

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Redeeming Mental Illness

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**An Annotated
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Transforming Our Sorrow



Editorial

What Do We Mean by Peace?

NONVIOLENCE IS A HALLMARK of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith reaching back to our beginnings in Switzerland and Holland. For many of us in the EMC it would seem that we have stood alone in the pacifist camp all these centuries. That is not the case.

I was startled to discover pockets of war resisters in England during World War I who were not Mennonites. Far from it, in fact.

I picked up a cheap book at Chapters entitled *To End All Wars* by Adam Hochschild and was delighted to fill my appetite for historical fare while at the same time learning about the radical lobbyists for peace in hostile times.

Few Anabaptists who believe in the non-resistant stance of our faith have likely ever heard of Cristobel and Sylvia Pankhurst, the Hobhouse family, Keir Hardie, or Charlotte Despard.

Yet each of these individuals and families suffered for their anti-war stance, serving jail time, enduring politically motivated trials whose outcomes were long decided before the gavel hit the block. Surprisingly, none of these resisters were at all inclined by faith in Christ to take this stand. In fact, one famous resister was the renowned atheist Bertrand Russell.

It appears that, aside from faith, it was the insanity of war, the millions dying on foreign fields of battle for

making peace. I wondered what made us different from these characters of English history.

We essentially agree that violence is not the answer for world conflict or cross-border crises. We agree that to send young men and women into the jaws of machine guns and to endure the relentless shelling of a field gun is hideous.

What makes us different from the Hardies and Despards is our motivation for peace. What makes us different from the Vietnam War protesters and the Iraq War protesters and the “peaceniks” of our time is our understanding of God.

Why do we want peace? What do we mean by peace?

What bothers me personally is where the Anabaptist position on peace appears to be headed. Peace for peace’s sake is not satisfying for me. As one professor told me, it seems that Anabaptists tend to make a god out of the peace position.

It has often been said that peace is at the heart of the gospel. Yet what I read in 1 John is that God is love. “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

You can see peace in the sentence: Jesus is an atoning sacrifice. But it is a product of the love of God, the love God has for us. Therefore, peace is not the heart of the gospel, love is.

As a disciple of Jesus I am compelled to emulate my Master. If I am going to model my life on his life then I am going to copy his love.

You see, if I love like Jesus loved then I will do everything to keep from harming you because I love you. My love, based on the love of Christ, will lead me to make peace with you or for you.

Despite my interest in history and wars in particular (I find them fascinating), I deplore the violence of war. I know I’m an enigma. When I think of 18- to 20-year-olds throwing their lives into the maw for an indiscernible cause, my heart is wrenched. Or for a cause that feeds some political machinery—how painful is that for God to watch. I truly pray that wars would cease.

But more than that, I pray that the world would come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ. If that happened, there would be peace. 

Darryl G. Klassen



The zealous nature of these resisters incited me to ponder the motivation we as Anabaptists have for making peace. I wondered what made us different from these characters of English history.

irrational causes that prompted these people to take a stand. Nationalism and patriotism swept the majority into the violence of this tempest.

Many cried that it was the right thing to do, that it was even unchristian to stay home while your neighbours fought to preserve the nation you enjoyed. A minority driven by morality and the injustice of fighting a war that made no sense stood against this nationalism to oppose the war.

The zealous nature of these resisters incited me to ponder the motivation we as Anabaptists have for

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Redeeming Mental Illness: a Biblical Perspective



Pastor Darryl G. Klassen

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MENTAL ILLNESS IS AN ancient malady that has persisted in the communities of humankind since ancient times. It has been given different labels and sufferers have been victimized by the uninitiated until the field of psychology enlightened us in recent decades.

Mental illness is debilitating and extremely introspective. One who suffers evaluates, judges and critiques oneself to one's own misery. If left unchecked it can have fatal consequences. Those who

care for the sufferer often feel helpless to know how to help. Others may label the sufferer as crazy, insane, self-centred, or any number of unfair characterizations. It is even common for society to point to mental illness when a gunman massacres a number of innocent victims.

The Church has added to the misery of many who have felt the dark grip of depression in their lives by defining it as "sin" or unfaithfulness. In some faith communities depression is the new

leprosy, the "healthy" being afraid to be tainted by the gloom of the "unhealthy." Christians are not supposed to despair or lose hope, but cling to the promises of God in the face of trauma or adversity. That, however, is not the world we live in today. Nor was it the world of the people of faith in the Bible.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the biblical personalities who suffered mental illness in order to develop a biblical perspective of mental illness.

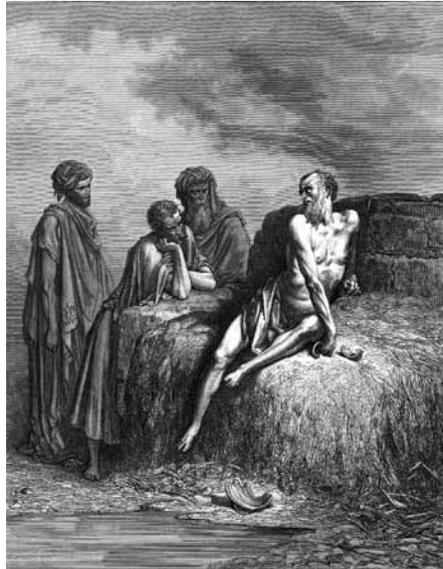
From this exploration we will discover the worth of mental illness in the Bible so as to appreciate all of God's gifts in whatever form they come. Is there a redeeming worth to mental illness that the Christian community can appreciate? A study of the lives of Job, David, Elijah and Jesus reveals that God can use the experience of mental illness in his servants to teach great truths.

Job's Tragic Losses

It is not surprising that our earliest example of mental illness is the person of Job in the OT. Job personifies every type of loss humankind can imagine: he lost his wealth, his means of livelihood, his servants, and his children. To exacerbate matters further, Job lost his health. Even his marriage was affected by his losses.

When Job begins to speak of his inner turmoil we get a sense of a depressive state in his countenance. He rues the day of his birth: "May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!' That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it" (Job 3:3–4). Again he cries, "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (3:11).

Job even fixates on his own death as a means of escape: "Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure..." (3:20–21). Sleep evades him as he wrestles with sorrow, "...so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been



By chapter 30 of Job, the suffering patriarch speaks in such a way that modern professionals have no trouble diagnosing Job with full-blown depression.

assigned to me. When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss till dawn" (7:3–4).

By chapter 30 of Job, the suffering patriarch speaks in such a way that modern professionals have no trouble diagnosing Job with full-blown depression. Job exhibits symptoms coinciding with a dysphoric mood: sadness (v. 28)—he gives in to uncontrolled crying in a public setting; fear, hopelessness and despondency (v. 15); irritability at younger men (v. 1); helplessness and discouragement as he feels as if toyed with by God (20, 22). Coupled with other criteria such as poor appetite (30:27), sleep deprivation (30:17), loss of sex drive (31:1), and

recurrent thoughts of death (30:23), there is no question that Job would be in therapy today.¹

H. Norman Wright wrote, "Losses are often at the heart of depression. Any loss can trigger a reactive depression—the loss of a person, a job, a home, a car, a valued photograph, a pet. The stronger the attachment, the more intense the feelings of loss. Loss is especially devastating for women because they put so much of themselves into relationships and build such strong attachments."²

Such traumatic losses are bound to have an adverse affect on any survivor or victim. "No matter where the origin may be when a person becomes ill in one area his total personality is likely to suffer. By sickness we mean a condition in which an individual cannot function as he was meant to function; in which his energies are consumed in a destructive struggle rather than being freed for creative, positive experiences."³

Illness brings us face to face with certain basic issues that can force us to search for biblical answers. What is the meaning of life? What is the nature and purpose of life that involves physical, emotional or spiritual suffering? Can one learn to endure suffering without becoming ill? How do we overcome suffering?

These are questions raised by Job from his own pain and which echo pertinently for us in our suffering today. We relate to Job because of all the characters in the Bible we feel what he felt in terms of mental anguish and personal loss.

Richard Keady quotes Erik Erikson in his paper on depression citing a young Martin Luther as a psychological case in this regard. "In looking at the list of painful problems Luther experienced at that time we find a striking number which are in the list of depressive characteristics...self-doubt, fear of God's judgment, crisis of generativity, cardiac spasms, constipation, severe sweats, low self-esteem and buzzing in his ears. These many characteristics

1 Morton Allan Kapusta and Solomon Frank, "The Book of Job and the Modern View of Depression," *Annals of Internal Medicine* (86:667–672, 1977), 668.

2 H. Norman Wright, Matt Woodley, and Julie Woodley, *Surviving the Storms of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2008), 65.

3 Carroll A. Wise, *Psychiatry and the Bible* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 3.

would indicate that Luther certainly held God to be a God of wrath.⁴

It was from this perspective that Luther viewed God and therefore this is the kind of God he believed in. This, for Luther, was cause for great distress, guilt and confusion that led to his trip into darkness. The more he learned about the law of God the greater his fear of God since he knew that he could not fulfill the law to God's satisfaction.

Of course, as history tells us, Luther discovered that through Christ we no longer are required to fulfill the law due to Christ's gracious sacrifice. The way out of depression for Luther was to be found in God's action of grace in Christ and his stubborn affirmation that God is a God of mercy and justice. How we view God leads to how we view ourselves and ultimately dictates, in part, our mental wellbeing.

"The fundamental reason why a particular concept of God would contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of an individual is that the concept of God comes closer to describing God as He is in reality more than any other concept of God."⁵ Our concept of God is governed first and foremost by the Word of God and Jesus Christ who is the exact representation of his being (Heb. 1:3).

