

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Calling, Accountability, and Vision: Missions Promotion and Recruitment within the EMC

An interview with Dr. Ernie Koop by Darryl G. Klassen | p. 3

Miracles

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?
Do you believe miracles still happen in the 21st century?

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

Jesus performed miracles. Ergo, we should be able to perform miracles as well. Is this a wrong assumption?

My own difficulty lies in the dual nature of my confession. On the one hand, I believe whole-heartedly in the power and ability of Jesus to perform miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand or turning water into wine. On the other hand, I feel a rising skepticism when someone today talks of miracles or miraculous intervention. I feel bad about this because I want to believe, but my experience has been otherwise.

Those who do not believe in the existence of miracles in our age are called “cessationists.” They believe that miracles and other manifestations of the Spirit, such as tongues, were consigned to the period that is known as the birth of the Church.

This position is closely intertwined with the “dispensationalist” theology that teaches history is broken into various eras. Therefore, the dispensation of miracles is ended and we live in the “Church” age. I do not subscribe to this position.

Others who do believe in miracles to the extent that they are hyper-expectant, and perhaps see miracles in what we call ordinary occurrences, are called “sensationalists.”

These people seek signs before doing anything when they already know what they should be doing. Their faith rests on the miraculous, and when a miracle does not occur their belief system is rocked. Jesus even warns that it is a wicked generation that asks for a miraculous sign (Luke 11:29). I do not subscribe to this position either.

I would like to say that I rest somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, but the reality is that I live like a cessationist. I don’t want to be a cessationist. I want to believe that there are times when

the natural is invaded by the supernatural. I want to believe that God invades the common with the uncommon.

I can easily relate to the father of the boy possessed by an evil spirit. When Jesus tells him, “Everything is possible for him who believes,” the boy’s father replies immediately, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23–24). That’s me.

One Christian minister, who is also a scientist, explained miracles this way: “If the order in the Universe is a reflection of God’s faithfulness in creation, then miracles could be seen as special acts of grace when God supersedes His normal ways of working. If God did too many miracles then the world would become totally unpredictable; if he did no miracles it would be extremely boring.”


So it would seem to this anonymous writer that miracles are limited and perhaps reserved for specific situations.

C. S. Lewis would appear to agree with this limitation and specificity in regards to miracles. He states in his book *Miracles* that God does not shake miracles onto the world as if using a pepper shaker, but they come on great occasions. And if you do not happen to be in the vicinity when the great event occurs you will not see the miracle.

“Miracles and martyrdom tend to bunch about the same areas of history—areas we have naturally no wish to frequent,” says Lewis. “Do not, I earnestly advise you, demand an ocular proof unless you are already perfectly certain that it is not forthcoming” (172).

How important is it that you or I see our faith expressed in a miracle? Is my faith in any way inferior because I have not witnessed a miracle? When I have prayed for a healing in our congregation and the healing was not forthcoming, was the prayer wasted? Certainly not.

We can persist in believing in miracles. We can even be skeptical because not all oddities are miracles and must be discerned with divine wisdom. And we can trust that when God wants to, he will deliver us miraculously or otherwise according to his good pleasure.

As one person said, “It is a miracle that God even loves us.” 

Darryl G. Klassen



How important is it that you or I see our faith expressed in a miracle?

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Calling, Accountability, and Vision: Missions Promotion and Recruitment within the EMC

*An interview with Dr. Ernie Koop
by Darryl G. Klassen*

Ernie Koop, BTh (Steinbach Bible College), MDiv (Providence Theological Seminary), and DMin (Trinity International University), serves as the professor of missions and Bible at Steinbach Bible College. In 2010 he completed a Doctor of Ministry in Missions and Evangelism. His thesis was entitled, "An Evaluation of the Current Context of Missions Promotion and Recruitment in the Evangelical Mennonite Conference." The questions and answers have been shortened and edited, with some clarifying material added.



DARRYL KLASSEN: Ernie, your dissertation focuses on missions. What is your background in missions?

ERNIE KOOP: I spent seven years with EMC in missions in Nicaragua, and another five years in Mexico, and the past 10 to 11 years as missions professor at Steinbach Bible College.

DK: At what point did you decide that you wanted to go into missions? What was your missions story?

EK: Actually, I didn't want to enter missions. I originally felt called to pastoral work, took a pastoral track at SBC, took all the Greek I could get, felt really called



to pastoral ministry.

I was single at the time, and you know at that time it was pretty hard to become a pastor as a single in the EMC. Henry Klassen (then EMC General Secretary) asked me if I wanted to help with a church plant in Mount Salem in Ontario. He was a man of vision and realized he needed

to figure out a way to involve this young seminary grad. During the year I was there he kept pestering me about being involved in missions and saying, “We need somebody doing this in Nicaragua. We need someone doing that in Paraguay. We need someone doing this in Mexico.” He kept throwing that at me. That year in Mount Salem I did a fair bit of introspection. I threw the fleece out, asked God to direct, and ended up in language school and then off to Nicaragua.

DK: Later on you talk about “calling” in the dissertation. Would you say you were “called” to missions? If so, in what way would you say God called you?

EK: I was at RGBI (Rio Grande Bible Institute) probably a month or two, and, as a single, I was in the Latin Boys Dorm. So here I am, one Anglo with 50 to 60 Latinos. They speak Spanish, I don’t speak Spanish, and it’s culture shock. It didn’t take more than a month or so and I fell in love with the Latin people. It confirmed for me the sense of yes, this is what I want to do.

I’m thinking maybe God decided Ernie couldn’t “make the entire leap” all at once; he needed a small step in between or two. So Mount Salem first, then RGBI, and then Nicaragua. Of course, you can do that with anything: say God led based on what you see. I think for me it was trusting God, stepping forward. That’s probably not a typical call. You have people that would say, “Since I was a kid I wanted to go to Africa as a missionary.”

I think you should have a very strong sense of call if you go into cross-cultural missions. I equate it with marriage. There are moments in most of our marriages where, if it wasn’t for your feeling that this is a God thing,

and that he brought the two of you together and he is part of this, some of us would throw in the towel. But the sense that this is God ordained, something that God has done, gets you over that hump. On the mission field it is the same: the sense that this is a God thing and he has called you gets you through some of those tough times.

DK: Why did you decide to evaluate the current condition of EMC missions promotion and recruitment?

EK: Well, a number of years ago the word was that “the writing was on the wall” for small denominational mission programs. Six or seven years ago, when I thought about that, I wanted to make a contribution to EMC Missions. I

“If you only depend on human efforts, you get human results. You need to get beyond that, trust God, search for God’s direction and leading, and forge out.”

had served on two of its three fully-administered fields and had been on the board. I really care about EMC Missions, and would hate to see EMC Missions fizzle out and die.

I sensed it was important to figure out how we recruit missionaries. The first time I was on the board we realized that we probably needed almost 10 recruits a year just to replace the ones that were retiring or leaving. It didn’t take rocket science to figure out if we didn’t do something, we were going to end up without staff. I needed to look at our missions promotion and recruitment. I see promotion and recruitment as two sides of the same coin. You can’t recruit if you don’t promote.

DK: Later on in your paper you identify the decline in EMCers going to traditional EMC mission fields, while noting an increase of EMCers in associate missions. Why do you think that is?

EK: Well, a number of factors would be part of that picture. The EMC Board of Missions’ mission statement is focused on church planting. There is nothing wrong with that. It’s good. I affirm that. I approve of that. But it also means you cut a narrow swath. I recommend that the EMC open a new field every five years. We need to; and, again, it’s a faith issue. If you only depend on human efforts, you get human results. You need to get beyond that, trust God, search for God’s direction and leading, and forge out.

DK: Why do think that EMC Missions has focused on Latin America so much?

EK: Well, it was a natural result of a couple of factors. One, we were a Low German Mennonite migratory group that came from Prussia/Russia to Canada and then some of our people went to Mexico and Paraguay. We went to minister to our own people and then started to minister to others. We stayed more so within part of our comfort zone. Nicaragua was the exception. That was because a missionary got frustrated with the whole visa challenge in Mexico and said, “We don’t care to do this any longer. How about sending us elsewhere?” So that was more of an accident than a pre-meditated plan.

DK: That was a divinely orchestrated accident, don’t you think?

EK: There you go. Conversely, the whole move to church planting in Guadalajara would be an example of careful planning and vision casting and, hopefully, also trusting in God and looking to God for direction.

“I see promotion and recruitment as two sides of the same coin. You can’t recruit if you don’t promote.”



Interview photos (including cover) by Gord Penner

It’s an exciting endeavour. It’s also completely outside of the “Let’s go to Low German people” idea. It’s outside the rural pattern; it’s very urban. It’s also within what is called the “cone of silence”—it’s got the least evangelical influence in all of Mexico.

DK: How important is it for our missionaries to have theological or other training? You mentioned that with Abraham we can observe that God’s purposes do not depend on the gifts and abilities of the person or on what they have to offer. In fact, you say one might suggest that God frequently chooses the weak and insignificant. Then why study?

EK: I thought that what we needed to do in our churches was gift assessment including the personality, heart, and abilities. That’s one picture. Then we put people in positions based on their “shape.” But then I backed up and said, wait a second. Scripture gives us two pictures. The other picture is that God doesn’t necessarily pick us based on who we are and what we have to offer. He also picks people that have very

little to offer and then equips them.

I’m not prepared to say the church only needs to develop a formal program of gift discernment and then do placement and all of that. That doesn’t leave room for God’s divine serendipity and his whole process. What I’m saying is that one of the very important tasks of the church leadership is gift and calling discernment. So, yes, do assessments as far as how God has shaped and equipped you, but also give attention to where God is calling you.

Many times God will call me to what he has equipped me to do. But I think that God also calls people to do something that he hasn’t, at least not overtly, equipped them for. Whether Gideon or Abraham, the list is pretty long in Scripture. That does not mean we shouldn’t do theological training, we shouldn’t do gifting, and all of that. Absolutely not. I’m just not prepared to say it’s only an academic exercise of figuring out who belongs where. I think if God is in the mix, he has the last word.

DK: How important is missions to the local churches? What does it mean for them?

