

Dying to Grow and The Point of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It's not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas "church gigs" have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together. When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the

highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***"

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by "human concerns." Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.***"

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord's return: "*It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who*

*is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.***"

How's that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not "lose our life;" we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of "human concerns" and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life. They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is "teleological" – from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end" or "point" or "goal." We need

to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he “sets his eyes upon the prize” (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a “Son of Man” who is “made a little lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don't do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light

of Christ's supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore, evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It's not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can "lose ourselves" in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

Q&A: What is the significance of Jerusalem being the capital of Israel?

Anonymous asks:

My question is the significance of Jerusalem being made

capital again. My reaction is yay, hallelujah!!

*In Nehemiah 2 an Arab was amongst those ridiculing Nehemiah m
helpers n in b 20 saying they have no right to any property in
Jerusalem n no share in traditions.*

*My feelings run along side as God gave His people the Jews,
Jerusalem.*

*It's all in end time prophecy but I'm seriously out of date
wth the latest happenings.*

Your enlightenment would b so appreciated. Tks so much.

***[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this
blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You
can submit a question (anonymously if you like)
here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]***



Thanks for the question. The topic is loaded with some political energy, so I'm hoping to tread carefully.

I need to begin with the significant caveat that I have no expertise in international politics, and certainly not in Middle Eastern affairs! My limited understanding of the current situation leads me to the following initial thoughts.

1) There has not actually been any significant change in the actual status of Jerusalem. As far as I am aware, the nation state of Israel has pretty much always claimed Jerusalem to be its capital, even if the administrative centre is in Tel Aviv. The complexity is that the displaced Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. What *has* changed is that

President Trump has announced that the US will *recognise* that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and implement this through the relocation of the US embassy. While this is controversial, it is not a surprise, and it is an action that has been mooted by other US presidents in recent years.

2) Personally, I don't think my reaction can be "yay, hallelujah!" Irrespective of its justifications or otherwise, this is a *provocative* action on President Trump's part. It seems pretty clear that the socio-political situation in and around Jerusalem is highly anxious. The cliché of "powderkeg waiting for a spark" seems to fit. Bloodshed *is* possible. Diplomacy and care *is* needed. While I'm not in full disagreement about the US recognition of Jerusalem, (the "recognition of reality" line has some merit), I'm not sure President Trump has pursued the way of peace in this situation. Certainly, many other leaders, including the UN, have decried the escalation.

3) Before I get to the theological aspects (see below), it is clear that Jerusalem is a conundrum of competing claims, all of which have at least some degree of validity. I understand that the Palestinians, through no fault of their own, *have* been displaced from a city and a land in which they have lived for generations. I understand that the Jewish community has also experienced displacement (and worse!) in the last century, and that they have genuine ethnic links to Jerusalem and the land also. I also suspect that there is some significant "proxy activity" going on as the tensions in Jerusalem connect with the power plays of broader political forces. Injustice is the order of the day, and it's a difficult thing to wade through.

Theologically, I can only begin to approach this issue by noting the *differences* between the people and nation of Israel that we see in the Bible, and the contemporary nation and state of Israel in modern politics. The biblical notion of

Israel is that of a covenant people (a people of *promise*), descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who was later, personally, called *Israel*). They are a people defined by these roots of divine promise, and the subsequent foundation of divine rescue as they are brought out from Egypt under Moses, and called by the Law towards the goals of the original covenant. This identity reached something of a zenith under King David, who established Jerusalem as a political capital in about 1000 BC. His son, King Solomon, responding to the Mosaic law, established Jerusalem as a *holy* city, building the temple that encapsulated all that the Mosaic tabernacle had beforehand. It became the tangible and symbolic manifestation of God's promise and presence.

The modern state of Israel, while having clear ethnic and historical roots in this theological understanding, can be considered in contrast: It is a "Jewish and democratic state", and, as I understand it, the "Jewish" part is understood *ethnically* not *religiously*. As a political entity there is very little that sets it apart as being particularly shaped by an Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic identity. Its establishment as a nation state lies in post-war turmoil and involves the actions of Zionist activists, and the political machinations of Western powers, leading to a formal recognition in 1948. Even among orthodox Jews, there has been controversy about the form and formation of modern Israel. I understand that Haredi Jews, for instance, consider the re-establishment of Israel without the Messiah to be an act of presumption and rebellion against God.