Having said this, the overwhelming feature of the book and character of Job is that he does not surrender his faith in God (23:10–12). Even when he demands an audience with God so that God may explain this suffering, the redeeming aspect of this brash request is that he seeks out God for his answers. Job does not turn to other means to alleviate his pain but goes to God in tears and prayer to find solace for his inner angst.

4 Richard E. Keady, "Depression, Psychophysiology and Concepts of God" (*Encounter*, 41 no 3 Sum 1980, 263–277), 270.

5 Keady, 274.

6 Pam and Jon Ruthven, "The Feckless Later Reign of King David: A Case of Major Depressive Disorder?" (*The Journal of Pastoral Care*, Winter 2001, vol. 55, No. 4), 425.

It is obvious to many readers of the Psalms that many of David's works arise out of a depressed state.

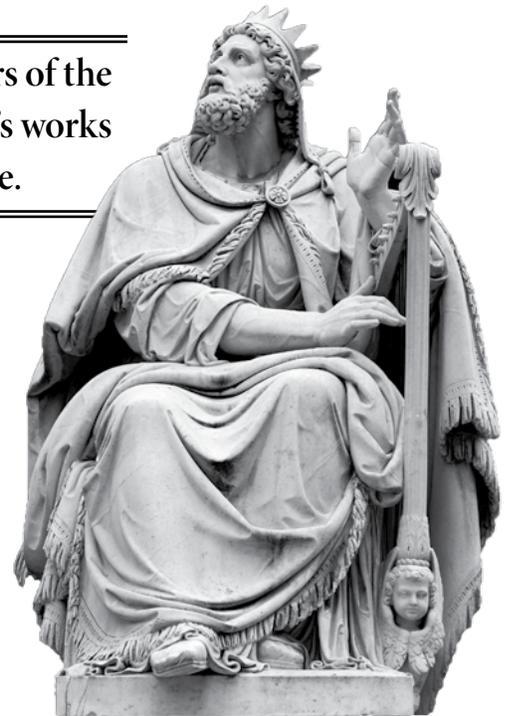
David's Depressive Disorder

King David offers another case study of a biblical personality afflicted by mental illness. Many explanations have been offered concerning the unflattering account of his later reign from 2 Samuel 11 to 1 Kings 2 focusing on theological, political, and sociological components.

However, Drs. Pam and Jon Ruthven come from the psychiatric angle and suggest this:

Another axis of interpretation from the perspective of modern psychiatry may provide an integrated and useful framework for this story; i.e. that the account describes a David suffering from chronic Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). MDD is an emotional disorder characterized primarily by a sense of apathy and hopelessness, emotional detachment from most familial, social, or occupational activities. Associated symptoms include sleep disturbance, decreased energy, psychomotor agitation, indecisiveness, and excessive thoughts of guilt, death, or suicide. MDD often result from prolonged and intense stress. As a "quick fix" for its pain, an MDD sufferer may resort to addictive, impulsive, and immoral acts.⁶

The Ruthvens identify several key symptoms of MDD in their analysis of



David, some of which will be mentioned here. It is obvious to many readers of the Psalms that many of David's works arise out of a depressed state. Psalm 3:1–2 expressed David's feelings when his son Absalom revolted and wrested the kingdom from David's hands. David cried, "O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" This situation in particular reveals David's paranoia and passiveness even as he flees from his own son, doing nothing to assert his royal rights.

David further reveals his feelings of guilt, worthlessness and general melancholy in Psalm 6:1–10. Here he expresses excessive guilt for an unknown offense against God citing great weeping and insomnia. Other Psalms have David writing about abandonment (Pss 10, 13), fear of God's wrath (Ps 28), and forsakenness (Ps 22). The latter is most famous as prophecy concerning Christ's own emotional battle on the cross.

Reviewing the life of David, professionals note that the ups and downs of his early career may have contributed to what today is called a "meltdown."

“Perhaps precipitating the symptoms of MDD...depression-generating stress certainly was not absent from the story of David leading up to his Jerusalem reign. Years of alternating between extremes of rejection, life-threatening danger and exhilarating victories could well have contributed to emotional burnout that David exhibited throughout the succession narrative.”⁷

Ultimately, MDD was manifested in David in the Bathsheba affair, something akin to a mid-life crisis. The text (2 Sam. 11) indicates that the time for kings to do battle had come, but David sent his men off without him. It is said that a sexual encounter, ranging from consensual affairs to rape, can serve as an instant feel-good “fix” to cope with the pain of hopelessness, low self-esteem, lost goals, idealism, fading sexual attractiveness and vigor, even aging.⁸ Could it be that David felt that with all his dreams realized he succumbed to emotional deflation? It is said that Alexander the Great wept when he realized that there were no more countries to conquer.

David had no lack of wives at his disposal for sexual fulfillment; therefore lust appears to be less an issue for him than the loss of lust. Loss of libido is characteristic of depression. Forbidden sexual excitement with a young wife of another man could only provide a part of David’s motivation.⁹ It is but one way of making an aging king feel alive. There are many unfortunate results of this encounter, greatest among them being the murder of the woman’s husband by order of the king.

David’s story helps us see a greater theme in the Books of the Kings, which

reveals a tension between those God calls to his service and the human frailty of the same. The major personalities, Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon, portray the absurdity of political idolatry that affects all in the realm, leader and follower alike. These flawed human beings remind us that only God is morally perfect and only God is fit to be king.

What we learn from David himself is that, though he may have suffered from MDD, God chose to use him despite his crippling emotional disorder. “God’s grace transcended this weakness and exulted in David as a servant ‘after God’s own heart.’”¹⁰ God can redeem his servants even in the midst of mental illness and its negative influences. David’s legacy to us is a depressed person used by God, a family line through which our Healer comes, and Psalms that speak for us in our pain.

Elijah’s Panic Attack

Elijah’s experience on Mount Carmel exemplifies the great high of a person in ministry (1 Kings 18:16–46). Highs are followed by lows inevitably, and the crash can leave a person in pieces. Those in ministry are particularly susceptible to mental illness as a result.

Wright described depression and Elijah’s post-high experience insightfully when he wrote, “The deeper the depression, the more paralyzing is your sense of helplessness. You feel passive and resigned. Everything seems out of focus. You feel as though you’re in a deep, dark pit, cold and isolated. There does not seem to be a way out of this pit either. Depression can blind you to the realities of life. It narrows your perception of the world. You end up feeling all alone, as though no one else cares about you.”¹¹ He goes on to say that depression can affect the way you see God, especially as a loving God with all the answers but who seems far off.

Following the Mount Carmel event, Elijah finds himself on the run from Ahab and Jezebel, the wicked rulers of Israel.

If the reader compares the 1 Kings 19 description of Elijah’s mental state with the Canadian Mental Health Association’s list of ten or so symptoms of depression, Elijah scores a six out of ten, enough to convince a healthcare professional that he is depressed.

Elijah cries, “I have had enough, LORD...Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (19:4). He is exhausted,

If the reader compares the 1 Kings 19 description of Elijah’s mental state with the Canadian Mental Health Association’s list of ten or so symptoms of depression, Elijah scores a six out of ten, enough to convince a healthcare professional that he is depressed.



7 Ruthven, 430.

8 Ruthven, 430.

9 Ruthven, 430.

10 Ruthven, 432.

11 Wright, Woodley, and Woodley, 67.

feeling worthless, and falls asleep under a tree (19:5). Elijah has no appetite to prepare himself a meal and so must be fed by divine intervention (19:5–7). He persists in the belief that he is better off dead and that he alone is the only person who cares about the things of God (19:10). These are the indicators that suggest deep depression in the person of Elijah.

The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon was known to have bouts of depression. He told his students at his pastors college, “One crushing stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low. The brother most relied upon becomes a traitor... Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor, or Demas the apostate.”¹²

Those in ministry know how devastating it can be to face one negative comment or find opposition in those we called allies. “You know what one cold-hearted man can do, if he gets at you on Sunday morning with a lump of ice, and freezes you with the information that Mrs. Smith and all her family are offended, and their pew is vacant. You did not want to know of that lady’s protest just before entering the pulpit, and it does not help you.”¹³

The drama and trauma of the last few days of the Elijah story left him

emotionally vulnerable to depression. In the rhythm of life as we have come to know it there are “ups” and “downs,” so it should not be a surprise that the high of the spiritual victory over Ahab and Jezebel’s prophets would diminish.

Following Elijah’s triumph comes the stark reality that not everyone appreciates his spiritual victory: the royal couple wants him dead. But even as God speaks dramatically at times, God also speaks in the subtle moments of life. Elijah’s depression was an opportunity for God to

Spurgeon saw three purposes in his own struggle with mental illness. The first was that it functioned like Paul’s thorn to keep him humble.



reveal this truth to the burnt-out prophet.

As Tony Baker writes, “...a life of walking with the Lord is not all wind, earthquake and fire. The Lord is saying, ‘Elijah, learn again to hear my word in the gentle whisper’ (19:12), literally ‘The sound of a gentle silence.’ That is how it still is for those of us who have the word of the Lord in Scripture. Much of receiving God’s Word is steady walking, listening, trusting and obeying.”¹⁴

Panic attacks tend to find their source in our self-importance, just as Elijah saw himself as the Lord’s only servant. The anxiety sets in when the burden

of a mission feels like it rests on your shoulders alone. Throw in aggressive opposition and the tension mounts to a place of despair and desperation. When you realize you cannot accomplish everything that is set before you, depression drifts in like a fog blinding your vision of what could be and what you are capable of doing. Elijah’s experience reminds us of the need for retreat and reflection and restoration. He reminds us of our need for a quiet moment with God to gain perspective.

