith, and 2) remorse over—and turning from—one’s sins. Faith isn’t enough. Nor are faith and remorse enough (see p. 13). All three are required.

Rasmussen doesn’t say, but one wonders which sins must be abandoned? How would a person seeking salvation know what he or she had to give up in order to be saved? Should we carry around a list of the sins which must be forsaken? If so, where do we get this list? Does the Bible contain a list of sins that must be forsaken to gain the free gift of eternal life? Logically, if sins must be abandoned, then *all* sins must be abandoned. That would include both sins of commission—things we do which we are commanded *not* to do (such as lying, cheating, stealing, coveting, being jealous, having outbursts of anger, etc.) and sins of omission—things we fail to do but are *commanded* to do (such as praying without ceasing, giving, loving our neighbor as

ourselves, owing no man anything, loving your wife as Christ loves the church, submitting to your husband, etc.).

There are many biblical difficulties inherent in the view that one must abandon his sins in order to gain eternal salvation—none of which is answered in the booklet. According to the Gospel of John, the only book in the Bible whose express purpose is evangelistic (John 20:31), the only condition of eternal life is believing in Jesus. Repentance isn't mentioned even once.

Jesus didn't tell the woman at the well in John 4:17-18ff that she needed to be sorry for her sins, or that she needed to resolve to give them up. Nor did John indicate that she was sorry, or that she determined to turn from her sins.

Likewise in Acts 15:7-11; 16:30-31 and Ephesians 2:8-9 there is no mention of remorse or turning from sins. Salvation is not of works, lest anyone should boast.

If even one passage in Scripture clearly shows that a person is saved by faith alone, apart from remorse or turning from sins (and many do), then we can be sure that faith is the only requirement, since Scripture is without error and doesn't contradict itself.

This booklet contains three citations from seventeenth century Baptist creeds which adopt the view that to be saved one must have remorse for his sins and must either resolve to amend his life or else actually endeavor to do so. While this is interesting, I wonder what it proves. The issue, which surely Rasmussen would agree with, is what the Scriptures teach, not the Council of Trent, Vatican II, the Westminster Confession of Faith, or the Second London Confession of 1688 (one of the Baptist Creeds Rasmussen cites). Even if every Baptist who ever lived held Rasmussen's view—and thank God they have not—if the Scriptures don't teach that view, then it must be rejected.

Herein lies the major weakness of Rasmussen's presentation: The author devotes only about one page (part of pp. 15 and 16) in an effort to show that his position is biblical. Interestingly, in none of the limited passages he cites is salvation even mentioned! The closest is Luke 13:3, which says, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." That text in no way proves Rasmussen's view. In the first place, some commentators feel that Jesus was speaking of perishing physically. Jesus may well have been promising that, apart from national repentance, Israel would

fall and be removed from the promised land and many Jews would die. (This is what happened in the Jewish Wars of A.D. 66-70.) In the second place, even if this is referring to individuals and eternal condemnation, one must still determine what Jesus meant here by "repent" (*metanoēō*). Rasmussen fails to show contextual evidence that it doesn't mean "change of mind regarding Christ," as Hutson and Hyles would presumably argue. In fact, he merely cites the verse and moves on, with not a word of comment about it.

Rasmussen would like for *Sword of the Lord* to adopt his view of the gospel. Fortunately, that isn't likely to happen, since *Sword of the Lord* has long stood for the clear gospel, the free gift of eternal life received by faith alone in Christ alone.

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PERIODICAL REVIEWS

“What Does It Mean to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit? A Biblical Investigation,” Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (June 1997), 229-40.

Köstenberger's thesis is essentially this: There are two types of filling with the Spirit in the NT. One type refers to special empowering for a given task. God sovereignly determines when He will give such special enablement. While this might be influenced by our prayers for special help, God might choose to say No to such prayers, or to empower us even in the absence of such prayers.

The other type refers to spiritual maturity. One who is “full of the Holy Spirit” is a spiritually mature person.

There is much good material here. Köstenberger's thesis is essentially sound, though it should be emphasized much more than it is.

Köstenberger briefly covers the concept of filling with the Spirit in the OT and he covers all NT uses of the concept. He rightly urges caution in making Eph 5:18 as some key text on the spiritual life by pointing out that it “is the only reference to being filled with the Spirit in the entire Pauline corpus” (p. 231).

There are two aspects of this article which are lacking. In the first place, the author fails to *emphasize* that there were two types of filling with the Spirit in the NT. While he rightly sees one type as special enablement for a given task, he barely mentions that a number of texts, when referring to being full of the Spirit, are merely referring to a person who is a mature believer.

For example, in Acts 6:3 the apostles told the believers at the Jerusalem church to “seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” Clearly this doesn't refer to ones who had received special power and special wisdom. It merely refers to those who are spiritually mature and wise. Compare also Acts 6:5, 8 and 11:24.