The presence of Jesus in salvation history also impacts our understanding. The person of Jesus interacts with the base shapes of theological identity – Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic – in a way that cannot be ignored. In particular, we understand that Jesus *fulfils* these covenant. Jesus fulfils the Abrahamic covenant – the family who was "blessed to be a blessing" has brought forth its ultimate blessing. Jesus fulfils the Mosaic

covenant – he obeys the law and receives the covenant blessings, sharing them with his people as he covers them sacrificially. Jesus fulfils the Davidic covenant – he is the “big-M” Messiah, the anointed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus is the Temple, where the presence of God is manifest. Jesus is the Promised Land, in which we have “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” In his risen life, Jesus extends this promise to all those (Jews and Gentiles alike) who would follow him, put their faith and trust in him, and so receive his Spirit and be counted amongst his people.

What this means, is that when I read stories in the Old Testament, such as the one you mention where Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem and faces his opponents, I understand the story in the light of Jesus. Nehemiah, in verse 20 of chapter two, says to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” For me, I see a man, grasping the promises of God and moving forward in faith and favour in order to see the covenant promises manifest once more. I see the powers of this world, that would frustrate God’s purposes, put rightly in their place. This is, with bricks and mortar, the same prayer as “Thy Kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Nehemiah wants to re-establish Jerusalem, and I draw from that a desire for Christ’s rule to be made more manifest.

This is something that the New Testament imagines as the “New Jerusalem.” And President Trump’s declaration does not particularly enter into it!

Nevertheless, I am not intending to completely spiritualise the reality of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Physical locations are important. Ethnic identity is important also. And these are particularly so when they are filled with such historical and theological meaning. For myself, I turn to Romans 11, where Paul speaks not only of the inclusion of the Gentiles

into the promises of God, but mourns the apparent intransigence of his own people, the Jews. Yet he is full of hope, that even in their stumbling they are fulfilling their calling:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

*'The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.'*

(Romans 11:25-27)

The calling on Israel and Jerusalem is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). That calling is caught up into the Messiah, Jesus, who has embraced it, fulfilled it, and continued it by “grafting” the Gentiles of faith into the covenant people of God. But that doesn’t mean the calling has waned. It remains Jerusalem’s calling – to shine a light, to bless the world, to truly be the city of peace. For that to happen, for the “end” to be reached, Jerusalem doesn’t so much need the proclamation of a President, but the ministry of her Messiah.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Q&A: Do we neglect the doctrine of hell?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

Do we neglect the doctrine of hell? I recently read Jonathan Edwards' "sinners in the hands of an angry God" and my reaction was:

*To marvel at the magnitude of my rescue;
To be reminded of the urgency of sharing the gospel and my part in that.*

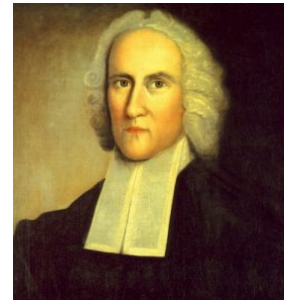
(I also thought you'd have to be brave to talk like that in our generation!)

I understand that Jesus spoke more of hell than heaven. Salvation is a rescue – should we talk more about the reality of hell both to draw people to the Rescuer, and to increase our worship of God and our evangelism, whilst avoiding both the Middle Ages fascination with grisly imagery and the laughed off sandwich board person proclaiming that the end is nigh. If I am honest, (and holding this alongside election) I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell.

A related question is do we neglect the doctrine of heaven...

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Hi Sarah, thanks for the question.



I must admit, I've never read this sermon from Edwards, (which was penned in 1741, and now available online for those who are interested). He is preaching on Deuteronomy 32:25 :- *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time...* (to use Edwards' probable translation). I haven't been able to look at it in depth, but there are a couple of things to note that can help us here:

Firstly, Edwards gets the *audience* right, at least initially. The text is not so much about God raging against the world, it is about God's broken heart about *his own people!* Edwards describes them as "wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works towards them, remained... void of counsel, having no understanding in them."