Spurgeon’s Three Purposes

Spurgeon saw his depression as the design of God for the good of his ministry, a time to reevaluate and seek the glory of Christ, not one’s own glory. “It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity.”¹⁵

Spurgeon was a Calvinist who believed that everything came from God. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in believing that God can use any illness for his glory. Wright counseled, “Listen to your depression. There’s a message in it. It’s telling you that something is amiss in your life. It’s like a warning system or a protective device that can keep you from further stress. Admit your feelings to another person who can help you.”¹⁶

Spurgeon saw three purposes in his own struggle with mental illness. The first was that it functioned like Paul’s thorn to keep him humble. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ saith the Lord.” Instruments shall be used, but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifested; there shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing of the honour due to the Great Worker... Those who are honoured of their Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening, or to carry a peculiar cross, lest by any

12 Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 156.

13 Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *An All Round Ministry* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 8.

14 Tony Baker, “Elijah – A God just like his” (*Evangel*, 20.1 Spring 2002), 4.

15 Darrel W. Amundsen, “The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon,” (*Christian History*, issue 29, volume X, no. 1), 23.

16 Wright, Woodley, and Woodley, 71.

means they exalt themselves, and fall into the snare of the devil.”¹⁷

The second purpose was the surprising power it gave to his preaching and ministry. One morning he preached on Psalm 22 and spoke from his own experience about the horror of the darkness he had felt. A man came to see him the next day and shared how Spurgeon spoke into his own life and kept him from taking his own life.¹⁸

The third purpose Spurgeon saw for his depression was that he perceived it was a prophetic signal for what came next in his life. Depression, he said, came when the Lord was preparing something bigger for him in his ministry. The dark clouds of his illness parted and he was able to see the mercy of God.¹⁹

Jesus in the Garden

There is a question outstanding as to whether Jesus experienced depression in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Matthew records in his gospel that Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled. The Amplified Bible translates these words as “He began to show grief and distress of mind and was deeply depressed.” Jesus also says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mt. 26:38).

Wright suggests that with the cross before him and the realization that no one would stand with him in the final hour, Jesus’ depression is to be expected. Being human Jesus felt what any human would feel in a moment of crisis such as this. “Jesus knew what was about to happen

The argument Wright proposes has a foundation of truth in that Jesus felt all the emotions of being human and likely understood the underpinnings of depression.

to him, and it depressed him. He did not feel guilty over being depressed, and neither should we. But our depression creates a distortion of life and intensifies any guilt feelings we have. Thus, guilt over depression leads to more depression.”²⁰

Considering that clinical depression is a long-term experience, we must question whether Jesus experienced mental illness mere *hours* before the cross. However, the argument Wright proposes has a foundation of truth in that Jesus felt all the emotions of being human and likely understood the underpinnings of depression. It is important then to note that Jesus never taught that sickness was a sin nor would he consider mental illness to be sin itself, though it might be a consequence of sinfulness or immoral activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this biblical sketch we must concur with Wise in his summation of these stories:

The Bible is an account of the spiritual struggle of individuals and groups over a number of centuries. It portrays in vivid form experiences of fear and anxiety, hostility and quiet, faith and trust, love and forgiveness, and other profound attitudes and feelings. Here we find man at his lowest and at his highest, at his worst and at his best, portrayed concretely in language that communicates below the level of abstract ideas. The language of the Bible is heavily weighted with profound insights into the nature of life... It is because the experiences portrayed in

the Bible are similar to our own experiences that we can identify ourselves with its characters.²¹

Spurgeon and Luther were two also who found identification with the Bible personalities

when it came to heartache in ministry. Spurgeon expressed some modern day angst concerning the blows to the heart in preaching when he said, “What terrible blankets some professors are! Their remarks after a sermon are enough to stagger you... You have been pleading as for life or death and they have been calculating how many seconds the sermon occupied, and grudging you the odd five minutes beyond the usual hour.”²² That is a criticism that many preachers can relate to in their ministries. For others it exemplifies the feeling we all get when nothing we do seems to work out right or satisfy others.

How is mental illness redeemed in these biblical examples and historical illustrations? Mental illness is nothing new. Despite what some contemporary ministers deign to tell us, mental illness is not a modern phenomenon arising out of North American prosperity. It is an ancient illness that afflicted many, including patriarchs and prophets in the OT. Like all things in a fallen world, strength and weakness, health and sickness, victories and defeats—all things can be used by God to bring glory to his Name.

A strength that can be found in the mentally ill is that they have a profound sensitivity to the things of God. Their keen awareness of feelings, which is often their Achilles’ heel, can also be that through which God works through most powerfully to touch the lives of others. Mental illness is nothing to wish for, but neither is it beyond the grace of God to work through and to use. **Θ**

17 Amundsen, 163–164.

18 Spurgeon. *An All Round Ministry*, 221–222.

19 Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, 160.

20 Wright, Woodley, and Woodley, 68.

21 Wise, 44.

22 Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, 157.



What Is Sin?

Russell Doerksen

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ICAN RECALL MY FIRST memory of consciously choosing to sin. I was about four years old with my family at a campground on a little lake in Manitoba. Our neighbour told my father that the lake was an excellent fishing spot, so our family made the long trip at least once a summer for many years.

While the fishing was good, or so I remember because I caught my first fish there, what I enjoyed the trip for were the trails through the woods. They were muddy paths either made by campers or wildlife and they wound every which way around the little lake.

It was on one of these paths that there was a particularly tall birch tree. Birch has a paper-like bark, and this intrigued me to no end. Right about my eye level there was a patch that was slightly peeling, and so with all of my child-strength I grabbed that bark and tore it the entire way around and ran to go show my dad.

I was very proud about my find and interested when my dad told me how some people used to write on birch bark and use it to send messages. However, what he said next scared me greatly. He told me that I had to make certain to only pick the bark off the ground, because if I took it off trees I could kill them.

My stomach sank like a rock. I think he could tell because he asked me where I had gotten that rather fresh piece of birch bark. After a moment of silence, I told him that I found it on the ground. For the rest of the trip I kept to myself because I was afraid my dad would be upset with

me if he knew I was lying. Also, I felt really bad about killing that birch tree.

An Action?

Now this may be a rather innocent story as far as sin goes, but when I think about it, it serves well to introduce the topic that I wish to briefly explore in this article. What is sin? Looking at the story above, it might seem clear that sin was in the action of me lying to my Dad. In that

Sin should be thought of as the moving away from what makes humanity human.



moment there was a right and a wrong choice to make and I chose the wrong, and in that moment I sinned.

However, I am no longer convinced that thinking about sin is as simple as thinking about what is right and wrong. So in this paper I hope to unpack the following thought and then address how it should be dealt with: I believe that instead of being a matter of simply what is right and what is wrong, sin should be thought of as the moving away from what makes humanity human.

Not Something in Itself

To begin to discuss sin, it should be specified that sin is not something in itself. Instead, sin should be thought of as the lack of something. Sin is the result of something that has been taken away from a good creation that makes it less than what it originally was. To see this aspect of sin, we need to look at the creation narrative in Gen. 1 to 3.

In Gen. 1 and 2 we see the story of creation. In Gen. 1, God brings into being all things and at the pinnacle of creation is humanity. Humanity, we are told, is male and female made together in the image of God. To this creation, God says that it is good.

In Gen. 2 we see further creation of male and female. We see God walking with humanity in the garden, and we see humanity working with God in the garden through the act of naming. It is in these two chapters that we are told what it means to be human. To be human is to be in relationship.

To be human is to be in relationship

with creation, both as a part of it, and as sovereign to it. This does not mean we are to domineer it or destroy it. We can deduce this because we do not see this in these two chapters. To be human is to be in relationship with the rest of humanity.

In this narrative we see male and female together are created in the image of God, and we are told that is good. This does not mean either male or female is to be over the other, as we do not see this in these two chapters. Finally, to be human is to be in relationship with God in such a way that we work together, as is seen in the naming.

However, even though we work together, we know that humanity and all creation is under God. What Gen. 1 and 2 show us is that what it means to be human is to be in right relationship with creation, with humanity, and with God. However, as the purpose of this article is to discuss sin, it is to Gen. 3 we must now go.

The Fall

Gen. 3 is the story of the fall of humanity. The narrative begins with the temptation of Eve by a talking serpent. It is actually quite important that the animal chosen in this story is a serpent, as in the ancient Near East the serpent was an image used to represent wisdom. For this reason, it should not be thought of as odd that a talking serpent is what is tempting Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit.

What the serpent tempts Eve with and eventually Adam as well, is the wisdom to be like God; it is the ability to know right from wrong. This part of the story should not be read to say that gaining wisdom is a bad thing. The importance of pursuing wisdom is an ongoing theme throughout the wisdom books in the Old Testament,

What the serpent tempts Eve with and eventually Adam as well, is the wisdom to be like God.

but, instead, that the wisdom of man as is represented by the snake is not the right way to obtain the knowledge of what is good or what is evil.¹

The knowledge to tell right from wrong is something that is to be learned through and with God. In listening to the serpent and seeking to be like God, humanity fundamentally disorders the proper order of things that God put into place in creation.

In God's good creation humanity is firmly on the second tier. As such in the narrative of Gen. 3, the fall was complete before the fruit even touched Eve's lips. The sin was a refusal to accept the place that humanity was given in creation, and as such resulted in a distortion in the relationships that make humanity human.