EK: Some would say if the church has ceased to be missional, it’s ceased to be the church. Again, it depends on what you mean by the word *mission* or *missions* or *missional*. That word *missional* has become a catchy word, and sometimes words lose meaning because they are so generic and are understood in so many different ways. It boils down to discovering God’s heart. I think that Scripture is very clear that God doesn’t want anyone to be lost. He cares about every single human being. That he wants us to be in right relationship with him is shown whether you take the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12) or you go to Peter’s statements that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9–10). I prefer to take an Acts 1:8 mentality and say that every single church can be involved at all three levels simultaneously. In fact, every single Christian can be involved on all three levels simultaneously.

DK: If missions is an extension of the church, why are there so many mission agencies that are not affiliated with the church? Wycliffe is not EMC; it's not Baptist. New Tribes is not affiliated in the sense that they don't have a church behind them. Why have these agencies started apart from the church in that sense? Why have they disconnected themselves?

EK: My ecclesiology says that the mission mandate has been given to the church. The church is responsible to do God's work in the world. I want students, for instance, to realize that if they go to the mission field they need to stay connected to the church. The church sends them and they are accountable to the church.

Now, for logistical purposes that might mean that they are with an organization that's able to focus their resources and abilities in making that work. My local church would not be able to give the kind of technical support a missionary doing translation work would need, so we need Wycliffe. Where I would be nervous is where inter-denominational and non-denominational ministries view themselves as completely autonomous and independent of the church. They should be accountable to the church.

DK: You talk about decentralizing the missions program so that churches have more say in what we do as a conference. What are the dangers of centralization as it pertains to EMC missions?

EK: There are challenges in centralization and decentralization. When you have an organization that grows rapidly like EMC Missions, you need organization and structure to manage that growth. The problem is that with a centralized body doing the leading and guiding and organizing and planning, you can slowly have a loss of ownership at the grass roots level. When you get to this point, you have loss of ownership and a loss of interest.

If the local church is integrally

missional, what do they do in response? They begin doing their own thing. Then other local churches become involved in their own projects, their own ministries. That's a result of the centralization, loss of ownership, disconnect.

But, we're actually seeing a bit of a reverse trend lately. Churches want hands on, they want participation, and they want more accountability. This generation doesn't want to throw

money into a pot. They want to give toward specific projects, they want participation, and they want to feel like they are a part of something.

DK: Young adults have historically sparked revival leading to missions. How can we unleash our young adults today to discover the Holy Spirit and reclaim the vision for missions for themselves? That's something you talk about in your paper; that's where the passion comes from.

How do you jumpstart that?

EK: Let me throw out an idea, without stating it strongly or being able to provide significant research that supports the hypothesis. We have people, now seniors, within that revival movement in the EMC that fostered the missionary movement. And then we also have the young ones now that are getting involved in short-

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term missions and want to change the world. There is a bit of a leadership vacuum in the middle. Even if you look at pastors in our conference, you have some senior men and some younger pastors.

To some degree it’s like pioneering. A pioneer works like crazy to start a business. His son still works because he didn’t grow up in the lap of luxury. And then that third generation grew up without shortages, in the lap of luxury. Usually these businesses die after the third generation because that third generation didn’t know how to work. They grew up with everything and they squandered it.

Now I’m wondering if my generation bought into that American dream of prosperity and focussed on materialism and those interests. I’m wondering if this next generation has seen that this pipe dream has not always brought the desired result. There have been marital breakups, addiction problems, and a host of unhappiness.

Some of this recent generation are willing to entertain a different dream to pursue and are really interested in changing their world. I don’t think that we will be able to hoodwink them into pursuing something that’s not legit. We will have to do our homework, but I think this next generation is actually hoping for something that is credible and viable.

DK: Short-term missions seem to be about observing and doing practical work. Obviously a person can’t go down and

learn the language in a short time, then go in and make an impact. How can these be considered hands-on? When it comes to tasting missions, how does short-term missions create missionaries in that sense?

EK: Well, statistics seem to bear out that nowadays there’s rarely a long-term missionary that hasn’t had one, two, or more short-term experiences. However, just because people go on short-term missions doesn’t mean they become long-term missionaries. In fact, in some cases it’s had a negative result: “I’ve done missions now” because they’ve gone on a couple of short-term trips.

If you’ve spent thousands of dollars to have a group go and build outhouses in Nicaragua, I don’t know if you can justify that from a stewardship standpoint. It would be far cheaper for locals to build them. To me a short-term missions venture is only as good as the objectives and planning that goes into it. When we do MissionX (our short-term program at SBC) we want to connect with the missionaries. It’s easier to have a coke in a restaurant with a missionary in the field and talk about issues than to try to have a conversation with a guy wearing a suit and tie in front of a rack of literature in the foyer.

We want students to glimpse what missionary life is actually like. So we call it mission exposure. We know that with a one semester course in Spanish you’re not going to be fluent. You’re not going to be doing significant missionary work.



DK: What do you suggest is the role of a pastor in promoting the missions of a church?

EK: I’ve tried not to be too aggressive, but I’m gathering from what you say, you caught the sense that I was laying a fair bit of heat on the pastor. That’s good. I feel good that I actually managed to do that. I think that the pastor of a church has control of the pulpit. I don’t say that in a negative sense. I think the pastor should be responsible for what happens in the pulpit. That’s under his watch.

So whatever the organizational structure (with elders, or ministerial, whatever), ultimately the pastor has a fair bit of responsibility for what happens in the pulpit and where the church is going. Some would say if the pastor isn’t missional, the church won’t be.

I think where your heart is, that’s kind of where you steer things; it’s where you end up going. Being missional includes being outward focused both locally and globally. As you and I have said, the pastor needs to be a champion of that kind of perspective. As you evaluate what happens in your church, is there an

outward focus? Are people being prepared for ministry to others out there?

Whether that means going to the missions field, or volunteering at a youth drop-in centre, helping a neighbour, or going to shut-ins. Formally or informally, what's the heartbeat of the church, in terms of being outwardly focussed? I think the pastor really has a lot to say about what that looks like.

DK: Is revival the key to a recharged emphasis on missions today?

EK: That's a great question and I grappled with that. In the beginning I was preparing my brief historical sketch of the EMC, and I thought this could be a really nice short dissertation: missions kind of grew out of the spirit of revival; the way to renew or recharge your mission program is to just have another revival! That's an oversimplification, but, at the same time, it is somewhat true. When God moves powerfully in our hearts and lives individually and collectively, things happen. Human effort begets human results; divine efforts beget divine results.

If we say, here's a list of 10 things we have to do and it will all be better, that takes God out of the equation. But to just sit and fold our hands and say, "Well, let's pray and hope God does something" removes our responsibility, and so that's a great question.

DK: Now they skirt the pastor and go straight to the Board of Missions.

EK: Again, you're indicating their lack of understanding of church body life, accountability, and mentorship and all of that, rather than what it should look like. It's symptomatic of our individualism. You have people that don't really notice others until one day they ask others for financial support: "Oh, let's have some financial support, too, because I'm going here and I need

“If we say, here's a list of 10 things we have to do and it will all be better, that takes God out of the equation. But to just sit and fold our hands and say, 'Well, let's pray and hope God does something' removes our responsibility.”

to raise this much money.”

That's not the healthy process because really it should be the church identifying individuals and saying, "You have gifts for cross-cultural ministry. We believe in this quite strongly and we want to support you. If fact, if you're willing, let's work on you going on short missions. We'll help. We'll support. We'll pray. We'll do the pre-trek work with you. We'll walk through together what this means in regards to God's calling in your life. And we would be thrilled if God would call you to full-time ministry in a cross-cultural setting.”

Now you have the accountability: this is now something we're doing together, rather than me stepping up and asking you for funding. In the "hands off approach" all I ask is for funding, but don't tell me what to do. That's not biblical.

DK: With Associate Missions, they seem to be saying that if we don't have our own EMC program, associate missionaries will be forgotten. Our mission program helps keep them in our minds.

EK: I think what they are saying is that the level of commitment to missions in general goes down when you don't have your own program. I'm not going to take potshots here at indigenous ministries. K. P. Yohanan, I think, has mellowed over the years. His rhetoric was pretty aggressive in the early years: "We don't want you North American missionaries. Give me your money.”

As to supporting indigenous missions only, I would say in general that the pattern is that first we send

missionaries, then we send money, and then we don't send missionaries or money. Out of heart, out of sight, out of mind. I'm not saying you can't ever support indigenous missions, but I don't think it's an either/or. It might be a both/and. The Bible says go; it doesn't say send money.

When I was in Nicaragua, half of my responsibility was to the people on the field—the work that I did. But I also felt quite a heavy responsibility to my constituency at home—what I communicate here. Most people I interviewed said, yes, we still need our own program. Not because we're better than others, not because other programs aren't good. But in terms of ownership, commitment, staying mission-minded, we need our own program.

DK: With the New Testament Church there's a hierarchy of sorts in the Jerusalem Church, who then sends out Paul and Barnabas. Is decentralization biblical in light of this?

EK: There doesn't appear to be one exclusive model for recruiting missionaries. There are places where the Holy Spirit speaks up; there are places where the church chooses. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas off to see what was going on, to be involved. But then later on, in the church at Antioch, while they are praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit says to set apart Paul and Barnabas. It's the local church that identifies through the moving of the Holy Spirit and sets two guys apart and sends them off. Was there a board meeting back then?

No, there wasn't.

The Jerusalem Council was convened and it was terribly important: the outcome was going to decide whether this was going to remain a Jewish Church or whether it was going to throw the doors open to the Gentiles. Fortunately, the right decision was made. I don't view decentralization as anarchy or as a move away from authority.

DK: Let's say a small church gives \$10,000 and one of the bigger churches gives \$150,000. Money speaks so loudly today. How can we share ownership with the smaller church that can only give a little when I'm part of the big church and feel like our church is carrying the load and we should have more of a say?