In this he is, indeed, reflecting the focus of judgement language in the New Testament. e.g. Jesus uses language such as "hypocrites" and John talks about "a brood of vipers", referring to his own people. Similarly, it is the *temple* which will have no stone left on top of another. It is a message, first and foremost, *to the people of God*, including the church.

This understanding locates judgement in the midst of grace. Jesus is no Pharisee, loading down but not lifting a finger to help. No, he is the good shepherd, reflecting the heart of his Father. He has *come* to his intransigent people, to take responsibility for them if they would have him.

You ask “should we talk more about the reality of hell?” If we do, we need to take heed; we can’t preach judgement without going through our own refining fires. And sometimes I see a whole bunch of tinder-dry unChristlikeness amongst those who take Christ’s name. I fear it needs to be a great conflagration, and I am well and truly including myself in this brood.

Secondly, Edwards asserts that the wrath of God is real and present, withheld only by his grace, and he is right about this. This is hard for people to hear, (we are understandably uncomfortable with divine anger!), and it should always be communicated clearly. But it must be, and can be, communicated:

After all, the wrath of God is simply an aspect of his justice. It isn’t fickle, or out-of-control. It is the appropriate response to wrongdoing. We are bland and apathetic, God is not. We harden our hearts and walk past injustice, God does not. There are times we should be more *angry* at the unchecked sin in the world, and certainly at the unchecked sin in our own lives. The fact that there are homeless people on the streets of my otherwise middle-class town, is an injustice, it should *move* us. The tears of a teenager misused by her porn-addicted boyfriend, should induce something in us; a cry for justice at the least, the power to act if we can. Those who don’t want God to be wrathful shouldn’t also ask us to care about #metoo. God is not #meh about this world.

Similarly, the wrath of God is never disconnected from his righteousness and his grace. We sometimes have this image of God as someone caught in an internal battle “Do I love them, or do I hate them?” No, God is love in all things. “Making things right” through bringing justice in judgement is an act of love. Withholding judgement as an act of grace is love. When we face analogous issues – say, perhaps, in our parenting – we often experience conflict because we lack

the wisdom, or the security, or, indeed, the affection to do it well. God does not lack those things.

So should we talk about these things? Yes. In fact, our current series at the St. Nic's evening service is looking at the foundations of faith, drawing on the list in Hebrews 6:1-2 as an inspiration. "Eternal judgement" is one of the topics we will be looking at. The application will likely include those things that you mention: gratitude about the grace of God, and urgency about declaring the gospel. It will also include the imperatives that relate to pursuing God's the Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

But your question is not just about judgement, it is about the concept of hell. And this is where you'll probably find that I differ from Edwards. I push back at the caricature of "total eternal torment", for I find little, if any, of it in the Bible. If anything, the *exact nature* of the final state after judgement, is a second-order issue for me; I won't go to the stake for it.

My eschatology (my understanding of "the end") looks to the renewal of this earth as the gospel hope. I've talked about this in my review of N. T. Wright's excellent *Surprised By Hope*. Wright draws on C. S. Lewis with regards to the outcome of judgement, and speaks of a final state of "beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all."

Wright's view has merit. My own take is closer to *annihilationism*, that the outcome of eternal judgement is either eternal life (for those in Christ), or simply ceasing to exist (you can't get more eternal than that). I've written about this before, and I won't reiterate it here.

So yes, we should talk about these things more. But here's my final thought: You say "I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell" and I get that. But I don't think I would

quickly, if ever, say it that way. I *would* say this: I want to belong to God, because he is the most holy, delightful, awe-inspiring, identity-giving, glorious One. He is my eternal Father, and I love him.

Q&A: What does it mean to be co-heirs with Christ?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

What does it mean to be co-heirs with Christ in Romans 8:17?

It must be unfathomable, outrageous grace to inherit all that Christ has as God the Son!

This is way better than Eden isn't it?