This is not to say that the distortion is a severing of the relationships. From the speech of justification between Adam, Eve, and God at the end of the chapter we know that there is still some form of relationship there. Instead what this distortion is, is a perversion of the relationships that define what it means to be human.²

The end of the Gen. 3 narrative shows the effects of this corruption as well as how far reaching they are. The relationship between male and female becomes shot through with sin. Adam and Eve cover their nakedness, distancing themselves from each other.³ After the



fall Adam gives Eve a name, which as we saw in Gen. 2 means that Adam has declared himself as superior to her in the created order, disordering God's good creation even further. Also, when God asks who ate of the fruit, Adam's response is to blame Eve, an act contrary to the original unity of male and female.

In the end of chapter 3, the relationship between humanity is further distanced yet. Man is cursed to rule over woman; woman is cursed to have great pains in childbirth and desire that which will rule over her.

Childbirth stops being a wonderful outpouring of the selfless giving of male and female, and becomes instead a necessity to stave off the death of the race.⁴ The relationship between male, female and offspring, which is to say the entirety of humanity, becomes less about selfless giving and instead becomes about competition and antagonism. The relationships that bind humanity to themselves become distant, perverted and strained.

The Gen. 3 narrative also shows the distortion between humanity and the rest of creation. God tells of how work will become toil and the ground will resist human efforts. Humanity is then clothed in animal skins, showing a fundamental difference from the created order because what was once proactive sovereignty of humanity over nature becomes instead a violent act of the domineering will of humanity over creation. This strain in relationship is also stated in the curse of the serpent, in which the curse is that animals will both fear and fight against humanity's efforts to subdue them.

1 Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 20.

2 Ibid., 105.

3 Paul K. Jewett and Marguerite Shuster, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 192.

4 Ephraim Radner, "The Nuptial Mystery" in *The Nuptial Mystery*, Roy R. Jeal ed. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 96.

A Perversion of Relationship

Finally, the Gen. 3 narrative shows us that sin is the perversion of the relationship between humanity and God. The fall was the seeking of humanity to usurp God's position as supreme. In this move of humanity to become God, there was a distortion of the relationship between humanity and the divine.

This strained relationship is seen immediately following the fall. God comes looking for Adam, to which Adam's response is to hide from God. This action of hiding shows that in the fall, the relationship that has been portrayed as nothing but friendly and loving up until this point in the narrative, has become a matter of humanity now fearing the Creator.⁵

The curse against the serpent shows the distortion of the relationship between humanity and God as well. As was mentioned, the serpent in the ancient Middle East was a symbol of wisdom. As such the curse against the serpent should be at least in part viewed as saying that human wisdom is now cursed because it is separated from God.

In the end of the narrative, the perversion of humanity's relationship with God is shown in the expulsion of humanity from the garden so that they could not eat of the tree of life. As God is the source of life, to have eternal life can only be possible if in communion with God, and now that the communion between humanity and God is strained, life becomes death.

While in Gen. 1 and 2 the relationship between God and humanity is seen to be one of love, in the fall the relationship between humanity and God is portrayed

as antagonistic even though God does not show any intention of abandoning humanity.⁶ God does not change in Gen. 3, but through the distortion of the relationship between humanity and God that arose due to humanity attempting to usurp the Divine, our perception of his love became fundamentally distorted.

Inversion and Perversion

So, what is sin? Sin is the fundamental inversion and perversion of God's good created order. Sin is not a thing of its own as much as it is that which makes fallen creation less than that which God made and said was good. Sin is that which makes humanity less than human by taking away from the relationships that define it, causing them to be a perversion of what they were.

Sin is anything that causes the relationships between humanity and the rest of humanity, humanity and the

Sin is the fundamental inversion and perversion of God's good created order.

rest of creation, and humanity and God to become strained. What this means is that I am convinced that in my story above about my young self and that now long dead birch tree, is that what the sin was, was not only my lying to my father, but also the strain that I put on my relationship with him.

While the action itself was undoubtedly wrong, it was the strain that it caused that is the bigger concern. It is not wrong to say that sin begets more sin, but it is not because of the actions themselves. The action of lying to my father is nothing more than the physical manifestation of the larger issue of sin. When I chose to lie, I became scared that he would find out what I had done and so I distanced myself so he would not.

If I would have been asked the question again, "Where did you get that

piece of bark?" I would undoubtedly have chosen to lie once more. What was my sin that day was not just the lie itself, but the distancing I took upon myself that put me into a system that would have inevitably caused me to lie again.

By lying I created a system where the easiest thing to do to save face was to lie more. I knew that what I did was wrong, I felt terrible about it, but I would have chosen it again. In this way, sin is a vicious cycle that is always seeking to feed itself; in this way sin can only be thought of as an addiction.

The Saving Work of Christ

Let us look briefly at the saving work of Christ in order to understand a little more about the addicting aspect of sin. In his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension Christ took unto himself all of fallen humanity and redeemed it. Through the incarnation Christ took all of fallen creation, creation that is completely shot through with the effects of sin, and made it whole again.

While this is the greatest news that we as fallen humanity could ever receive, it is here where the irrational nature of sin shows most strongly. Through the actions of Christ humanity knows we are free of sin and that we must not sin again, and yet we persist. Any choice to sin is known to be the bad choice, and yet it continues to be the path most traveled.

It is not possible to make full sense of this irrational nature of sin, but to think about it, it is best to place it in the same paradigm as addiction. To indulge the addiction is the wrong decision to make and yet the sin can be overpowering. Humanity is responsible for its addictions and yet it is a disease that can overpower decisions.⁷

In part, sin is an addiction because it is shot through everything. Sin is shot through all of creation to the extent that there is nothing that can be done that is not affected by sin in some way. As can be seen in the fall narrative in Genesis 3,

⁵ Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin*, 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

or in my story at that little Manitoba lake, sin is an action just as it is a disposition, and this same disposition runs through all of what humanity does.⁸

What to Do With It?

Unpacking the question of “what sin is” is a meaningless endeavour if the question of “What to do with it?” is not addressed as well; and so now the tone of this paper will shift into a significantly more pastoral one.

Dealing with sin can never be a matter of drawing a line in action and saying that to go farther than that line is to sin. To show why, take this example. If someone was to export a factory to the Third World only for the reason that poor workers could have jobs, that would be a good thing. However, to the people that lost their jobs to the export of the factory, it would be bad. It is not possible to make a solely right or solely wrong decision.

Everything that can be done is shot through with sin in such a way that everything that humanity does is affected by it. It is for this reason that simply making a list of what is sinful and staying away from those things named will always be a fruitless endeavour. Sin is not only about what is right and what is wrong, but about what is causing strain to the already strained relationships between humanity, creation, and God. Sin is whatever causes us to move away from that which makes us human.

Turning Around

It is in this thought of moving in a direction that the deceptively simple answer to the question of dealing with sin lies. If sin is the distancing of ourselves from the rest of humanity, from creation, and from God, sin should be dealt with by turning around. What this is to say, is that when addressing the issue of sin, it is not nearly so important to think in terms of right and wrong as it is to think about where you are headed.

This is the idea that is put forth by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. Think about the pattern Christ uses in Matt. 5:38–39. In this passage Christ first presents how things have traditionally been viewed, “You have heard it said, ‘Eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth.’” However, the issue with looking at the world in this black and white way is that the violence only begets more violence. While thinking in such a way is undoubtedly just and fair, the initial violence causes such a gulf in the relationship between two people that it will always lead to more violence.

To this vicious cycle of sin Christ proposes that we should not resist the violence of evil people. Instead if we are slapped, we should turn to them the other cheek as well. With this act of pacifism, the strain in the relationship that can only cause sin to beget more sin is relieved. In this act the relationship is healed at least in part, and the vicious cycle of sin is ended.

Taking Inventory

The solution to sin is deceptively simple, but the enacting of the solution is anything but easy. To undertake such a task requires one to take an unflinching inventory of that in their life of which they are most ashamed. It requires the asking of questions of why these sins are issues and what in their life is causing them to hold on.

People may know that sin is wrong, but due to the nature of sin as something that strains relationships, sin is the improper fulfillment of some need that people have. When I lied to my father, I would have lied again because that sin fulfilled a need that I had at that time to defend myself in his eyes. It was an improper way to fulfill that need, but it served that purpose and so it would have been hard to give it up. Sin is an addiction in this way.

To end the cycle of sin we must identify what role our sin is playing and shift our lives in such a way as to bring the cycle to a close. Sometimes it is as

easy as coming clean as in my case above, but, unfortunately, it is usually much more problematic.

No Need to Go it Alone

Do not give up hope though. As has been stated over and over again, to be human is to be in relationship and so know that there is no need to go it alone. There is nothing new under the sun, which means that no matter how heinous you think you are, there will always be people to help you. The inverse of this is true as well. If someone needs help it would be wrong to not help to the best of your ability, even if that is just pointing to someone better equipped.

Finally, to be in relationship also means one more important thing: God will always be there to help. God never stopped loving humanity and seeking to be in right relationship; we simply lost sight of that in the fall. If sin is what causes creation to be less than good, then to work against our sin is at least in a small way to again work with God as we did in the garden, toward a greater perfected creation. We cannot do this good work on our own, but through God everything is possible. ⁹

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⁸ Ibid., 12.

Transhumanism and Mormonism Considered



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AN UNUSUAL YET INFLUENTIAL movement is afoot, one that speaks like a religion, embraces humanistic thinking, and pulls from the world of science. Technology and faith, it seems, are poised to merge in a post-modern revolution—one that will challenge Christianity as we enter the *transhuman*.