EK: Well, that's why it's important for us to agree together on a vision and on a mechanism. I suspect that it does happen where major contributors in local churches feel like they have an extra say in what happens. Unfortunately, I think that reflects a misunderstanding on a number of levels. First, it doesn't understand that we are in this together. Second, it fails to remember that what you have and what I have isn't mine or yours; it belongs to God. It further fails to remember that there's a proper way of making decisions and it isn't nepotism or cattiness, whether that be at the local or conference level. That's why it requires a level of humility on everyone's part. Because we are part of a family, it doesn't work for me to stand up and wave my machete and claim that for this and that reason I have a bigger say here.

DK: How do you feel personally about the next few decades concerning our participation in the great commission as a conference?

EK: That's a great question. I'm the eternal optimist. I'm not a pessimist. To me there are signs of good things to come.

Ten Recommendations

1 When one is considering the calling to mission work, cross-culturally or domestically, knowing that God called you will help you to endure tough times.

To EMC Board of Missions: Open a new field every five years to continue to bring vitality to the program.

3 To the local church: Teach and administer gift assessments, including personality, heart and ability, to discover the missionary within your midst.

The local church must maintain a missional attitude. "If the church has ceased to be missional, it's ceased to be the church."

5 It is essential for the local churches to take ownership of the mission program. Loss of ownership + loss of interest = churches doing their own thing.

Short-term missions and youth mission trips foster an on-the-field grasp of what is going on in missions and with missionaries. Local churches need to continue to send individuals and teams to the field so that they can accurately report back on the work.

7 To pastors: Your enthusiasm for missions encourages the church to be enthusiastic for missions.

It is the job of the local church to identify individuals and say, "You have gifts for cross-cultural ministry. We believe in this quite strongly and we want to support you."

9 Indigenous missions cannot stand alone. There must be both the indigenous and foreign missionary to fulfill the Great Commission to "go."

The future of EMC missions rests on the local church catching the vision.

Our conference is moving into Guadalajara, and we decided to try a team church plant instead of sending one individual, one couple, kind of the Lone Ranger approach. Bolivia has come up on the radar. Other things like that.

The crux of the matter for me will be whether we're able to communicate or generate ownership at the local level, the grassroots level. There needs to be a recasting of vision together, and there will be ownership as a result. I hope that recruitment will happen more naturally in a more biblical fashion at the local level. Rather than spending more dollars producing pamphlets or having our recruiter driving around the country, the local church should

“The local church should embrace the vision and, therefore, shoulder up to pray and seek out potential candidates.”

embrace the vision and, therefore, shoulder up to pray and seek out potential candidates.

You can't add new fields, you can't open new ministry opportunities if you don't have personnel. Yes, I'm optimistic. But those kinds of things need to happen. Then the future could be very interesting indeed. I think this generation is very interested in making a difference and is open to being involved in church planting or missions. What we haven't said is that the mission field is coming to us.

You could go sit in the mall in Calgary, Winnipeg, or London (or actually here in Steinbach) and find people of many different cultural and religious backgrounds. There are many opportunities locally as well as overseas to be involved in kingdom building.

DK: I appreciate your taking the time to talk to *Theodidaktos* about your thesis. It's immensely important to have a home-grown missiologist in our conference. It's great that we have someone who cares about missions like you do. Thanks very much for taking the time to speak about missions to our conference in general.

EK: It has been my pleasure. ☺



Braving the Interpretive Storm

by Dr. Pierre Gilbert

Pierre Gilbert, BRE, MA, PhD (Old Testament), is associate professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at Canadian Mennonite University and the coordinator of the Winnipeg Centre for Ministry Studies. He is an ordained minister within the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.



ANABAPTISTS OF ALL stripes vigorously pursue the question of identity. Nowhere is this quest more evident than in the field of biblical interpretation.

When it comes to reading Scripture, the most critical issue Anabaptists face may not involve the method we use as much as the underlying assumptions we bring to the text. Anabaptists have traditionally maintained that biblical interpretation must be carried

out in accordance with the nature and purpose of Scripture. We approach the Bible with the conviction that it is inspired, authoritative for faith and practice, and that it ultimately points to Jesus Christ.

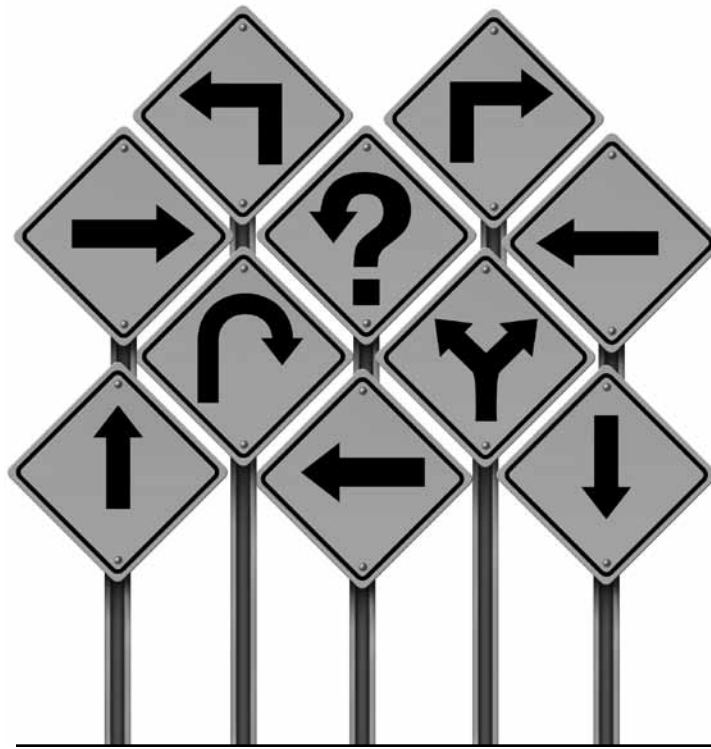
We have also advocated for an interpretive process that not only ascertains the meaning of the text, but also seeks to discern what God wills for us. Once we have assessed, to the best of our abilities, the original intent of the text, it becomes incumbent upon us to gauge its ethical implications as followers of Christ.

No Longer that Simple

Though at one time we could safely assume all Anabaptists would enthusiastically embrace such assumptions, I am afraid it's no longer quite that simple.

We are witnessing in the Western world a culture war that increasingly polarizes people into what is commonly referred to as the "Right" and the "Left" on the ideological spectrum. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, the Right leans toward a conservative ideology, while the Left is inclined to promote a progressive agenda.¹

While the severity of this collision of worldviews may not be transparent to all, the reality is that some of the ideological



One of the hallmarks of progressive ideology is the rejection of the notion of absolute truth, particularly as it pertains to matters of faith and sexual morality.

options available in the marketplace can have a deleterious impact on biblical interpretation.

For instance, while theological conservatism is in many respects consistent with the traditional Anabaptist approach to Scripture, one of the hallmarks of progressive ideology is the rejection of the notion of absolute truth, particularly as it pertains to matters of faith and sexual morality. Those who hold such a view

will neither be well-inclined toward the biblical text nor receptive to its message.

Cautions for Progressive Anabaptism

Here is where the rubber hits the proverbial road. There are Christians who feel a strong affinity toward some of the more questionable elements of the progressive agenda. This phenomenon, which has long been prevalent in the mainline churches,² has also made some inroads in the Anabaptist family. This is most apparent in the areas of pluralism, the peace position, and human sexuality.

Pluralism

First, the naïve yet persistent belief that all religious faiths are just so many ways to God or, to put it more plainly, that all worldviews are equally true, will necessarily result in

the degradation of Christ the Saviour to merely a good moral teacher.

Radical Pacifism

Second, the most extreme expression of the peace position, what I call radical pacifism, rejects all forms of violence including the state-sanctioned use of force to maintain law and order.³ While there is much merit to proclaiming the peace of Christ, radical pacifism is theologically problematic. This ideology has, for instance, played no minor role in how some scholars have reconfigured the doctrine of the atonement in an effort to strip it of its violent overtones.⁴

Since radical pacifists say God would not use violence, and thus would not impose the death penalty for sin, there is no need for Jesus to die on the cross to

1 I have written about this divide, and how it affects the broader Mennonite church in "The Challenge of Dual-Citizenship in the 21st Century," in *Out of the Strange Silence* (Kindred Productions, 2005).

2 For an excellent analysis, see Edmund W. Robb and Julia Robb, *The Betrayal of the Church* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986).

3 It should be noted that the Schleithem Confession of Faith (1527) squarely steers away from a radical pacifist position.

4 See, for instance, J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 225.

pay that penalty for us. Radical pacifism has also been pivotal in redefining missions as an appeal to identify and encourage the peace elements in a given culture rather than an invitation to shift allegiance to Christ.⁵

Sexuality

Finally, progressive Anabaptism increasingly challenges the New Testament portrayal of sexuality as an expression of love between a man and a woman within the confines of marriage.⁶ Progressive Anabaptism thus echoes popular culture's crusade to define sexual morality within the framework of identity ethics, which determines the ethical character of sexual practices on the basis of one's natural impulses rather than a moral code inspired by Scripture and a corresponding lifestyle empowered by the Spirit of God.

Those three characteristics of progressive Anabaptism may seem trivial to some. They are anything but. Because they represent theological positions that are irreconcilable with Christian orthodoxy, they have already and will continue to cause significant slippage both in terms of the method by which we study Scripture and our most basic convictions about inspiration and the authority of the Bible.

A Way Forward

Anabaptist distinctiveness does not, however, solely reside in the way we read Scripture. It hinges on a unique

We face the threat of an ideology that actively challenges our perception of truth, Christ's unique claims, and our understanding of the lordship of Christ.

configuration of factors that include our commitment to the Bible as God's inspired and authoritative Word, the centrality of Christ, a resolute emphasis on mission as an invitation to consider Jesus' unique claims, the pursuit of Christian discipleship, and a fundamental impulse to go back to Scripture as the primary source of theological data.

But like any other group, Anabaptism is not fixed in time. Churches and denominations always run the risk of losing their theological integrity. When, for instance, a Christian denomination experiences a radical erosion of its Christology, it also tragically loses its ability to share the only cure there is for a sick world. At that point, all is lost!

A Great Future!