What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped? I suppose I mean what does it mean to be alongside God as heirs but being glorified humans, not divine?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah,



The passage you are quoting is (to use the NIV) Romans 8:14-17:

*14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 **Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.***

To respond to your first two points. Yes, this is “unfathomable, outrageous grace” and yes, “this is way better than Eden”!

You ask what does it *mean*?

Firstly, we need to grasp what Christ's inheritance *is*. The answer is big and simple: Christ's inheritance is *everything*. It isn't always spelled out; after all, how do you detail everything? What might it include? *Big things*, like “eternal life”, the “new heaven and the new earth”, and “peace.” It's *everything*.

The go-to passage that helps us out is Hebrews 1:1-2

*1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed **heir of all***

things, and through whom also he made the universe.

You might also be familiar with the “attitude of Christ” that Paul espouses in Philippians 2:1-11. This passage talks about the “self-emptying” (the technical term is *kenosis*) of Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Paul then talks about Christ’s *exaltation*, and in many ways he is talking about Christ’s *inheritance* – what God the Father *rightly* gives the Son who gave himself up for his people:

*9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Christ’s inheritance is the *reverse kenosis*, that comes not from himself, but from his Father.

And it’s not just every *thing*, it is also *all authority*. Just look at Matthew 28:18 or 1 Corinthians 15:24 and many other places. Jesus really *is* the “Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 21:6).

That’s his inheritance. Of which we are *co-heirs*.

That’s amazing.

We can pull it apart theologically, but the narrative is simple: The heart of God has always been to share the fullness of himself with his people. We see it in Eden. We see it as he

reaches out to Abram, making his promises, intervening in history. We see it as his presence goes with his people out of Egypt, through the sea, and on into the wilderness years. We see it as he speaks through his prophets. We see it as he nurtures a king whose heart is after his own. We see it as he pours himself out as a child, and in sharing our humanity, *covers us* with his grace and his purpose. He now shares with us his sonship, his sweet heart of faith, his trust and dependence, his obedience even to the point of death, and the blessings that rightly flow from it.

We are “in Christ” as he covers us, and Christ is “in us” by his Spirit. Salvation catches us up into the relational dynamics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thinking of salvation without any sense of sharing in Christ’s inheritance, is like conceiving of a banquet without any reference to food; you can sort of imagine something in the abstract, but it doesn’t really make any sense.

But your secondary question draws the meaning out even more. You ask, “*What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped?*”

I think there’s something here: God *is* a worshipper. The object of God’s worship is himself. This is not vanity, it is truthful *delight* and entirely appropriate. The Father *adores* the Son. The Son is *devoted* to the Father. The Spirit *raises up* the name of God! Surely we can say that Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, rightly *worships* his Father, perfectly, throughout his life and especially in his death.

To be co-heirs with Christ is, therefore, to share in his role as a worshipper. In Christ, we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and, in Christ, it is worthy and honourable and *received* in great delight by Almighty Creator God.

Again, there's something amazing about that.

But does our inheritance with Christ also mean an inheritance in the worship he *receives*? In some sense, yes, but I mean this very carefully: as Christ's people, we share in the worship *he* receives, not in any worship we receive, but in the worship *he* receives.

What I'm trying to grasp is in this account from the end of the book, in Revelation 21:9-27:

9 One of the seven angels... came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

John then goes on to talk about the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem and includes imagery of apostolic foundations and things like that. The overall picture is one of beauty, and purity, of the Bride of Christ, who shines (and this is the point) *with the glory of God*. Jesus covers his bride with *his* glory. *That* is our inheritance. It is not *our* glory. It is *his*. But we share in it. All creation will gaze upon us, his people, and worship him.

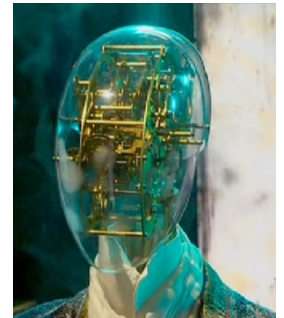
And that brings us back to Romans 8:17, where we started, because there it is in the second part of the verse:

*Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that **we may also share in his glory.***

It *is* outrageously amazing.