My first taste of this was in 2010 at the “Transhumanism and Spirituality” conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sponsored by the Mormon Transhumanist Association (MTA), this event explored Mormonism, “Christian Transhumanism,” mystical thought, Buddhism and secularism, and how spirituality will look as science and technology stretch what it is “to be human.” Afterward, I penned a critical essay about this meeting and the ideas it presented. To my surprise, this resulted in an invitation to speak at the 2013 MTA conference as a “Christian Critic of Christian Transhumanism.”

Trans...what?

The modern idea of transhumanism is linked to the forecasted impact of technology and science upon individuals and society, and its capacity for transformation. To that end, the technical developments that drive transhumanism are many: the potential of genetic sciences, human brain mapping, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and avatar robotics, the morphing of

machines with humans, the creation of virtual worlds and immersive simulated cyber-environments, and brain-computer interfacing.

Indeed, it has been argued that we are *currently* in the “Transhuman Age,” as computers have become personal communication devices—powerful mediums for social change—and as technical augmentation is forcing us to rethink human limits, as was the case when double amputee Oscar Pistorius competed in the regular 2012 Summer Olympics by using “Flex-Foot” artificial limbs. Genetics too is moving us down new paths, to the point where ethical questions swirl around the issues of creating “designer babies,” the legal ownership of a person’s genetics, and how far is too far when it comes to human *transgenics*.

Or consider brain-computer interfacing (BCI), a working technology that allows you to tether your mind to a computer and operate software or robotic devices “hands free.” Today, BCI is finding a valuable place in spinal cord injury research. Electronic gamers are also looking to BCI and its potential to elevate the player’s experience to a new level of realism.

Watch in the next few years as “neuro-gaming” goes mainstream, for the technology is poised to move from bulky headsets and primitive actions to wireless headpieces and complex movements. And for those who already use virtual spaces

like Second Life, a cyber-environment where you interact in a 3-D “physical” digital landscape, BCI technology will blur the distinction between “real life” and the “virtual self.”

Does all of this sound like science fiction? When you consider this is just the tip of the techno iceberg and that the items listed above are real and burgeoning, it’s not hard to see how the idea of transhumanism is growing.

While techno-wonders proliferate, transhumanism isn’t about “gadgets” *per se*. Rather, it’s an intellectual movement recognizing that science and technology are integrating with humanity in unprecedented ways, and that we can now see possibilities to reshape humankind at the social and even biological levels—to “take evolution in hand” and redesign humanity in *our* image.

Largely centred on Darwinian macroevolution, the transition from one species to another species (whereas microevolution is variation within a single species), many in this movement believe that the process of change must be guided through progressive scientific and intellectual leadership. In other words, a “priesthood of the anointed” will move us beyond ourselves, propelling us through the transhuman era and into the age of the post-human, ultra-human, or neo-human.

At this point in time, transhumanism is a broad subject with a multiplicity of approaches, personalities, and programs.

Research papers are being published and conferences have happened in universities such as Oxford and Stanford. There's an international push to bring the United Nations on-board as a global agent for "the transition to neo-humanity"¹ and transhuman institutions—like Singularity University—are openly supported by Google, Autodesk, Canon, and NASA. The European Union, the US Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation, and Britain's Royal Society have all supported studies and research into the transhuman concept.

For some, transhumanism is about seeking positive medical breakthroughs to enhance human life and grant longevity—to cure diseases, and slow or stop the effects of aging. For some connected to the defense industry, it's about engineering supersoldiers for "battle space dominance." Others hope to someday genetically tailor desirable physical and cognitive traits in their pre-born children. For others it's about replacing humankind with "something better for the

planet"—a new eugenics² for a global paradigm.

Currently, the transhuman quest opens upon a range of possibilities, from the beneficial to the bombastic to the bizarre. Some ideas will remain as theory. Others will find expression in the health-care industry, the marketplace and tech-industry, and more ominously the "battle-space."

Still other technical advances

present dangerous possibilities for "social engineering." The warning of yesteryear critics—Vance Packard and Neil Postman³—come to mind. More recently concerns were expressed by the "father of virtual reality," Jaron Lanier: "It is impossible to work with information technology without also engaging in social engineering...."⁴

Social engineering, especially when

attached to eugenics, and the boast of "playing God" has often been two peas-in-a-pod. As the World Transhumanist Association stated in 2003, "Transhumanists reject the idea that human beings should refrain from playing God."⁵

But for others it means something more: "becoming God."

Playing God— Becoming God

Talk of "religion" and "God" is rife within transhumanism.

One early example is the noted humanist and evolutionist, Julian Huxley, who considered the need for a "new belief" which would recognize humankind's role as "managing director... of evolution."

Writing about this in the 1950s, he postulated that as humankind worked to perform this cosmic task, girded with science and technology—and equipped with the "techniques of spiritual development"—a transhuman belief system would arise.⁶ Huxley said, "I believe in transhumanism; once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence...."⁷

Later Huxley would write of the need for science and religion to merge, creating

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1 An "Open Letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon" was circulated by leading scientists and innovators as part of the Global Futures 2045 Congress, an international conference held in New York City, June 15–16, 2013, meant to propel the transhuman movement. The letter was first published on March 11, 2013.

2 Eugenics is the application of science and social policies to modify human genetics.

3 See Vance Packard, *The People Shapers* (Little, Brown and Company, 1977) and Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1993).

4 Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 4.

5 World Transhumanist Association, slide 3 in the *Intro WTA PowerPoint*.

6 Julian Huxley, *New Bottles for New Wine* (Harper & Brothers, 1957), 17. See also 13 to 17 for his discussion of cosmic evolution and the managing role of humanity.

7 *Ibid.*, 17.

a “new organ for dealing with destiny, a new system of religious beliefs... to inspire change.”⁸ Implied is that a new “god” would be birthed by humankind, for as he explained: “religions, like sciences or philosophies, are creations of man, and gods are products of the human mind...”⁹

Jumping to 1994, Kevin Kelly, founder of *Wired Magazine*, ventured into “god-talk” in his book, *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization*. In it, he asserted that humankind was taking on a god-role by creating machines and computers that would eventually be sentient; to be conscious, creative, and perceptive. He also emphasized the idea of “playing God” in the context of simulated virtual worlds: “Stripped of all secondary motives, all addictions are one: to make a world of our own. I can’t imagine anything more addictive than being a god... Godhood is irresistible.”¹⁰

More recently, Ben Goertzel, a transhumanist and Cosmist thinker, wrote about the God question in his 2010 book, *A Cosmist Manifesto*:

“Whether or not transhuman minds now exist in the universe, or have ever existed in the universe in the past, current evidence suggests it will be possible to create them—in effect to build ‘gods.’ As well as building gods, it may be possible to become ‘gods’...”¹¹

The Mormon Transhumanist Association also speaks about “God.” In fact, the issue of God is front-and-centre of the organization’s existence, as explained by Lincoln Cannon in his opening speech at the 2013 MTA conference:

The Mormon Transhumanist Association stands for the proposition that we should learn to become Gods, and not just any kind of God, not the God that would raise itself above others, but rather the God that would raise each other together. We should learn to become Christs, saviors for each other, consolers and healers, as exemplified and invited by Jesus.

This quest for a collective God fits with Mormon teachings. Joseph Smith, the founder of the religion, held that God was only an exalted man and that we too could become gods:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!... I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and suppose that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea... he was once a man like us... Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have

done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another....¹²

In the Mormon construct—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—God the Father is an advanced human being: “God himself, the Father of us all, is a glorified, exalted, immortal, resurrected Man!”¹³ *Doctrine and Covenants*, another claimed revelation of Joseph Smith, puts this within a biological context: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s...” (D&C 130:22).

Parley P. Pratt, the “Apostle Paul of Mormonism,”¹⁴ tells us that in “the great family of man” there are five progressive stages of development, with the top order in the “family of man” being that of the gods “composed of personal spirits, who inhabit tabernacles of immortal flesh and bones in their most refined state...”¹⁵

The point is this: Father God is just a man in the Mormon cosmology; therefore becoming a *god* is not only possible, it’s the implied goal of the LDS believer. But something else needs to be considered, for if God is an exalted human, then “he” must operate under the same rules of science and the laws of nature as other men. Indeed, he must be bound to them.

Pratt recognized this: “Each of these Gods, including Jesus Christ and His Father, being in possession of not merely organized spirit, but a glorious immortal body of flesh and bones, is subject to the laws which govern, out of necessity, even the most refined order of physical existence.”¹⁶

Mormonism thus becomes a type of naturalistic theology where the LDS God acts as a master engineer—what Freemasonry calls “The Great Architect of the Universe”—manipulating already existing matter to a “perfected order.” As *Doctrine and Covenants* 131:7 states, “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes.”

The humanized Mormon God could not, therefore, engage in *creatio ex nihilo*

8 Ibid., 287.

9 Ibid., 286.

10 Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization* (Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994), 233.

11 Ben Goertzel, *A Cosmist Manifesto: Practical Philosophy for the Posthuman Age* (Humanity + Press, 2010), 29.

12 Joseph Smith, as quoted in *Mormon Doctrine* by Bruce R. McConkie (Bookcraft, 1979), 321.

13 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 643.

14 See Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

15 Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Dessert News, 1915), 64.

16 Ibid., 42.

(creation out of nothing) as that would require a *different kind of God*, one who could “speak” matter into existence (Genesis 1)—a Creator beyond space and time—a transcendent spirit not bound by physical constraints (the uncaused cause).