I believe there is a great future for the Anabaptist movement. But nothing can be taken for granted. At this point in our history, we face the threat of an ideology that actively challenges our perception of truth, Christ's unique claims, and our understanding of the lordship of Christ.

The way forward does not lie in condemning and attacking each other; neither does it reside in pretending that


everything is as fine as a foot in a slipper.

Anabaptists cannot afford to switch on the autopilot. Like Menno Simons himself did centuries ago, we need to discern where ultimate reality and truth lie.

I am not unsympathetic to those Christians who feel a strong affinity with some aspects of the progressive agenda. But it is important that we realize how the more radical elements of this ideology represent a clear and present danger for the integrity of the Christian community and its ability to preach the gospel.

Robust Imagination or Denunciation?

The imperative to redefine who we are in the face of an ever-changing environment may be legitimate and necessary, but I would suggest there is a life-giving approach to such a project, and one that is not so life-giving. The contrast, for instance, between a Tim Keller⁷ and a Brian McLaren⁸ is stark. The former offers a robust way to imagine afresh how orthodox Christianity can be relevant to a new generation. The latter takes the reader on a long personal quest that ultimately offers little more than a denunciation of Christian orthodoxy as an unfortunate Constantinian accident.⁹

It still remains to be seen whether Anabaptism's search for an identity will not prove to be as much a symptom of post-modern uncertainty as anything else. 

This article was previously published in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 2011). It is reprinted with permission.

5 For a short discussion on the impact of a radicalized peace position on missions, see Pierre Gilbert, "Who Is This Christ We Claim to Follow?" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 5, 2004), 4–5; and also Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 11 (1992), 205–208.

6 David Eagle offers a revealing example of such a position in "Pneumatological Ecclesiology and Same-Sex Marriage: A Non-Essentialist Approach Using the Work of Eugene Rogers and John Zizioulas," *Conrad Grebel Review* 28 (2010), 43–68.

7 *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008).

8 See, in particular, his recent book, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010).

9 For a brief but insightful comparison of the two, see Harold Jantz, "Can the Church be Reinvented?" *ChristianWeek*, September 15, 2010.



Which Atonement? How Scripture Speaks Anew to Each Generation

by Dr. Len Hjalmarson



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THE DOMINANT VIEW of atonement for the first 300 years of the Church was not Penal Substitution (PS), but *Christus Victor*. Jesus' death and resurrection made him Lord and established him as sole victor over the forces of death and destruction. Jesus' death was a ransom paid to the devil.

The Penal Substitution view was there in Scripture, but the Early Church was less interested in that view. Under Anselm in the 11th century the Church changed positions and began to put its weight on the other foot. It was the legal and forensic climate of those times that provoked the switch.

In other words, it was a *cultural* shift that provoked a theological shift. That's a pretty important point, because we are in a time when culture is changing dramatically, and here we are having a lot of theological debates.

We could conclude from this that every time the culture changes, the

What was it about the context of the Early Church that required one approach (*Christus Victor*) more than the other? Is there something about our own changing world that requires a return, or at least a much greater emphasis, on the earlier view?

Church becomes unfaithful. Or, more wisely, we could conclude that when the culture shifts *God speaks in new language*.

Many Aspects

In a helpful introduction to the atonement, Tim Geddert of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (now Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary) writes,

There are many aspects to a restored relationship with God, and as a result discussions about the atonement can also become complicated. Theologians have put a great deal of effort into working out precisely how the death and resurrection of Jesus accomplish “the atonement.” Unfortunately, defenders of various views sometimes use the word “atonement” as though it meant their view! When I use the word “atonement,” it means simply “becoming reconciled with God.

Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection are not the atonement, they are the means of the atonement.¹

Note this last statement. Jesus’ death and resurrection are not the atonement; they are the *means* of the atonement. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the *way* we become reconciled to God. If you get this last part, then it takes some of the emotional weight away from the conversation we need to be having these days.

Scot McKnight

Scot McKnight expands on the meaning of reconciliation by listing the atonement

metaphors. He writes,

Atonement language includes several evocative metaphors: there is a sacrificial metaphor (offering), and a legal metaphor (justification), and an interpersonal metaphor (reconciliation), and a commercial metaphor (redemption) and a military metaphor (ransom). Each is designed to carry us to the thing. But the metaphor is not the thing. The metaphor gives the reader or hearer an imagination of the thing, a vision of the thing, a window onto the thing, a lens through which to look in order to see the thing. Metaphors take us there, but they are not the “there.”²

Well said! We are prone, when we don’t recognize the way language and symbols work, to mistake the menu for the meal. It then becomes nearly impossible to actually talk about how and why we do theological work, because we are too busy defending our symbols. And atonement debate is mostly theology—not Scripture, but language that interprets what we read in the Scripture, and language that represents the dominant understanding in our faith communities.

One Passage, Both Views

And what do you know? Both major views can be found in a single New Testament passage in Colossians.

Penal Substitutionary: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood

against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13–15).

Christus Victor: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:16, the next verse).

Cultural Shift

As said earlier, the dominant view of atonement for the first 300 years of the Church was *Christus Victor*. In the 11th century, and in the legal and forensic climate of theological thought, the Church began to put its weight on the other foot. Cultural shift provoked a theological shift. But God is the Lord of both culture and theology. When the culture shifts, old questions are asked in new ways. In response, God speaks in new language. God speaks to a new culture in new ways through the Scripture because a new culture hears in new ways.

The Voice of the Spirit

To be more provocative, the voice of the Holy Spirit did not highlight the penal substitution (PS) view for the Early Church. What was it about the context of the Church in those days that required one approach (*Christus Victor*) more than the other? Is there something about our own changing world that now requires a return, or at least a much greater emphasis, on the earlier view? Might it even be possible to hold the two views side by side, like a pair of glasses, and see in 3D?

Or to ask the question in reverse, why are western evangelicals so stuck on one view, to the extent that holding other

1 Tim Geddert, “Thinking About the Atonement.” *MB Herald*, June 2009.

2 Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007) 38.

views as equal provokes an emotional reaction?

A Sacred/Secular Duality

It strikes me, having participated in some of this debate among Anabaptists the past five years, that those who are tied to an exclusive view have an investment in that view because we have also become tied to a narrow and other worldly, future-oriented view of salvation. The PS view doesn't push us to deal with the coming of the kingdom now, where we live.

In other words, the PS view lends weight to the sacred/secular duality we have lived with throughout Modernity. The PS view of the atonement has a certain resonance with a particular culture and worldview. Our emphasis on individual salvation over the "one new humanity" in Christ (Ephesians 2:14–16) and on personal salvation over the redemption of all creation (Colossians 1:19–20) is also a tension between Jesus as Saviour and Jesus as Lord.

Moreover, the PS view pushes us away from the public and even *political* implications of the atonement toward the private world of "my faith." (Contrast Stanley Hauerwas, "the church does not have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy."³)

The Private, Individual life

The PS view is weighted toward the private, individual life. It is about *my* life and *my* salvation—thus the justice picture, and the responsibility and call to work for justice, to get involved with the broken people and systems around me, is weakened. We need not call the Empire to account when salvation is mostly an otherworldly, future-oriented reality. In this view, justice comes in the next life and we should not expect it in this world. We end up living in two separate worlds and effectively denying the Lordship of Christ or his victory over the Powers.

Isaiah

Contrast this view of the kingdom to the one that resonates strongly throughout one of Jesus' favourite Gospels—Isaiah. Again and again God confronts Israel with her neglect of justice and the poor, while she accumulates land and wealth. Israel wants to make gathered worship the centre of religious life, while Yahweh continually reminds them that true religion involves social justice (Isaiah 58).

Paradoxically, though the theology of the PS view seems all about sin, it is so inwardly-oriented that it allows me to avoid really talking about the impact of sin as sin pushes me toward a private world and away from social engagement—a separation we do not see in Jesus, Paul or in the Gospel writers.

Anabaptists and Charismatics

Anabaptists were once heavily weighted toward the *Christus Victor* theme, and it was reflected politically in the way they (mistakenly) withdrew from the world into isolated communities. They clearly viewed the world and its systems as fallen, and emphasized personal transformation as well as a new—and separate—political reality under the active Lordship of Christ. They were right about the former, but wrong about the means of transformation.

These days the *Christus Victor* theme is more readily recovered among charismatic groups, who tend to get down and dirty with deliverance and inner-healing issues. It's interesting to see what happens when the Holy Spirit becomes more active among Mennonites—it is like watching a



The Gospel is so much more than life insurance; it moves us toward God's kingdom shalom and to enacting the kingdom of justice under the Lordship of the Risen One.

second conversion as they discover that God really does care about all kinds of healing, physical and spiritual, and that salvation is really *shalom*; not intended only for a distant world to come. Again, because the PS view is usually paired with a futurist eschatology, an out-of-this-world salvation, helping people actualize the atonement in their lives and relationships is less a priority.

Pastoral Implications


Which raises the question of the pastoral implications of atonement views. Mark Baker's work pushes in this direction, but one may also refer to Marva Dawn's position in her strongly Anabaptist book, *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God*. That the victory of God is won in weakness and not with armies is another of those political implications we could miss in only the PS view. Similarly, a recovery of kingdom theology creates an atmosphere conducive to *Christus Victor*.

We really need to live into both these understandings in order to avoid the worst problems of enculturation. The

3 Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Spirit speaks in multi-voices in Scripture, giving one message in many ways (think—*four* gospels) the better to reach the many hearers, at many different times in history. The wider our hearing, and the more diverse our cultural reach, the more we see the beauty of a many-coloured grace.

The Gospel is so much more than life insurance; it moves us toward God's kingdom shalom and to enacting the kingdom of justice under the Lordship of the Risen One. It leads us to pray with Jesus and all the disciples, "May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Our understanding of the atonement should be similarly integrative, and empower us to live into a salvation that knows no separation between physical and spiritual, private and public gospel. 

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Re-Interpreting the Myth of Redemptive Violence:

Subversive Use of Violent Imagery in Revelation

by Jeff Wheeldon



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WE LIVE IN A WORLD in which violence is believed to be natural, inevitable, and justifiable, if not exactly good. As the recently passed Walter Wink put it, "violence is the ethos of our times."¹ Violence is paradoxically used to promote peace, uphold justice, and humble the powerful.