Home, the Long Way 'Round

I've recently had cause to reflect on my mortality. I can now count myself amongst that (rather large, as I am finding) cohort of people who have had the doctor gaze and use the "c-word." In my case, it's bladder cancer.



In my situation, while there are some unknowns remaining, there is not cause for great concern. From the moment I saw blood in my urine (if you see it, get it checked!), the time to having a wonderfully acronymised TURBT operation was less than a month. It was a large tumour but caught quite early.

All signs are good for a full recovery with minimal subsequent treatment, and we'll know for sure after an appointment next week. God bless the NHS!

But it's made me think, of course. Despite the fact that my particular cancer journey is merely a tiptoe to the front gate compared to the epic expeditions of some... I'm 41 years old, and mortal, and now very aware of that fact.

There are three components to my musing:

Firstly, I'm not afraid of dying. I'm really not. *1 Thessalonians 4:16-18* is a comfort, and I can echo that wonderfully defiant hope-filled proclamation from *1 Corinthians 15*: **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"** I *will* be raised on that last day, if our Lord does not return first.

Secondly, I *do* have some worries, and they are about those who depend on me, most fundamentally my family. I manage this anxiety by returning to a truth that I have had to fall back on a number of times as a husband and father: God is trustworthy. Sometimes I feel the answer to my anxious prayer is a divine “Do you trust me with them, or not?” And that pokes until there is life-giving movement.

Thirdly, within myself, my response is this: I’m not done with my life yet. Yes, I know my life is not my own, and there are always acts of fate and providence that I cannot control. But it’s my reaction to a real and present sense of mortality: I don’t want to shortcut, I want to get to the goal the long way ‘round.

You’ll have to forgive my nerdiness, because I’m referencing *Doctor Who* here. In the episode *The Girl in the Fireplace* the Doctor jumps from point to point in a woman’s timestream. She realises what’s going on: that he goes the “short way”, moving from decade to decade in a blink of an eye. But she “takes the long way ‘round”; she lives her life to the end. It all happens because of clockwork robots, of course, because, well... Doctor Who.

But my point is this. I want to live life, the long way ‘round. I want the good times and the storms, because blessed is his name. The *fading like autumn grass* is a felt reality, so I don’t want to waste the summer sun, but get on with obeying the truth and sincerely loving according to the enduring word of God. The thought of missing out on all that, whether life be a fight or a cruise, produces a regret in me and makes my mortality more foe than friend.

There are times where, like *Paul*, we long for heaven, and groan even more for the resolution of all things at the end. I think there are some who might feel rightly cheated if I were to enter into my rest before the work was done and the trials were ended! But nevertheless, this transitory life has

the very depths of value, even and especially in the work and the trials it brings. And so my aspiration, resolve, my longing, becomes this: Bring it on. Let's get there the long way 'round.

[UPDATE, 3/8/16] We have now had the follow up appointment and the news is good. The CT scan was clear and the tumour has not spread. The histology shows that it is a slow-growing form of cancer, and therefore not highly aggressive. I will not need any further treatment except for regular checks for the next five years and intervention if required. Apparently (according to the doctor's bladder cancer app!) there is a 24% chance of the tumour recurring in the next year, and a 40% chance of it recurring in the next five years (which is a little concerning, but not a problem with regular checks). There is a smaller chance (less than 1%) of it developing into a more aggressive form. [/UPDATE]

Missional Eschatology Before Breakfast

There are these words:



*Fearless warriors in a picket fence,
reckless abandon wrapped in common sense
Deep water faith in the shallow end
and we are caught in the middle
With eyes wide open to the differences,*

*the God we want and the God who is
But will we trade our dreams for His
or are we caught in the middle?*

*Somewhere between my heart and my hands,
Somewhere between my faith and my plans,
Somewhere between the safety of the boat and the crashing
waves...*

That things are both “now and not yet” is a fundamental part of Christian spirituality.

It locates us in history: The Kingdom of God is **now**, for Christ is Risen! The Kingdom of God is **not yet**, for we look ahead to when Christ brings renewal and rightness to the groaning of all creation. We are “in the middle” in the opportunity to share in God’s loving purposes, his *mission*. We are not too early nor too late to the dynamic plans of God. This is what *eschatology* and talk about the end of all things means for the Christian.