An interesting consideration emerges. As the Mormon version of God is an exalted man who operates in and is bound to physical matter, “full salvation” or exaltation requires a naturalistic mechanism: works and obligations. Exaltation, to be raised up a god, must be enmeshed in the acts of humanity—first, through the flesh-and-blood “God” sitting in heaven, and second, by the works of those who strive in the LDS.

Indeed, good works, church requirements, and the propagation of the family are the vehicles through which exaltation in the LDS is attained; to pass beyond the resurrection of the dead, enter into the “celestial kingdom,” and advance to the state of God or “full salvation.” In the *Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 25:23 provides one example of the importance of good work: “for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”

This is a spin on Eph. 2:8–9, which says, “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Ephesians goes on to say that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” In other words, “good works” is a result of our salvation, not a joint cause of it; for if salvation required our works then the “finished work” of Jesus Christ on the cross (John 19:30, Heb. 10) is *incomplete*. Jesus Christ is either true—the finisher of our faith, with nothing more required—or He is not, and thus a liar.

Bruce McConkie, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the LDS, presents a brief overview of

“salvation” in Mormonism. Here he explains the three necessary levels—the “three heavens or degrees” (D&C 131:1)—and what it takes to “make it”:

“1. Unconditional or general salvation, that which comes by grace alone without obedience to gospel law, consisting in the mere fact of being resurrected. In this sense salvation is synonymous with immortality... This kind of salvation eventually will come to all mankind, excepting only the sons of perdition....

2. Conditional or individual salvation, that which comes by grace coupled with gospel obedience, consists in receiving an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of God. This kind of salvation follows faith, repentance, baptism, receipt of the Holy Spirit, and continued righteousness to the end of one’s mortal probation....

Transhumanism fits the LDS faith, as the *movement* and the *religion* are seeking God-like attributes, and both strive to this end through “works.”

3. Salvation in its true and full meaning is synonymous with exaltation or eternal life and consists in gaining an inheritance in the highest of the three heavens within the celestial kingdom... Full salvation is attained by virtue of knowledge, truth, righteousness, and all true principles. Many conditions must exist in order to make such salvation available to men. Without the atonement, the gospel, the priesthood, and the sealing power, there would be no salvation. Without continuous revelation, the ministering of angels, the working of miracles, the prevalence of gifts of the spirit, there would be no salvation. If it had not been for Joseph Smith and the restoration, there would

be no salvation. There is no salvation outside The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁷

The LDS, therefore, places an unimaginable and impossible burden on the shoulders of Mormon followers. Yet Jesus himself tells us in Matt. 11:28–30, “Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

In working through the issue of “playing God” and “becoming God” in transhumanism, and “exaltation” and “becoming God” in Mormonism, I can see why an organization like the Mormon Transhumanist Association would exist. Transhumanism fits the LDS faith, as the *movement* and the *religion* are seeking God-like attributes, and both strive to this end through “works.”

The transhumanist attempts to achieve an evolved and God-like status through technology—the Mormon through obligations, duties, acts of righteousness, and the extension of the family into the celestial kingdom. And as Mormonism itself is a type of naturalistic theology, these “acts of righteousness” and “good works” can then logically extend into the realm of science. Transhumanism and Mormonism dovetail.

As Lincoln Cannon said in his opening statement, “If you’re a Mormon, you should be a Transhumanist. To identify as a ‘Mormon Transhumanist’ is not at all redundant, but to identify as a ‘Transhumanist Mormon’ is redundant, because Mormonism mandates Transhumanism. In other words, you can be a Transhumanist without being a Mormon, but you can’t be a Mormon without being a Transhumanist, at least implicitly...”

Closing the MTA 2013 conference was Richard Bushman, professor of Mormon Studies and one-time editor of the

17 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 669–670.

Joseph Smith Paper. His words reflected the transhumanist-MTA aspiration, yet left the group with a serious challenge: “This is a saved-by-works group. It really believes that we can do anything—just give us a little time and enough research funds, [and] we can pull it off. My question is: is there any room for grace?”

Conclusion

The conference of the Mormon Transhumanist Association was a one-day event, and I was glad to attend. Each of the people I interacted with, from Lincoln to the other speakers and members of the MTA, treated me with respect. They were gracious hosts in every sense and I enjoyed spending time with them.

Did we agree? Not at all. That was the point of my invitation: to have an outside and critical voice at the table.

So what did I say? The title of my talk was “A Christian Critique of Christian/Religious Transhumanism”—and, yes, “Christian transhumanism” is how members of the MTA view Mormonism. The thrust was basic: Jesus Christ alone as fully God, not “God became”—and not Jesus plus good works, plus obligations, plus social action, plus technology or science.

None of the “pluses” will save or perfect us. One of two choices is then open to us: To repeat the same error as Adam and Eve in Genesis 3—to attempt to “be as God” through special knowledge—and thus work to save ourselves, or to trust in Jesus Christ as the only redeemer and finisher.

In preparing my talk, I was struck by what took place at the cross of Calvary. Jesus, hanging naked and scourged, found

Himself between two thieves. Consider the words of Luke:

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:39–43).

Contrast what Jesus Christ said to the thief next to Him, who could do nothing to “save himself,” with the long and arduous list required for exaltation as given by Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie. The difference is telling:

...grace coupled with gospel obedience... faith, repentance, baptism, receipt of the Holy Spirit, and continued righteousness to the end of one’s mortal probation... virtue of knowledge, truth, righteousness, and all true principles. Many conditions must exist in order to make such salvation available to men. Without the atonement, the gospel, the priesthood, and the sealing power, there would be no salvation. Without continuous revelation, the ministering of angels, the working of miracles, the prevalence of gifts of the spirit, there would be no salvation. If it had not been for Joseph Smith and the restoration,

there would be no salvation. There is no salvation outside The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁸

In closing, it must be said that the MTA’s transhuman vision of “human betterment” is couched in good intentions: lifespan longevity, eradication of diseases, and excelling at doing good works. For this, I applaud them, while at the same time noting their god-quest.

However, transhumanism is a movement that operates beyond the intellectual sounding board of the MTA, taking place in the broader context of online communities, other dedicated organizations, global conferences, university settings, government committees, laboratories and testing facilities, and industries racing to create technologies for tomorrow. That said, much of the “hardware” and “software” of transhumanism is beyond our examination and even technical understanding, a fact that makes it difficult if not impossible for the rest of humanity to consider its uses and misuses, ramifications, benefits, and unintended consequences. We’re rapidly entering a “brave new world.”¹⁹

But the above points shouldn’t cause us as Christians to hide our heads in the sand, nor remain on the sidelines, for we are called to be “salt and light” wherever we find ourselves. Instead, as the techno-faith of transhumanism, by its nature, intentionally enters the theological and social landscapes, intentionally enters the theological and social landscapes, we find ourselves facing an opportunity: to compare and contrast Jesus Christ with the “works of our hands”—to proclaim Christ as the perfecter, saviour, and finisher, against the unscalable mountains of self-imposed religious obligations and the false hope of technological messianism.

As Isaiah 43:10b–11 reminds us, “...before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no savior.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 669–670.

¹⁹ *Brave New World* is the title of Aldous Huxley’s 1931 novel about a coming dystopian techno-future. In 1959 he published *Brave New World Revisited*, in which he marveled at his own mistiming. Believing, in 1931, that this techno-controlled society was centuries away, he realized in 1959 that his earlier predictions “are coming true much sooner than I thought they would... The nightmare of total organization... has emerged from the safe, remote future and is now awaiting us, just around the next corner.” Aldous was a brother to Julian Huxley.

An Annotated Bibliography on Pacifism

Darryl G. Klassen

Bonk, Jon. **The World At War, The Church At Peace.** Winnipeg, MB: EMC/Kindred Press, 1988. 85 pp.

Jon Bonk was a minister at Kleefeld EMC for several years and still holds a dear connection to the church, though he now teaches in Connecticut. *The World at War, The Church at Peace* is written for the general reader and is understandable by all. In a brief book, Bonk has provided a helpful treatment of some of the tough questions we might have about Scriptures, both OT and NT, that appear to sanction war. Short but helpful, this study may assist in planning a sermon series or a Bible study.

Charles, J. Daryl. **Between Pacifism and Jihad.** Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005. 196 pp.

This text is an attempt to ease the minds of pacifists concerning current issues with a fresh look at the Just War Theory. Charles gives us a history of the Just War Theory and explains how it can serve to show love to a neighbour by enacting necessary justice. The sketch includes a look at Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, and others, as well as a brief look at Roman Catholic social teaching. In summary, *Between Pacifism and Jihad* seeks to answer the question, "Is war ever justifiable?" Is there ever a situation in which it is better to use lethal force or to go to war than to permit terror and heinous evil to go unimpeded and unaccountable? We may not agree with this text as Anabaptists, but it is a necessary read in order to understand the Just War side of the argument.

Clough, David L. and Brian Stiltner. **Faith and Force: A Christian Debate About War.** Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007. 304 pp.

This book began as an argument between friends who were surprised to find themselves on opposite sides of the debate about whether the United States and the United Kingdom should invade Iraq in 2003. They came from opposite sides of the Atlantic, from two different churches, and from opposite sides of the Just War/Pacifist fence. Through long emails they discussed world affairs and the place of the Christian in their midst. It is interesting to see how two friends critique each other's position, pointing out flaws and weaknesses, while maintaining Christian love and seeking a unified Christian response to world troubles. Again, a sketch is provided of the Just War Theory and of Christian Pacifism. It asks whether

humanitarian intervention is enough to maintain or create world peace and it looks at terrorism today and how the Christian should respond.