Even more strangely, the Christian Scriptures—focused on the story of a God who willingly submitted himself to violent humans and in so doing peacefully undermined the powers of evil and restored relationship with those very humans—are often used to promote and justify violence.

It's somewhat understandable: the Bible contains incredible violence and violent imagery. Critics of Christianity love to point this out, and by justifying certain acts of violence some Christians may avoid such criticism; but this is not an option for Christians who uphold the value of non-violence that we find in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament. So if we are not willing to

justify violence, how can we justify the violence in the Bible?

No Easy Answer

There doesn't seem to be an easy answer. Some argue that the Bible contains a progressive revelation, that "poor, benighted primitives knew no better, and ascribed to God attitudes that later generations would sharply condemn."² Wink doesn't find this notion particularly satisfying, seeing a distinct *regression* in the culture of Israel even within the Pentateuch.

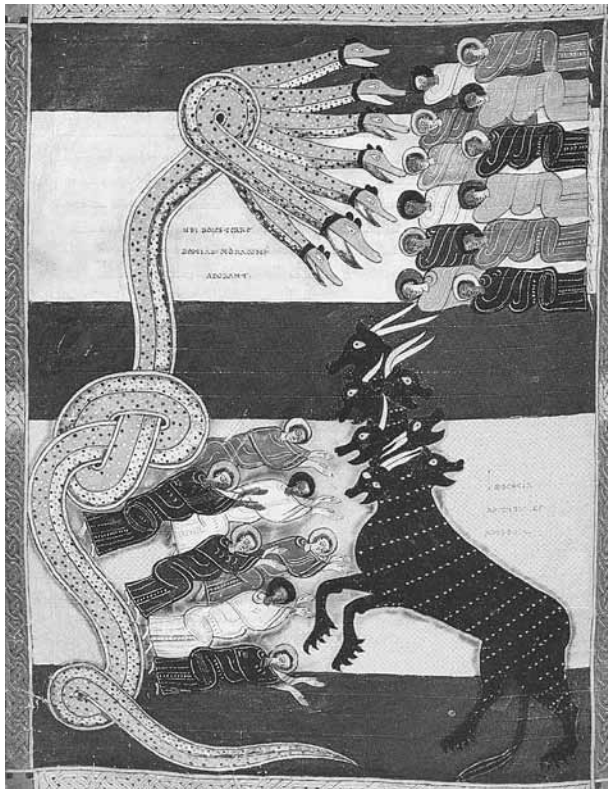
William Webb, on the other hand, suggests a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" which does not involve primitive peoples attributing their violent notions to God, but rather God meeting people within their violent culture and progressively redeeming them, transforming them from the dark society in which they were found to a more just and ethical society.³

This theory is much more satisfying when dealing with the Old Testament,

1 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 13.

2 *Ibid*, 44.

3 William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001).



[Progressive revelation] would suggest that after the fullness of God’s self-revelation has come in the person of Jesus Christ we would no longer have any grounds for the violent imagery we find in Revelation.

has done is take a literary work, which the intended audience of Genesis would have been very familiar with, and change it in such a way that it only subtly changes the structure or content, but radically changes the theology.

Indeed, as Waltke points out, “while the biblical narrative wears a garb that resembles other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, its theology... stands radically apart from them.”⁵ By borrowing the “garb” of competing creation myths, the writer of Genesis has forced the audience to compare and contrast not only the myths themselves, but also the gods and worldviews they testify to.

It is my assertion that the writer of the Revelation of Jesus Christ has used the same literary technique, and, in some sense, has used the same text for comparison: the *Enuma Elish*.

Myth of Redemptive Violence

Walter Wink coined the term “the myth of redemptive violence” to describe the enduring notion that it is only through a use of violent force that we can achieve peace and order.⁶ He traces this myth back to the *Enuma Elish*, the creation myth of ancient Mesopotamia.

In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk becomes king of the gods by destroying Tiamat, the goddess of chaos, before she can kill the gods; from her dismembered corpse he creates the world and its inhabitants. The world itself was created through an act of graphic violence that has repeated itself in every myth and legend and action movie and comic book ever since.

Wink describes the pattern with the old “Popeye the Sailor Man” cartoons: an evil force (Bluto) reveals itself as a threat to innocence and order (by kidnapping Olive Oyl and attempting to rape her), requiring the hero (Popeye) to overpower him to save the day. To heighten the suspense, the righteous hero is almost defeated, before summoning the strength or cunning that is born of his righteousness (or in this case, a can of spinach) to overpower the evil threat.

but still leaves us with a problem when faced with the New Testament: if God has revealed himself progressively in order to redeem us from a violent and sinful culture, this would suggest that after the fullness of God’s self-revelation has come in the person of Jesus Christ we would no longer have any grounds for the violent imagery that we find in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

I suggest that the answer to this problem is not to be found in a hermeneutical or cultural investigation, but rather in a literary one.

Subversive Borrowing

Biblical literature has a long history of borrowing from the religious texts of Israel’s neighbours and overlords. It was a common practice for a religious text to be translated from one language to another, changing the names of the

gods to suit a different religion while leaving the story the same. For example, there are flood narratives to be found in almost every culture of the ancient Near East, with extremely similar plots; the obvious comparison between Greek and Roman mythology is another example.

In his *Old Testament Theology*, Bruce Waltke performs a close comparison between Genesis 1 and the ancient Mesopotamian creation myth (the *Enuma Elish*), and finds that the two documents share a common structure and largely common content. The *Enuma Elish* predates Genesis by a significant period, suggesting that Genesis borrowed extensively from it.

If the notion of the first chapter of the Bible being copied from Mesopotamian mythology bothers us, Waltke is quick to point out that it is not the *similarities* that are significant in this case, but the *differences*.⁴ What the writer of Genesis

4 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 197–203.

5 *Ibid.* 197.

6 This notion can be found in seemingly all of his works, but see especially *Engaging the Powers*, 13–31.

Wink points out that every episode of Popeye is essentially the same and, no matter how many times Bluto beats him, Popeye never remembers to eat his spinach *before* the fight; and no matter how many times Popeye defeats Bluto, there is never any reform. Bluto always makes another try at raping Olive Oyl, in the same way that the threat of the evil goddess of Chaos, Tiamat, needs to be symbolically destroyed every year by the representative of Marduk, the king of Babylon.

According to the myth of redemptive violence, evil is always lurking, and we must always be stronger than it (and willing to “do whatever it takes”) in order to prevail. Violence is seen as both inevitable and justified.

This myth of redemptive violence undergirded the authority of the state to use violence to suppress rebellion and dissent. It justified Pontius Pilate in putting the innocent man, Jesus of Nazareth, to death in order to avoid the chaos and riots that would have followed if he had not. In his willingness to submit to this obviously unjust execution, Jesus highlighted the injustice of it and thus undermined the myth of redemptive violence that had justified it. In this way, the Jesus of Nazareth of the Gospels seems directly at odds with the Risen Christ of Revelation.

Violent Imagery in Revelation

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the



face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Revelation 6:15–17)

Amazingly, we often miss the irony of the mighty of the earth being terrified of the wrath of a “lamb.” We usually focus on the “Lamb” referring to Jesus as a Passover lamb; while this is correct, we shouldn’t miss the irony of the statement itself: a lamb is a gentle creature, best known for being soft and cuddly and cute. There is a dramatic irony to the verse above: the Christian audience of the text know Jesus to be committed (to the death!) to non-violence, and yet the mightiest of kings fear his wrath.

I do not hold that Revelation does not depict the overthrow and death of the enemies of God and the Church, even by very violent means. What I do suggest

Amazingly, we often miss the irony of the mighty of the earth being terrified of the wrath of a “lamb.”

is that the writer of Revelation had their tongue planted firmly in their cheek throughout the narrative, and a sharp eye for cultural commentary and literary parallels.

Nothing New

Cultural commentary and general observation can account for the four horsemen, representing imperial conquest, war and murder, commercial injustice, and other forms of death. God does not just give these things the power to kill at some point in the future; these things (almost all examples of human sin) have always killed human beings and continue to do so.

The seven trumpets and their corresponding plagues are a mixture of literary parallel (an implicit reference to the plagues of Egypt) and cultural commentary, as “the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands” (9:20). Again, this is nothing new: we have always been afflicted by disasters and plagues, and yet we are slow to repent. All of these deaths are common in a fallen world, and even here do not appear to have any redemptive power; it is the depiction of Christ and his prophets bringing about death that are truly subversive to the myth of redemptive violence.

7 E.g. John 1:1–14.

8 Cf. 6:11.

Witnesses and Rider

The “two witnesses” and the “Rider on the white horse” are instructive for us. Those who would try to harm the two witnesses (i.e., prophets) are burned to death, but by fire that “comes *from their mouths* and devours their enemies” (11:5, italics mine). Similarly, the Rider on the white horse of chapter 19 (a common image of the “good guy” in the myth of redemptive violence, even in today’s Western movies), who is, of course, Christ himself, “makes war”—but again we should question the literal nature


of that war: “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (19:15). In both cases, it seems clear that it is their *words* that are powerful—a notion that is made very clear in the Gospels.⁷

The army of the Rider on the white horse should also give us pause: the armies of heaven are dressed in white linen; that is, they are the saints who have been martyred, put to death like their Lord in non-violent resistance to Rome.⁸ With all of the mighty angels at his command, with proven power

to inflict plagues and natural disasters and other calamities, the King of Kings rides into “battle” with an army of pacifists, armed only with his words, and overthrows the empires of the earth!

Conclusion

We surely cannot deny that Revelation uses intensely violent images to describe the victory of Christ over the evil forces of this world; indeed, at times it very obviously falls into the patterns of the myth of redemptive violence.

However, the absurdities presented there not only tip us off to the symbolic nature of the violent imagery, but also show the absurdity of the myth of redemptive violence itself by using its form to portray the non-violent victory of martyrs over the violent powers of this world. Like Genesis, the Revelation of Jesus Christ undermines the dominant narratives of our world, making foolish the wisdom of the wise and shaming the violence of the strong. 