It locates us in ourselves: “**Now** we are children of God, but what we will be has **not yet** been made known.” (1 John 3:2). In the middle, we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Phil 2:12-13). We know now, whose we are, for certain. But we are incomplete, and we must have growth, refinement, maturation, strengthening.

“Now and not yet” therefore both *grounds us* and *stretches us*.

- We delight in what we have, but holy discontent with ourselves and the world spurs us on.
- We rejoice in where we have come to, but plans and ambitions must be abandoned as shallow and small as God’s perspective invades.
- We have the peace of present rest, but the constant call makes us face our fears and turn away from the control

and comfort that would placate them: “Your journey is not yet done, continue, walk this way with me.”

The opposite of “now and not yet” is terrible. It’s “this is all there ever was, and it’s all there ever will be.” In such things we are both rootless and directionless, simply adrift. Rather, lead me through the tensions and pains of the now and not yet, so that, being alive, I may live!

Photo Credit: “Fresh-muesli” by Markus Kuhn at en.wikipedia – Transferred from en.wikipedia. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Q&A: Does 1 Tim 4:10... provide an escape clause for humanists?

Reverend Mother asks: *Tim 1, ch 4, v 10 says “...who is the Saviour of all men and especially of those who believe...” Is this the verse to quote to people who have lost a non-believer... or perhaps an escape clause for humanists?*

Thanks for the question. The text of 1 Tim 4:10 in its most immediate context is (ESV):

8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. 10 That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.

But to begin with, some basic principles: Your question is an exegetical one. That is to say, it is asking for an interpretation, an “get-meaning-out” question. Good exegesis attempts to disrobe the reader of current frameworks and asks the question “What did this mean for the person to whom it was originally communicated?” Once that question has been considered the question of “so what does it mean for me (or for a humanist etc.)” can be asked, and hopefully answered, to some extent.

We must give attention to semantical range of words. We know what we mean by, for instance, the word “Saviour” but is that the meaning that is intended? Paul, who wrote the original letter, knew nothing of modern day humanism. And before we collide a passage with a specific question such as “Does this comfort those who have lost a person of no faith?” we have to consider whether or not the text is actually relevant to that question at all.

In my mind the sticking point is the phrase “Saviour of all people?” What does this mean? Do the applications you suggest apply?

The word “Saviour” is in the original Greek σωτήρ which certainly means “saviour” or “deliverer” but also “preserver.”

It is a word that applies to the general sense of divine preservation of human life and the providential giving of all that is required for sustenance. It is telling that the word references the sense of God’s preservation in the OT, but it is not a word that applies to the messianic figures of David (and others) where the more specific sense of “salvation” in terms of rescue or vicarious victory is present. Jesus is the first “Messiah” to also be “Saviour.”

The word “Saviour” implies an object – who or what is actually saved? The natural object is “the world.” When we talk about “the Saviour of the World” we do not intend some sort of exhaustive/universalist scope (in terms of individuals) the

scope of the meaning is two-fold: this person has the capacity to save the world; this world has a Saviour, it is this person.

Therefore, based on this lexical analysis, my conclusion would be that the phrase "Saviour of all people" does not imply a universalism. It implies that Jesus has the divine attributes of being "saviour/preserver/benefactor" of all people.

This conclusion is supported by looking at the immediate context. What is the purpose of this passage? Well, in verse 8, the direct point is to encourage godliness. This godliness is like "physical training" which has benefit both for the "present life" and the "life to come." In fact, through godliness, we could say we are saved/preserved for this life and the next. The argument that is being made is that the godliness is worth pursuing (for salvation/preservation) because it is shaped around the character, nature and demonstration of the one who saves and preserves. We strive for godliness because we hope/trust in this Saviour, even to the extent of recognise the preserving benefit of following Christ's example in this life.