In 12 pages Köstenberger devotes only a few paragraphs to this type of fullness of the Spirit (pp. 235 top, 236 bottom, and 237 top). Here is his summary statement: "The difference between the references to being 'filled with' and being 'full of' the Spirit appears to be essentially one of event (in the case of the former) versus general characteristic (in the case of the latter)" (p. 237). While this is helpful, it certainly could be stated in a more powerful and practical way. One could read his article and miss the fact that he sees two distinct types of fillings with the Spirit.

In the second place, Köstenberger rejects the idea "that 'carnal Christians' can somehow shed their substandard experience merely by confessing their sins and by being 'filled with the Holy Spirit'" as being "unduly simplistic" (p. 239). Yet what of 1 John 1:9? The author does not deal with that passage. Probably unintentionally, Köstenberger is casting doubt on the role of confession of known sins in our spiritual walks. However, it is clear from 1 John 1:9 that confessing our known sins is indeed necessary if we are to walk in the light. This is John's equivalent to Paul's being filled up to all the fullness of God (e.g., Eph 3:19). And if one is out of fellowship with God, confession of sins is indeed the way out of that "substandard experience."

This is a very helpful article. I recommend it.

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"What Is New About the New Heavens and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," Gale Z. Heide, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (March 1997), 37-56.

Heide has asked an extremely narrow question. Essentially the question is this: Will the current earth be completely destroyed and then a new earth be created from nothing (*ex nihilo*), or will the current earth merely be transformed? Heide concludes the latter.

Prior to reading this article, this reviewer's idea was that the current earth (and current heavens) would be melted down and re-created. Thus the new earth and the new heavens will not be created *ex nihilo*. However, the re-creation would be so complete that the new earth will indeed be absolutely free of any of the consequences of the fall of man.

Heide, however, seems to adopt a different understanding of transformation, though reluctant to speak of any actual physical changes to the earth. On p. 54, the author writes concerning 2 Peter 3, "Though I am certain that a physical and historical event is expected by Peter, the primary focus of this judgment for him is the destruction of unrighteousness...Later, when he [Peter] describes the new heavens and the new earth, it is not as a place with new physical substances or new elements of creation. He describes it merely as a place where 'righteousness dwells.' The ultimate point of this judgment is not that it will destroy the earth and the sky, though something permeating and tumultuous must happen to release the creation from the decaying consequences of sin in the world (Rom 8:20-21)."

To describe the changes between this earth and the new earth as merely "something permeating and tumultuous" seems like massive understatement. This leads one to wonder why. What is the point of suggesting that there will be only limited changes from this earth to the new earth?

Heide's direct application is that while we might not call ourselves environmentalists, those concerns are valid and we should share them: "While I do not think of myself as an environmentalist, I must admit that they are concerned about the right things" (p. 40). This idea is developed more fully in the author's conclusion: "If [the earth] has a future existence, and if God feels strongly enough about saving it to make it a part of his eternal plan of redemption, then perhaps we should regard it as more than simply a source of food...God loves all his handiwork. Could it be that we should love it too?" (p. 56).

What believer or unbeliever views the earth as "simply a source of food"? The author does not give evidence of anyone who does. Of course, clearly some have little or no concern about alleged "global warming" (or is it cooling?), destruction of the ozone layer, defoliation of the Rain Forest, snail darters, etc. Possibly this is what Heide means.

Heide's thesis, stated early in the article, is puzzling: "If this earth on which we live is going to be completely destroyed, as many evangelicals believe it is, then we have little more responsibility to it than to act as good stewards of the resources God has given us. But if this world has a future in God's plan, being renewed rather than re-created *ex nihilo*, then perhaps we have a much greater responsibility than to merely act as good managers" (p. 39). If, on the other hand, this earth is going to experience complete renewal so that no environmental problems remain, then Heide's concern seems pointless. Whether the earth is completely destroyed and re-created *ex nihilo* or renewed, if the end product is perfect, Edenic, what difference could there be?

As strange as this might seem, Heide seems to be implying that the quality of the new earth will be dependent, at least in part, on our stewardship of this earth! In other words, Chernobyl-like incidents may have an eternal impact, lessening the beauty and glory of the new earth.

Space doesn't permit a point-by-point discussion of Heide's exegesis of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21. Briefly, the arguments presented seemed to be examples of special pleading. Heide seemed to draw a conclusion and then force that conclusion upon the Scriptures, rather than studying the Scriptures to see what they teach. Whatever 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21 mean, they certainly don't allow for the possibility of a new earth which is in any way flawed by the fall.

Concerning a more-directly gospel-related issue, it is noteworthy that on a number of occasions the author speaks of "the final judgment." Like many today, Heide suggests that all people of all time will appear at the Great White Throne Judgment (e.g., pp. 41-42), failing to explain how this can be harmonized with verses such as John 5:24 which says that believers "shall not come into judgment." The most natural explanation is that Jesus is promising that no believers will be judged to determine their eternal destiny. There is no "final judgment" for believers. They are and forever remain in a state of not being condemned (John 3:18). Hence no believer will appear at the Great White Throne Judgment. (Believers *will*, of course, be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ to determine their eternal rewards. However, that is not the type of "judgment" which Jesus spoke

of in John 5:24. He was speaking of the Great White Throne Judgment.)