Cultural commentary and general observation can account for the four horsemen, representing imperial conquest, war and murder, commercial injustice, and other forms of death.

Précis

Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament, Sandra L. Richter (IVP Academic, 2008), 263 pp., \$24, ISBN 9780830825776.

Written by Peter Ascough (Kleefeld), BA (Honours) in Religious Studies (Conrad Grebel College) and enrolled at Providence Theological Seminary. Peter has worked with youth for the past 20 years in jails, camps and churches in Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba. He has been Associate Pastor at Kleefeld EMC for about six years.



Editor’s note: A précis is a summary of a written work. It differs from a book review in that it is not a commentary or critique on the writer’s work. This précis is given as an example of seminary work for the benefit of the *Journal* reader who may be attending seminary in the future or who may be interested in how to summarize a book of this nature.

Introduction

The Bible is God’s story of redemption. We have not been taught that the Old Testament (OT) is our story. We struggle to identify with the people, places and times so we reduce the importance and lose a large portion of understanding ourselves as the church. One goal of this work is to bring the people, places and times into a real view so we can identify with them.

Another goal of this work is to help organize the OT into a usable and meaningful book. Our understanding of the OT is like a disorganized closet. We have a pile of stories, names, dates and places but we cannot put them together in any sort of order. So we tend to stick to the stories we know the best and ignore the rest.

Chapter 1 – The Bible as the Story of Redemption

We cannot assume that the culture of the Bible times is like our own culture or that our culture is somehow superior. However, it is important to understand Israel's culture as this was the time and space God used to communicate the truth of redemption. Redemption, before it was adopted by Biblical writers, had its origins in the laws and social customs of ancient tribal society. This tribal society was patriarchal in that the oldest living male was the centre of the family structure. He was responsible for the economic and legal welfare of the family, which could include three generations living together collectively farming. When the patriarch died or the household became too big they would split into new households, each headed by the now oldest living male family member.

The culture was also patrilineal in that a family passed its name and possessions down the male line. The oldest male usually received a double portion of the inheritance as he would become responsible for the welfare of the entire family. The purpose of passing on responsibility through the male line was to ensure no family member was left in poverty. The tribal community was also patrilocal which meant that the family shared a living space over which the oldest male would be responsible. He would thereby “redeem” his relatives by bringing them back into the family circle.

The imagery in the story of redemption is that God becomes our patriarch; he “redeems” us by bringing us into his care and we live in community under his provision. We are lost outside of the circle of kinship and at his expense God has taken on the role of kinship redeemer to bring us under his care.

Chapter 2 – The Bible in Real Time and Space

The OT can be organized into five eras, each with a major character and storyline. The first is Adam (Genesis

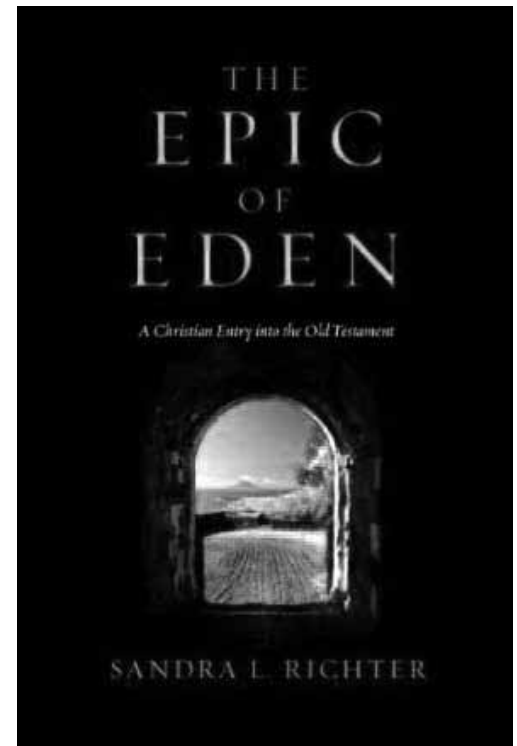
The imagery in the story of redemption is that God becomes our patriarch; he “redeems” us by bringing us into his care and we live in community under his provision.

1–5). It is through Adam's sin that there is a need for redemption and God's rescue plan begins. The second benchmark is Noah (Genesis 6–11) and the flood event which transitions us from the Adamic Age to the current one with God's re-creation covenant made. The third is Abraham (Genesis 12–50) with whom we can now trace time, around 2000 B.C. and whose covenant with God brings about the nation of Israel. Fourth is Moses (Exodus and Judges) through whom God establishes his people into a nation and settles them into a land set apart for them. Finally, in the OT is David (1 Samuel – 2 Chronicles). God establishes his kingly line from whom the king of kings will descend.

This drama unfolds around three general geographical regions: Mesopotamia (Assyria and Babylon), Israel (Canaan and Palestine) and Egypt. This area was known as the Fertile Crescent. It is important to know some of the geography as these stories happened in real space and time and if we know the culture, economy, and the people of these areas it can enhance our understanding of these stories.

Chapter 3 – The Concept of Covenant

The theology of the OT is organized around the five central figures and the five covenantal interactions God had



with them. A covenant is an agreement between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance. In OT culture people would create a “fictive kinship” through covenants thereby creating a new relationship. There were two types of covenants in the ancient Near East: the parity treaty, one made between equals using terms like “brothers.” The second was suzerain/vassal treaty made between greater and lesser powers using terms like “father and son” or “lord and servant.” A covenant involved oaths that resulted in obligations placed on both parties. The covenant was then ratified by a ceremony which usually included a sacrifice and a reading of the obligations of the covenant along with the blessings if the contract was maintained and the curses if it was broken.

What we see at Mount Sinai is God using the covenant concept, something the people would be very familiar with, in order to communicate his plan of redemption. God is the suzerain and Israel is the vassal. The covenant allowed

God to teach the nation of Israel about himself and his expectations.

Chapter 4 – God’s Original Intent

Although no declaration of a covenant is made we see God as the suzerain lord promising Adam and Eve the land grant of paradise if they remain loyal to their agreement. The agreement was that they would not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 1 was written to provide a lens through which to read the rest of the Pentateuch. It answers the question of who is God and what is his relationship to creation. This was significant for the Israelites as they left Egypt and its polytheistic culture.

The seven days of creation were being used as a literary device, not to give a chronology but to organize the details of creation. In verses 1–3 God created habitats and then in verses 4–6 he created the corresponding inhabitants who will rule over each habitat. The climax is the creation of man and woman who were to rule over all that has been created. Finally, on the seventh day God rested, establishing that he is the supreme authority over everything. This day is reserved for the acknowledgment of God as creator and ruler over all and to remember that humankind’s identity is not based in their work but in their creator.

By combining Genesis 1 with Genesis 2 we get a clearer picture of the covenant. God’s perfect plan was that the people of God would dwell in the place of God and in the presence of God. God’s covenant with Adam and Eve gave them freedom to do anything except decide for themselves what is good and evil. God reserved that right and responsibility for himself. The choice was left up to them to choose their lord and they chose to reject the covenant and God’s plan. As a consequence there was a removal and reversal of the blessings God had for them. Their relationship to God, each other and the creation they had dominion over was now in conflict. They had lost their status as the people of God; they no longer lived

in the place of God or in the presence of God. This sets the stage for God’s great plan of redemption as it explains what we have lost and begins the story of God’s plan to restore it.

Chapter 5 – God’s Final Intent

One way to answer the question of how God will redeem humanity is by tracing the iconography of Eden throughout the rest of Scripture. Cherubim were stationed at the entrance of the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were cast out so that humanity could not return. The presence of God has been blocked by his guards. We next find cherubim in Exodus 25–26 and 36–37 in the design of the tabernacle. God instructs Moses to build a tabernacle so that he may dwell amongst his people once again. This had not occurred since the garden. The curtains of the Holy of Holies and the veil that divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place were adorned with cherubim, as was the Ark of the Covenant. The image is that they are stationed before God in order to defend from any unworthy person entering to see the King. The Holy of Holies, just like the garden, was God’s dwelling place, his throne room. It was in the Holy of Holies that God had an audience with his people.

Another icon used in Scripture is trees. Once the people were settled under David they turned to constructing a more permanent dwelling for God. Under God’s direction Solomon built the temple with the addition of carvings of trees, flowers and fruit, a further reminder of Eden.

A third icon is that of rivers. In Ezekiel there is a picture of the restoration of the final temple at the end of time. It is characterized as being a perfect square as well as having a river which gives life everywhere it goes just like the river in Eden (Genesis 2:10). The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22 is the new Eden, a fruit-filled paradise animated by a cosmic river and graced by the Tree of Life. This perfect square, like

the Holy of Holies, will be God’s dwelling place, and here he will live side by side with a redeemed, sinless people. There is no longer any need for cherubim as there will no longer be enemies. Where is heaven? Where God lives and where the people of God dwell in the place of God enjoying the presence of God.

The Bible teaches us that God has been leading humanity back to Eden by means of a sequence of steps, rescues and covenants through Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

Chapter 6 – Noah and Abraham

By the time of Noah the earth was full of the depravity of man (Genesis 6). We do not know how long it has been since Adam but it must have been a long time as humanity was able to grow, develop and decay. Interestingly, there are a number of flood accounts coming out of the Mesopotamian area which coincide with the time of the Biblical account of the flood.

The flood is a de-creational event. Everything done at creation was undone. God starts again with Noah and his family, only this time he started with a fallen world. He began with a covenant that applied to all humanity and all creation. Never again will he destroy the earth and its inhabitants. The other significant aspect of this story is the roots of the nations. One evening after Noah had too much to drink, he fell asleep naked and uncovered. One of his sons saw him and does nothing but the other two sons cover him. Therefore Noah blessed the two sons; Shem from whom the children of Israel will come and Japheth from whom the numerous gentiles north of Canaan will come. The one he cursed, Ham, was the father of those in Egypt and Canaan. So the good guys and the bad guys of Israel’s world have been defined.

Abraham is introduced in Genesis 12 and can be placed around 2000 BC. This was during the Middle Bronze Age with both urban and non-urban settings.