Clouse, Robert G. ed. **War: Four Christian Views.** Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991. 212 pp.

As the title suggests, *War: Four Christian Views* reviews the major interpretations of Christian involvement in military aggression. The Nonresistant position is written by Herman Hoyt while Myron Augsburger writes on Christian Pacifism. Also included are the positions on the Just War Theory and the Crusade or Preventative War theory. Each is explained by its proponent and then critiqued by the other three. It makes for an interesting debate as the authors point out strengths and weaknesses of their positions in a respectful manner.

Hershberger, Guy Franklin. **War, Peace, and Nonresistance.** Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, third rev. ed., reprinted 1981. 382 pp.

Though an older book (it first came out during the Second World War), *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* is a systematic and extensive doctrinal and historical treatise. It gives a brief history of war, looks at peace and war in the OT, outlines nonresistance teaching in the NT, and provides a sketch of the history of Mennonite encounters with war in Europe and America. Hershberger provides a sound analysis of the difference between nonresistance and pacifism, a key distinction for our times. In that respect, the author gives an outline of various forms of nonresistance and pacifism, bringing in writers and thinkers like Tolstoy and Gandhi. If we believe that the way of life involved in the practice of Christian nonresistance means more than nonparticipation in war, that it requires the unreserved practice of Christian love and following in the steps of Jesus, then we are apt to disagree with some of the conclusions made about war and peace in the OT. However, this is a necessary text for thinking through the many issues of this grand topic.

Hochschild, Adam. **To End All Wars.** Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2011. 448 pp.

This title does not in any way represent the Anabaptist/Mennonite or even Christian perspective of peace. However, it does offer a look into the forces that drove World War One and the individuals, families and groups that objected to the

wholesale slaughter of the world's finest young men in the crucible of war. If you want a portrait of the insanity of the people who pushed for war and how strategy disregarded the sacrifice of millions of men to gain a few feet of ground, you will find it in this book. On the other side, Charlotte Despard and others cried out in the streets of London, appealing to their compatriots in Russia and Germany for an end to the madness of war. If there is one reason for Christians to read this book, it is this: to know how terrible war is and to know that Christians are not the sole possessors of the nonresistance movement. It sheds light on the movement itself and begs the question: What is Christian about resisting the draft and opposing war? Of all the books on this list, I highly recommend this very readable and extremely sad look at the first global conflict that drew so many nations and individuals to their deaths.

Kreeft, Peter. **Between Allah and Jesus**. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010. 188 pp.

Though the main focus of this book is to help Christians understand the mind of their Muslim neighbours, one chapter (13) discusses war and pacifism in this context. The book as a whole is a narrative between fictional characters discussing a variety of topics important to Christians and Muslims. This makes for enjoyable reading while learning about the Islamic heart and mind. It is very pertinent to our times when many people, Christians included, have preconceived ideas about Islam and generally regard Islam as the next global threat.

Leiter, David A. **Neglected Voices: Peace in the Old Testament**. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007. 186 pp.

The OT is typically seen as a violent part of God's book while the NT is heralded as the change of covenant bringing peace to the mission of God's people. Leiter takes that idea and turns it on its head by exploring passages in the OT where God calls for making peace. Leiter takes ideologies of peace buried in the violence of the OT text and reveals God's plan for nonviolent responses to conflict. One of those dominant themes is that of Shalom, which Leiter explains in full. He also shows mandates for peace in passages like Ex. 23:10–11, Lev. 25:2–7, Lev. 20–22, Lev. 25:8–55, and Deut. 15:1–14. For some readers this might be a stretch trying to pull out peace mandates in a violent era. However, it is worth reading if only to open one's perspective to the possibility that God is more a God of peace than a God of war.

Megoran, Nick Solly. **The War on Terror**. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007. 190 pp.

Megoran asks the reader to delve into the Bible before reading his chapters on terror and the Christian response. That

is appropriate since the Bible has a lot to say about the subject of terrorism throughout its many books. Megoran asks some tough questions: Why does God allow terror? What does it mean to love your enemies when they are terrorizing you? How can we be peacemakers in this current context of global terror? Filled with stories from the Bible and from recent history, this book will help the reader to think and speak about the pertinent questions of terrorism in the 21st century.

Steiner, Susan Clemmer. **Joining the Army that Sheds No Blood**. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009. 155 pp.

Steiner gives us a review of what the Bible says about peacemaking and tells the stories of Christian peacemakers through the centuries. Her tactic is to first look at what's wrong with our world as it is. Then she explores how Jesus shows us the way to peace and how to be a peacemaker. Steiner spends a fair amount of time in Scriptures, which is excellent since that is where we find our basis or foundation for being a people that "sheds no blood." Then she looks at three objections to our stance as Anabaptists carefully giving thought to what those objections mean. Finally, she brings us to a place where we put some action to our beliefs.

Yoder, John Howard. **Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism**. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, rev. 1992. 191 pp.

There is a great difference between nonresistance and pacifism; this book will explain the differences, not only of nonresistance and pacifism, but between a variety of stands that use the term *pacifism*. Yoder says, "It is possible to be scrupulous about not taking life, and yet lack insight into the positive obligations which flow from a genuine respect for that same life" (35). Yoder's book reads almost like an encyclopedia of pacifism; if you want to know how to define the different types, Yoder has done it for you.

Yoder, John Howard. **What Would You Do?** Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983. 115 pp.

In a book that is at times humorous—see the chapter "Three Cheers for Grandma"—its title says it all. What would you do in a situation that the world typically says calls for violence? Not to beat a dead horse, there are some great principles in this book about nonresistance. However, the real treasure of this book is the stories of how actual people responded to situations of violence or conflict, and how they overcame without hurting anyone. These stories will amaze you and inspire you to think twice about how to respond if a violent person threatened to harm a loved one. 

Feature Sermon

Isaiah 61:1–4, Luke 1:46–55



Transforming Our Sorrow

Pastor David Kruse

David Kruse, BA, MA (Theological Studies), is pastor of MacGregor EMC in southern Manitoba. He shared this message there on Dec. 11, 2011.

Earlier in the service, Advent candles were lit with this responsive reading:

Leader: We bring to God this day the truth of who we are, our scarred and broken hearts, our grief-filled, shattered dreams.

People: We bring to God this day the truth of where we live, our broken homes and wars, our hungry mouths and fears.

Leader: The One who called us here is faithful; God will bring us to the light.

People: We worship as we wait for the day when tears are turned to joy.

THIS WEEK A MAN shared with some of us a Christmas memory: Almost thirty years ago, when their kids were small, they as parents were asked for an early present.

The man and his wife wanted to remind them of the meaning of Christmas, so they called their kids one by one into the bedroom and told them, “We want to share with you the greatest gift of all: love. God’s love and our love,” and they gave each kid a big hug.



Most of the kids took it well, but their one son became angry and ran out of the room to sulk in his bed. He stayed in his room for the rest of the day, mad! They were sad that their little lesson had backfired with him.

Almost a year passed. As the next Christmas approached, the family went to

A lot of life is just plain tough. There’s sorrow and loss in it. The expression of sadness must be allowed.

visit relatives. The cousins went to play outside and started riding the dirt bikes. There was an accident and this son of theirs was killed.

Almost three decades have passed, but the memory is fresh; the tears flow as the story is told. There is sorrow.

Let’s pray.

This third Sunday of Advent takes us to the low point in our series and turns a corner. But let’s review: We’ve been lighting the Advent candles at a different place and time each Sunday. What do they mean, and how do they relate to our preaching topics?

The first Sunday of Advent was about “Learning to Pay Attention,” about an attitude of watchfulness. This anticipation corresponds loosely to the traditional meaning of the first Advent candle: hope.

The second Sunday was “Changing the Landscape,” about an attitude of repentance. Repentance puts us at peace

with God and corresponds loosely to the traditional meaning of the second Advent candle: peace.

Today we are talking about sorrow, a common condition in our world. It is hard to talk about our sorrow, sometimes, but by the end of this sermon I hope we will see some possibilities for sorrow to be transformed into joy. This corresponds to the traditional meaning of the third Advent candle, the pink one: joy!

Joy is great, but that's not how life is a lot of the time. Sometimes life is just boring or tiring. Other times it's tense or hurtful. A lot of life is just plain tough. There's sorrow and loss in it. The expression of sadness must be allowed.

I say it must be "allowed." Why would I say a thing like that? Because the tone of our times tends toward optimism. We think we don't want negative people around—not in our friendship circles, not at work, not in church. We want to feel good. The expression of sorrow doesn't fit.

This is how poet Mark Heard says it:

These plastic halos
They seem so out of place
Behind the mask
lurks a scarred and fragile face
We lie so spiritually,
Familiar smiles displayed
Misleading masquerade

We hide our pain
We try to laugh
Fools to think our tears
Would provoke holy wrath
In stone-gray silence
We do not face our fears
We bite our lips
And we press on with feeble cheer
With hearts of sadness
We say our thankful prayers
Refusing comfort unawares

We learn the protocol
We bare our souls to none
We praise our peers
For the optimism shown

"Brave men don't cry," we say
As we watch the world turn to dust

The tears of God fall for us

What if *you* feel upset, sad, negative? Are you supposed to stay away from your friends? Stay away from your church? No! We need each other.

So if life is tough and it's common to feel sad inside, and if we need each other, then *when* we're together, we should share the sorrow. How can we do that?

How can we make the church a haven for the hurting? Can a Sunday morning worship service be a refuge for those who grieve? Someone in our congregation told me this week that there are many who are struggling, but who put on a brave face for Sunday morning. I believe it.