I would have welcomed a discussion of the Judgment Seat of Christ (Bema). While 2 Cor 5:10 is mentioned in a list of Scriptures dealing with judgment (p. 41), neither it nor the Bema is discussed. I believe that some of the results of the Bema will be eternal. If this is true, then our experience on the new earth will only be as abundant as the capacity we develop in this life. Only those believers who develop a full capacity to glorify God will have a full-orbed eternal experience.

Jesus is coming again. It could be very soon. Even today. Are you ready? Are you living in a way that is pleasing to Him (2 Cor 5:9-10)? That, it seems to me, is a proper biblical application to make from the promise of the new earth (see 2 Pet 3:11-12, 14).

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“The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” J. Paul Tanner, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan-Mar 1997, pp. 23-46.

Tanner’s article is a pleasant surprise. It deals with one of the most neglected books in the entire canon. Many Christians have never heard any teaching on this book.

This article is especially helpful in that it surveys the various ways in which the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) is interpreted. Tanner briefly but convincingly shows the flaws in various interpretations of the book. Two of the most popular views are the *allegorical* and *typical* views. The allegorical view suggests that the book symbolically portrays the love between God and man (various interpretations specify this love as between Christ and the Church, God and the nation of Israel, or even God and *Mary*). The typical view suggests that Solomon and the Shulammite, while literal historical people, represent by typology the love that Christ has for the Church. Other less popular views, which Tanner shows to be untenable, include the drama view, the mythological-cultic view, and the dream view.

Tanner shows that there are also a number of literal views, all of which have problems of their own. On balance, however, he shows that the literal view is best and suggests that of those views the literal-didactic view (that the book literally deals with human love and sexuality, but that it also points to the greater love of Christ for His Church) is best.

This article briefly touches on some Gospel issues. When it discusses various allegorical views which concern Mary, the mother of Jesus, it touches on the veneration of Mary (which often hinders Roman Catholics from believing in Christ for eternal life). And, more importantly, if Tanner is correct that it is valid to teach the book as pointing to the love of Christ for the Church without adopting an allegorical or typical approach, then this article does indeed focus on a Gospel-related theme. Christ's love for the Church, and hence for all believers, is far greater than the greatest love between a man and his wife.

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Irving, TX

A Hymn of Grace

FRANCES A. MOSHER

Pianist

Christ Congregation

Dallas, Texas

NO OTHER PLEA

My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Everliving One,
His wounds for me shall plead.

Enough for me that Jesus saves,
This ends my fear and doubt;
A sinful soul, I come to Him,
He'll never cast me out.

My heart is leaning on the Word,
The written Word of God,
Salvation by my Savior's name,
Salvation through His blood.

My great Physician heals the sick,
The lost He came to save;
For me His precious blood He shed,
For me His life He gave.

Refrain:
I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me.

—Lidie H. Edmunds, 19th Century

Our family has recently been confronted by several major problems. Ideally, I would now report that our rock-solid trust in God has completely eliminated fearful hours and churning stomachs. I wish I could write that each and every time one

or another of our problems—or the whole combined crush of them—has entered my mind, my immediate response has been to turn to the Lord with a scripturally-based prayer rather than frantically wracking my brain yet once again for a clever human solution. I *have* frequently responded to such thoughts with some kind of prayer, or at least a reminder to myself that God is sovereign and that He holds the solutions to our dilemmas, but there have also been many times when purposeful prayer seemed more struggle than I could manage just then.

God has been faithful, anyway.

Gradually we are seeing God overcome many of the difficulties which had seemed so overwhelming only a short time before. He has answered—often before we prayed, or when we weren't sure what or how to pray. It has been a strengthening experience to be reminded that in His wisdom and timing He can and will provide solutions to our temporal problems. Because of His sovereignty, omniscience, omnipotence, and grace, we can have peace—a “resting place”—in the midst of earthly trials.

But earthly peace and rest are ours only because the Lord Jesus first provided eternal rest for our sin-battered souls. Just as His recent intervention in our earthly difficulties has been based on God's character and efforts rather than our own, so the securing of our eternal peace with God is based, not on *our* faithfulness, but on *His*. Our faithfulness would ultimately fail; my own ups and downs in the midst of temporal problems are enough to convince me on that point! How amazingly good it is of the Father that our eternal salvation—our “resting place”—lies firmly based on the finished cross-work of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. How amazingly gracious He has been in providing us with an objective record of this fact in His written Word. How kind He is to overlook our shifting and deceptive feelings and emotions in such a crucial matter as where we will spend eternity. How worthy of our praise and thanksgiving He is that He has provided the resting place for our faith!

“My Faith Has Found a Resting Place” first appeared in its present form in *Songs of Joy and Gladness* in 1891. The composer of “Norse Air,” the tune to which the hymn is customarily set, is unknown, and little is known about the author of the

words, Lidie H. Edmunds.¹ However, one who had so clearly understood and received the gospel of grace, as evidenced by the hymn's lyrics, will surely be one whom we shall meet in heaven. Perhaps she will then share with us the circumstances which led her to write this wonderful hymn of grace!

¹ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1990), 188.

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