In this context God made a covenant with Abraham in which He promises a people and a place. This covenant was made again in Genesis 15 but this time it included a ratification ceremony. However, it is the greater party who took the role of the lesser party. In verse 1 of Genesis 15 God also promised his presence to Abraham: “I am your very great reward.” As part of the covenant Abraham and all of his male offspring were to be circumcised. Although not new to the ancient world, Israel was unique in that they circumcised babies. This became an important ethnic marker for Israel.

God has re-established contact through Noah, and the people, place and presence of God have been identified through the covenant with Abraham.

Chapter 7 – Moses and the Tabernacle

The Exodus has been dated at both 1446 BC and 1250 BC based on both Biblical and external evidence. The exact date is not known. The Israelites have come to Egypt through Joseph and his father’s family. They have grown in number over the years and the pharaoh has enslaved them to build his kingdom. But God’s hand is at work. The pharaoh had ordered the death of all Hebrew children in order to cull the population. Moses is saved and raised as an Egyptian who learns to read, write, administrate and was trained in the art of war and diplomacy. Thus, he becomes the only Hebrew with the skill and training to negotiate the release of the Hebrews. Through Moses, God redeems his people, delivering them from slavery and poverty to a place of security, hope and a future. This one event is how God has chosen to be known throughout the nation’s history and is the reason the Israelites should serve him.

At Sinai the suzerain/vassal covenant is brought to Israel. Through this covenant God provides them with



The Bible teaches us that God has been leading humanity back to Eden by means of a sequence of steps, rescues and covenants through Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

law, a calendar, to organize their time, and a cultic system, based around the tabernacle. With the covenant God is enthroned, the people of God dwell with the presence of God and they are on their way to claim the place (land) of God.

It was a theocratic society ruled by God and represented by three offices: the prophet, who spoke for God to the people; the priest, who spoke for the people to God; and the king or judge, who represented the nation and kept the people adhering to the covenant. What we have through the Mosaic covenant is a typology. This covenant teaches us so that we can understand the new covenant that is to come through Jesus. By understanding all the requirements and workings of the covenant we can grasp what has occurred through the new

covenant. The old is a type of the new so that we can better understand the new.

Chapter 8 – David and the Monarchy

David’s covenant does not change the identity of the people, place and presence of the Mosaic covenant, but it adds a crucial dimension, a royal human representative who stands between God and his people. From Sinai we have the era of the judges. The people lived as tribes independent of each other. However, the nation’s success was dependant on adherence to the covenant and the people struggled with that. They would go through cycles of disobedience, to being oppressed by foreign nations, to crying out in repentance, to the rise of a judge or deliverer, to a military victory, to obedience and prosperity, only to start the cycle again.

In Deuteronomy 17:14–20 we see that it was God’s idea to have a king, but in Samuel 18:7 God warned the people about the consequences of choosing a king. Why the contradiction? The people’s motivation. They wanted a king who would form a professional army and fight in battle—yet God

had told them all they need to do is to adhere to the covenant and there would be no battles. So Saul becomes their first king. Saul was the king the people wanted because of his outward appearance but he failed as he forgot who ruled the kingdom. David was the king of God’s choosing because of the content of his heart. God knew David would remain loyal, which he did, even when confronted with his sin. God’s covenant with David is that God will build a “house,” a dynasty from him, who will rule God’s people forever.

From the kings that follow we see a recurring cycle of sin and rebellion. The people are still not adhering to the covenant. The kingdom splits and the foreign invaders come. Ten tribes are lost. Finally, the curse is enacted, the land

grant is recalled, the temple is destroyed, and the children of Abraham are killed and exiled. But there is still hope. The people hope for their deliverer from the “stem of Jesse.”

The Davidic covenant adds to the Mosaic covenant the typological figure that will play a major role in the fulfillment of the promised new covenant, a king for God’s kingdom.

Chapter 9 – The New Covenant and the Return of the King

The Jewish leaders were expecting one from the line of David to come and overthrow their oppressors and restore Israel as a nation. The gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy because this was one of Jesus’ most important credentials. John the Baptist, the last prophet of the

The curse is enacted...but there is still hope. The people hope for their deliverer from the “stem of Jesse.”

Mosaic covenant, announces the coming of the one who would restore the people to God. The baptism of Jesus juxtaposes the old and new covenants. The prophet baptized the new king as a sign of the new covenant; the symbolic oil was replaced by the descending of the Holy Spirit; and the voice of God, as opposed to the prophet, announces that Jesus was the one. Jesus is now the prophet, priest and king.

The new covenant became available to all, not just the biological offspring

of Abraham. We can all be the people of God. The place of God is the New Jerusalem, a re-created earth which is already ours and is still to come. The presence of God is no longer in the temple. Rather, the individual has become the dwelling place of God and in the restored Eden God will be amongst his people. We have come full circle; God’s original intent of every man, woman and child being able to be his people and dwell in his presence, in his place, was accomplished in Christ. θ

Feature Sermon

Romans 1:16–25

There’s a Word I Can’t Say

David Kruse

Rev. David Kruse, BA, MA, is serving as pastor of MacGregor EMC (Man.), where this sermon was preached on June 12, 2011. He has served in MacGregor for just more than two years and is grateful “preaching is a skill that is developing.” Previously, he was an associate pastor at Fort Garry EMC in Winnipeg, Man.



Summary: The gospel is the power of God to save anyone who believes it. The good news makes people in right relationship with God by faith. Those people who are not in right relationship with God are keeping the truth down. They know there’s a God because of the created world, but they don’t give him credit or thanks, so God lets them become confused and become enslaved to their bodies’ desires.

THE GOSPEL IS THE good news, the good news about Jesus. It needs to be put into words. And it makes things happen. But it is sometimes hard for us to say. This morning I want look at some of the reasons why it’s hard to speak about Jesus and why it’s worth it to do it, anyway. The gospel of Jesus changes lives.

Learning words

As a child reader I learned words. Some of them I never took the time to pronounce out loud. I skimmed silently along, figuring out from the context what the word must mean. One of those words was in C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*. Often instead of calling a cliff a cliff, he would use the word precipice. I had never



¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

¹⁷For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood

from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

heard anyone say “precipice.” When I finally had reason to say this word myself, I said “pre-SYPE.” I didn’t know how to say it. But there’s another word I can’t say.

Paraguay

As a child in a foreign culture, I learned to imitate sounds of speech. We moved to Paraguay when I was 10. My Dad was my teacher and school was in High German. For the most part, I had no idea what the teacher or other students or the textbooks were saying. But I learned to imitate the sounds of their speech and connect it to the words on the page, and I learned to speak grade school German. In fact, because of how German spelling works, I learned to pronounce perfectly German words I didn’t know the meaning of. But there’s still a word in English I can’t say.

As a singer I learned to imitate quality of tone and diction. Studying voice at Providence College I was required to sing in Latin, Italian, and German. I had a Korean roommate. I met African students and learned a few of their words. Sometimes people would be surprised at how quickly I could accurately reproduce the sounds they had just made, and I would explain that as a singer I had to imitate sounds, so my ear was practiced in that sort of listening. But there's still a word I can't say.

Violations of Pronunciation

Listening to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances has shown me that when someone mispronounces something, it really stands out; I really notice. It's somewhat distracting. I hear that people with perfect musical pitch are often frustrated listening to performances if the piano isn't correctly tuned or a singer is off key.

I don't have perfect pitch, and I also don't claim to have perfect speech, but I have a strong internal standard of pronunciation. Of course, I make allowances for the recognized variations of tomayto-tomahto, and I have no disrespect for regional or foreign accents. But I still notice when people pronounce things differently than I do.

Here are some violations of my standard of pronunciation that I remember:

- Instead of “especially,” one speaker says “expecially”
- Instead of “frustrated,” one speaker says “fusstrated.”
- Instead of “parallel,” one speakers says “paraLELL”
- Instead of “something,” one speaker says “sunthing”
- Instead of “spirit,” one speaker says “spur-it”

- Instead of “supposedly,” one speaker says “supposably”

These are all intelligent people, but there are certain words that, according to my standards, they can't say. There's a word I can't say, either.

Irony

You may find it ironic what that word is. Not being able to pronounce it makes me feel a bit ashamed and exposed. The word is: vulnerable. I practiced it so you'd be able to understand which word I was talking about. I'm never sure if it should be three syllables (VUL-ner-bul) or four syllables (VUL-ner-ah-bull). I've also been told I can't easily say Rural, Plural (apparently), or Fuchsia (fyoo-shuh).

Hewitt

Hugh Hewitt, an American lawyer and Christian radio personality, wrote a fascinating book called *The Embarrassed Believer*. I heard him once on *Focus on the Family* radio describing how difficult it is in “normal” social interactions to say the word *Jesus*.

Now, I actually have some physiological trouble saying the word: Should I say “JEE-ziss” or “jee-zuhss” or something with more of a southern drawl? But Hugh Hewitt isn't talking about that.

He's saying that it's hard for Christians—even the born-again evangelical kind—to talk about Jesus. I could identify with what he was saying. When I first have a conversation with a stranger, it's much easier to say something about “spirituality” or “my beliefs” than to mention God. It's much easier to say something about “God” or “church” than to mention Jesus.

Take a look at Hewitt's list from easiest to hardest to say:

- Spirituality
- Belief System
- Religion
(Not too hard)

As a singer I had to imitate sounds, so my ear was practiced in that sort of listening. But there's still a word I can't say.

- Faith
- The Divine
- God
(A bit harder)
- Lord
- The Spirit
- The Holy Spirit
(Pretty hard)
- Christ
- Jesus
- My Saviour
(Very hard)

Why is it so hard to say the name of Jesus? Barlow Girl sings these words in the song “Keep Quiet”: *Let's hope they see I'm different Jesus, Jesus why's Your name offensive? Why are we so scared to tell this world You've saved us when all of the hope of the world's in Your name?*

Why is it so hard to say the name of Jesus? Can you identify with some of the following reasons?