I do it, too. Instead of being tense about tears, we could welcome them. In fact, we would do well to learn to lament. A lot of the Psalms are prayers of lament.

Of course, if church was *always* a downer that would not be God's will,

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the
captives
and release from darkness for the
prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor
and the day of vengeance of our
God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve
in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of
righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.
⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long
devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for
generations.

– **Isaiah 61:1–4**

And Mary said:
"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my
Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call
me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great
things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear
him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with
his arm;
he has scattered those who are
proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their
thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good
things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants
forever,
even as he said to our fathers."

– **Luke 1:46–55**

either. We want to hear the gospel, the good news. God wants us to hear his Word, which offers hope.

Because we have hope in Christ, we believe all our suffering will be rewarded, and our sorrow explained someday. But while we're here in the body (and in the Body), it is sometimes appropriate to mourn.

One way we can allow sorrow in our services is to have a confession prayer. A friend of ours from Winnipeg commented that the most important part of the service for her is the confession prayer.

Here in our services there is no guarantee that there will be a prayer, out loud, that leads us in silently confessing sin; it's up to each prayer leader if they'll include that. But it is a standard component of the worship service in many churches.

Why is confession so important? Because it's honest and it gets to the root of what's wrong.

Often we're dishonest. Mostly what we show on the outside is smiles. We talk happy. We don't want to tell each other about problems we're having right now, we'll only consider sharing when the problem is past. "I *used* to have trouble with..."

When we ask each other how we are, we hope people are fine. When we answer the question, we try to put a positive spin on it. In fact, there's a person I know who asks the question and supplies the right answer at the same time! "How are you? Good?"

"How are you? Good?" A well-meaning question, maybe trying to bring out the positive, but it makes it very hard to be honest, sometimes.

So we put on a brave face, even though it's a bit fake. When we do confess and let a little of the darkness show, a little doubt, a little discouragement, it has to be with someone we really trust.

Sometimes when I go to prayer, when I go to a room where I've chosen to be with my Heavenly Father, as soon as I kneel down, I start to cry.

I'm with the One I trust. I don't even know why exactly I'm crying. It's a mix of frustration and relief, of fears released. It is the honest response. That's how I really am. It's confession to someone I trust.

Confession comes from our core. I imagine it this way: God made us a bit like an apple. Our core, our deepest, realest self, is created good by God.

But wrapped around that core is our flesh, which has become selfish. The meat of the apple is our sin nature, the cancerous flesh that entangles itself in all areas of our life.

Consciously and subconsciously we are struggling; the good core and cancerous flesh battle constantly.

It's like Paul in Romans 7, wanting to do the right thing but doing the wrong

tell the Lord and someone else how you're really doing. Find someone to confide in. Be honest.

Well, that's a lot of heavy stuff. It's time for us to turn the corner, or at least start the turn signal blinking.

Life is tough; we need to be honest about it. But it's not all about us. The Word of God speaks to these things.

Our call to worship from Psalm 126 talked about sowing in tears and reaping with joy. Isn't this how things really are? First you sow, then you reap. First tears, then joy. First it's hard, then the rewards come. Work first, play later. Invest, get dividends. It's hard now, but it will get better. That's how things really are.

Maybe that's why we try to end most conversations with some note of hope, or

Because we have hope in Christ, we believe all our suffering will be rewarded, and our sorrow explained someday. But while we're here in the body (and in the Body), it is sometimes appropriate to mourn.

thing, instead. The Spirit and the flesh are in opposition to each other. You could also look up Romans 8 and Galatians 5. We're continually struggling, thinking, and choosing. It's complicated inside our heads.

Confession feels like we're finally facing the simple facts. Confession names the problem for what it is: sin; our sin, the sins of others that affect us, and the sin of Adam and Eve that brought death into the world to all of us. Honest confession gets at the core.

I know that our worship service is not the setting to share everything that's going on inside. I'm not trying to make anyone feel bad for not speaking up on a Sunday morning.

But whether confession is part of our public prayers, or our private conversations, or our personal prayers,

why we part ways saying "See you again." Maybe that's why most stories and movies end with some happiness. Because that is how reality is, that's how God made the world—to end well.

Sure, first there will be persecution, tribulation, Armageddon. But when Jesus comes and judges, there will be reward and rest for those who have suffered and grieved. Jesus' own life was first the suffering and death, then the resurrection and ascension.

Paul promises the same pattern for us: die with Christ to our selfishness, be raised with Christ to eternal life. First suffering, then reward; that's the pattern of reality.

Luke chapter 1 says that this pattern will come into play. Mary expressed this when the Spirit revealed to her what the coming of Baby Jesus would mean: rulers

would be brought down and the humble raised.

The rich would be sent away empty while the hungry would finally eat. Jesus will punish the proud and lift up the humble. There will be a reversal. Sorrow will be replaced with joy.

When Jesus grew up and started his public work, he went into his hometown place of worship and took his turn choosing a scripture to read. What he did there is like someone who grew up in this church standing up at sharing time and announcing that God has a special call on their life.

Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He was quoting Isaiah 61.

If Jesus had gone on in that passage (and the people in the synagogue that day probably *did* go on, in their minds), he would have said “to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”

Do you hear those words? “Brokenhearted, mourn, grieve, ashes, despair.” This is no painting over of problems. This is no whitewashing the walls of the soul that are covered in the graffiti of grief. This is no brainwashing of the memories to say the hurtful history never happened.

No. This is God saying how it is, and promising something better. Jesus is doing a new thing. Something good is coming.

The last word will not be by death or evil. The last word will be by God for blessing and eternal life. That transforms sorrow into joy.

Here are three more truths that make it possible for sorrow to be transformed into joy.

The first truth for transformation is that *God is with us*. The first coming of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas is about God being with us. The name from Isaiah’s prophecy for this special person

Our present sorrow can be transformed because Jesus is coming.

was Immanuel, God with us. Knowing that Jesus is beside you, inside you—that Jesus knows your thoughts and feelings—that provides possibilities for sorrow to be transformed into joy.

The second truth is that *others* are with us, and *for* us, so we can be honest with each other. When you’re with someone you trust, someone who knows you well, and you share something that burdens you, there might be tears. And in those tears is healing. There is release, catharsis, a washing away of tension.

I think there’s a good level of trust among us as a congregation. One evidence of that is what kinds of things we *do* share on Sunday mornings, and the tears that sometimes accompany that sharing.

I pray that more and more our congregation will trust each other with the *heaviness* in our hearts, as well as the happiness. That kind of sharing happens with trust, and trust comes as we show ourselves to be *for* each other, to be on the same team. Being *for* each other provides possibilities for sorrow to be transformed into joy.

And thirdly, sorrow can be transformed into joy if we develop a *future focus*. Sorrow is about the past, about what we have lost. Sorrow is also about the present, about what is hurting us now. Sorrow may have something to do with the future, too, if we fear the future. But if we recognize that Jesus is coming, then the future can bring joy.

Jesus really came into this world of ours, two millennia ago; no serious

scholar would deny that there really was a Jesus of Nazareth. According to that Jesus (the one who really came), he is with us now.

And that same Jesus said he is coming back again. There will be rest, and reunions, and rewards. Our present sorrow can be transformed because Jesus is coming.

I want you to hear the rest of the story that I started with: When that young boy ran to his room, disappointed that the only gift was a hug and some words about love, he lay there and thought. In the middle of the night, he woke his parents and told them, “I want to give you the best gift of all: love. God’s love and my love,” and he gave them a big hug.

After that, he seemed to change. He became more gentle, more responsible. He started reading his Bible, sometimes under the blanket with his flashlight after he was supposed to be asleep. He had let God transform his sorrow and disappointment.

And now when his parents, still sad, think back to the days before his death, their sorrow is transformed, too. There were signs that God was preparing their son to leave this world.

They only pieced it together afterwards. Questions he had asked about heaven. Comments he had made. It still hurts to have lost him, but their sorrow has been transformed because they expect to see him again when Jesus comes for them.

Rejoice and be glad—the One we’ve waited for is coming! Faith will become sight, and hope will become truth, as those who sowed with tears reap with shouts of joy! 

Sources: Responsive reading, sermon title and theme come from *Leader: Equipping the Missional Congregation* (MennoMedia, vol. 9, no. 1, Fall 2001), 36. Mark’s Heard’s song lyrics: http://mhlp.rru.com/these_plastic_halos.html.

The Final Word

OUR WEAPONS ARE NOT WEAPONS WITH *which cities and countries may be destroyed, walls and gates broken down, and human blood shed in torrents like water. But they are weapons with which the spiritual kingdom of the devil is destroyed and the wicked principle in man's soul is broken down, flinty hearts broken, hearts that have never been sprinkled with the heavenly dew of the Holy Word.*

We have and know no other weapons besides this, the Lord knows, even if we should be torn into a thousand pieces, and if as many false witnesses rose up against us as there are spears of grass in the fields, and grains of sand upon the seashore.

Once more, Christ is our fortress; patience our weapon of defense; the Word of God our sword; and our victory a courageous, firm, unfeigned faith in Jesus Christ. And iron and metal spears and swords we leave to those who, alas, regard human blood and swine's blood about alike. He that is wise let him judge what I mean.

Menno Simons, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 198.

Menno Simons, a former priest turned Radical Reformer, wrote his first version of "Foundation" in 1539–40, about three years after leaving the Roman Catholic Church. He revised it as late as 1558, just three years before his death in 1561, though he emphasizes "not that I have changed the original doctrines and contents." Dr. J. C. Wenger calls it "the best known and loved" of Menno's works.

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