Jesus is just so...specific

Jesus is just so...specific. As we heard in Romans 1, the created world generally communicates to all humans that there is a God. Everyone at least has some suspicion that there are forces beyond their control or explanation. Some acknowledge intelligent design, “the divine,” or a Creator.

Many people in Western cultures believe in God, loosely defined according to the Jewish and Christian view. But that's much different than claiming to

follow the specific way of Jesus, and claiming to have a current personal connection to someone who lived thousands of years ago in Palestine.

The claims of Jesus and of the group he inspired are so specific and counter-intuitive. Jesus' way questions the conventional wisdom of most people. Jesus is just so specific. His name is hard to say.

Jesus is unique

Jesus is unique. His claims can hardly be compared to anything else. Sure, there are ancient myths of rebirth and resurrection among the pagan gods, but none are rooted in the specifics of time and space, the way the Gospels give us the story of Jesus.

Jesus claimed a unique relationship with God. He claimed to know the will of God, as a son knows a father in a close relationship. He claimed to speak uniquely for God. His name is hard to say.

Jesus is the final word

Jesus is the final word. God revealed God's self in the fullest way in Jesus of Nazareth. If we want to know what God values, we look at what Jesus valued. If we want to see a perfectly obedient life, we look to Jesus' example.

This is how theologian and songwriter Michael Card puts it: *When the Father's wisdom wanted to communicate His Love, He spoke it in one final, perfect Word. He spoke the Incarnation, and then so was born the Son. His final Word was Jesus, He needed no other one.*

The TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* is famous for the line: "Is that your final answer?" It's hard sometimes for the contestant to say, "That's my final answer." It's hard to commit, to give up all the other options. Jesus is final and his name is hard to say.

Jesus is demanding

Jesus is demanding. Though Jesus was the specific revelation of God's character and the unique revelation of God's will, it is hard to accept what he requires of us. He says: Love your enemies, give away your possessions, kill your selfishness, trust God. We don't want to do those things. Jesus is demanding. His name is hard to say.

Jesus is a hard name to say because he is so specific, unique, final, and demanding, so why try? Why try to speak of him?

Jesus commanded it

Jesus commanded it. Jesus told us to make disciples, and promised he'd be with us as we did so. If we are trying to make disciples, Jesus will be with us, will bless us with the power to do it. We'll be working together with the God of all creation.

Danger of destruction

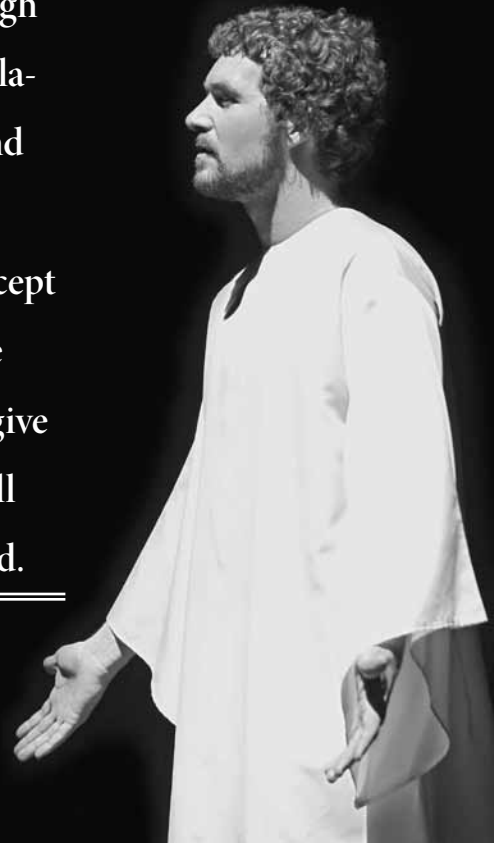
Why try to speak of him? There is definite danger of destruction. For those who reject Jesus, there remains the real risk of eternal loss, the separation from God and from all goodness—what we call Hell. Our lives here are short; what they result in is long. In one lifetime of choices, the result is eternal. Eternal reward or eternal loss.

Changed lives

Why is it worth it to push through our fears and embarrassment, to speak the name of Jesus and his power to save? Two words: Changed lives. Look in the mirror. Look at the people around you who are who they are because Jesus has changed them, has inspired them, has kept them from evil.

The gospel of Jesus changes lives. Even people you know who claim to be

Jesus is demanding. Though Jesus was the specific revelation of God's character and the unique revelation of God's will, it is hard to accept what he requires of us. He says: Love your enemies, give away your possessions, kill your selfishness, trust God.



against Christianity, resistant to Jesus' claims on their lives, can be changed. Sometimes the people voted least likely to become a Christian are the ones searching most intently for something solid to believe in, something great to give themselves to.

Where I went to high school there are some similarities to this high school: a clear group of Christians, the rockers, the smokers, the partiers, and so on. I ran for student council president, and, while I struggled with how to refer to my faith in my campaign speech, my opponent prepared for his moment onstage by securing a beer hat (the kind with a beer can holder on each side and tubes running down to the mouth).

He was a partier with a short-term, not eternal, perspective. About 20 years later I bumped into him in, of all places, a Baptist church. Somehow in the intervening years, God had got a hold of him and he'd been changed by Jesus. He was still his happy-go-lucky self, but he had an eternal perspective. The gospel of Jesus changes lives.

We are witnesses

Jesus is the specific and unique revelation of God's character and will, but not everyone has yet understood or accepted the story. We are witnesses to the truth of the story. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas helps us understand. He says:

If the gospel were a truth that could be known in general, then there would be no necessity to witness. All that would be necessary would be to confirm people in what they already know. If the gospel were about general human experience that is unavoidable, then there would be no necessity of being confronted by anyone as odd as a Christian. But because the story we tell of God is the story of the life

Jesus is the specific and unique revelation of God's character and will, but not everyone has yet understood or accepted the story. We are witnesses to the truth of the story.

and death of Jesus of Nazareth, then the only way to know that story is through witness.¹

Pentecost

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the Church. The Spirit of God was given in a new way, a fresh way, at the festival of Pentecost. With that first showing of the Spirit there was a sight and a sound so the people could see that something was happening, and that it was happening to the others in the group at the same time. After that they praised God out loud, and realized that they were speaking foreign languages they had never learned, words they didn't know how to say!

Speakers of those foreign languages heard them "declaring the praises of God in their own languages" (Acts 2:11). What does that tell you? "Declaring the praises of God in their own languages" tells me that the first effect of the Holy Spirit was praise, and that that praise was witness. The Spirit made them praise God out loud and in a way that drew others in. The Spirit inspired praise and witness. But only after the Spirit moved Peter to preach in the common language with common sense did people repent and believe. So the Spirit uses the spoken word to win hearts to Jesus.

Motivation

With all this talk about "talk," you may be feeling guilty for not doing more of it. I'm working on the big assumption here

that witness is both word and deed, but that words are the hard part. Being kind and helpful to your neighbours, contributing to the common good in our community, being a law-abiding citizen is pretty much a given. I've seen those things in you all.

Explaining why you do those things is more difficult. Stating your motivation is a challenge. Naming Jesus as your inspiration takes some courage. I'm also preaching this sermon to myself; I need to face my fears and share the good news about Jesus. And I work at that because the gospel of Jesus changes lives. I hope you can overcome your own objections to be part of it.

There are some words that are hard to say, because they will show that we're different than those listening to us. It's hard to talk about Jesus for a variety of reasons: they'll think I'm weird, I'll say something wrong and mislead them, I'll say something hard and they'll be turned off, they'll think of me as no longer one of them.

But God has chosen to work through the proclamation of the Gospel. That's why Paul can say in Romans 1 that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Later in Romans 10, he asks, how can people believe if they have never heard the message? How can they hear if no one says anything? How can someone say anything if they're not sent?

You are sent. I am reminding you on God's behalf that you are sent. God says, "I am sending you. Go and make disciples." The gospel of Jesus changes lives.

O Holy Spirit, fill us more and more. Inspire praise in us; point us to the people who need to hear the good news about Jesus. And help us to speak his name with joy. ☉

¹ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Paternoster, 2006), 149.

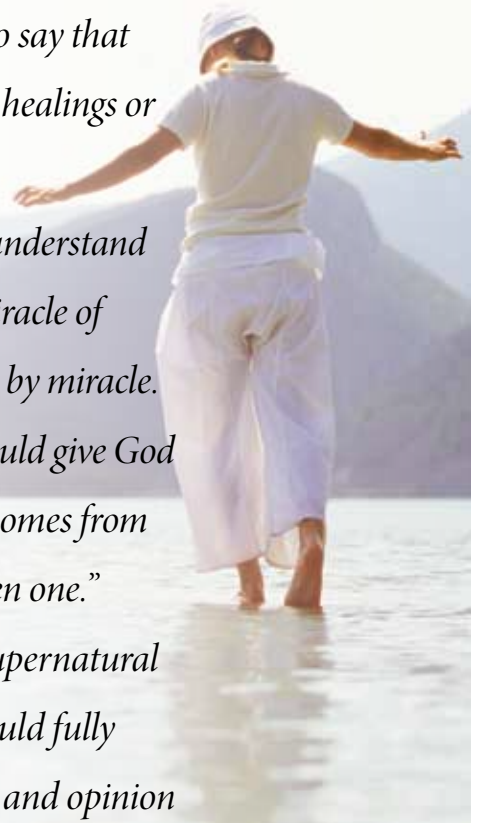
The Final Word

WE DARE NOT PUT GOD IN A BOX
on this matter, saying that he cannot give the gifts of healing or miracles today. He can. On the other hand, to say that is not the same thing as saying we have a right to expect healings or that what passes for the miraculous today is authentic.

Dr. C. Everett Koop writes, "I believe in miracles. I understand that all healing comes from God. I would love to see a miracle of healing where God supervenes his natural law and heals by miracle. If I were to see such a miracle, I would be overjoyed. I would give God the praise. But now, in spite of believing that all healing comes from God and in spite of believing in miracles, I have never seen one."

His experience has led him to conclude that truly supernatural healings are not occurring in our time. Whether one would fully agree with him in that conclusion or not, his experience and opinion should be a warning to those who talk loosely about this matter and even claim miracles in questionable cases.

James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986, 614–615.



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