However, for those whose hope in Christ extends to the eschatological hope of belonging to the age to come (the more specific sense of "salvation") there is even more reason to pursue the path of godliness because it is the path that pertains to the preservation of *eternal* life. Thus, in my opinion, the original audience of 4:10 would have heard something like this: *godliness is good for all people because it pertains to the preservation of all people in this world, and it is especially good for those who believe, because it especially pertains to the "life to come."*

How, then, does this apply to the applications you suggest?

a) Escape clause for humanists? Well, yes and no. It confirms the value of "godliness" for present-day preservation

of human life. I think the Pope said something similar recently about the value of “good works” even the “good works” of atheists. Such good works are, well, good. Does that give them an “escape” – well, perhaps.

b) Comfort those who have lost a person with no faith? Perhaps, depending on the person. I would think that passages that refer to the holiness and justice and compassion of God would be of more application.

Review: The Evangelical Universalist

“Evangelical Universalism” – an intriguing theological framework. It’s “universalism” because it’s a belief that all will eventually be “saved.” It’s “evangelical” because unlike other forms of universalism it maintains that Christ is the one and only way to salvation, and does not deny the authority of Scripture.

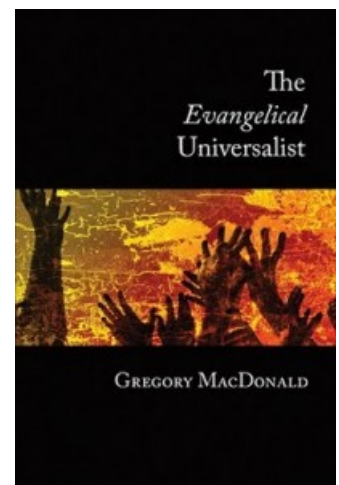
On the face of it, it seems to be oxymoronic.

But someone who strikes me as thoughtful challenged me to read the book, and so I did.

Some time ago actually, but things have been busy.

MacDonald writes well, with an appropriate studiousness and humility. My views are sympathetic with annihilationism and much of his arguments against the “traditional view” presuppose eternal torment and I approached my read with this in mind.

His introduction outlines his personal motivations in studying the topic. In many ways it is a basic theodical angst:



“The problem was that over a period of months I had become convinced that God could save everyone if he wanted to, and yet I also believed that the Bible taught that he would not. But, I reasoned, if he loved them, surely he would save them; and thus my doxological crisis grew. Perhaps the Calvinists were right – God could save everyone if he wanted to, but he does not want to. He loves the elect with saving love but not so the reprobate... Could I love a God who could rescue everyone but chose not to?... I longer loved God because he seemed diminished. I cannot express how deeply distressing this was for me...” (Page 2)

From this point he moves on to some more detailed philosophical considerations and then some exegetical considerations which he hopes will allow “universalist theology... to count as biblical.”

MacDonald exhibits some hermeneutical depth, drawing on Thomas Talbott he is honest about his assumptions:

“Talbott asks us to consider three propositions:

- 1. It is God’s redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself.*
- 2. It is within God’s power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world.*
- 3. Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence all together.*

Now, this set of propositions is inconsistent in that it is impossible to believe all three of them at the same time...

Universalists thus have to reinterpret the hell texts. But they are in a situation no different from Calvinists or Arminians in this respect. ‘Every reflective Christian who

takes a stand with respect to our three propositions must reject a proposition for which there is at least some prima facie biblical support.” (Page 37, 38)

And he brings a decent biblical theology to bear. Consider the diagram on Page 77 and also 105, which pretty much sums up his third and fourth chapters, that correlates crucifixion->resurrection of Christ to Israel's exile -> return (via the suffering servant) to the fall -> (universal, in his view) restoration of humanity. This also gives a decent missiological ecclesiology:

“Thus, the church is seen as an anticipation in the present age of a future salvation for Israel and the nations in the new age. This, in a nutshell, is the evangelical universalist vision I defend.” (Page 105)

It is clear through all this that his motivations and arguments are, indeed, evangelical, even if we may question his conclusions.

It is somewhat difficult to argue against him as he does a great deal to argue that a number of theological frameworks (Calvinism, Molinism...) are compatible with universalism. So what framework do I use in any rejoinder? He could always escape into a different framework. Nevertheless, my concerns include:

1) A view of hell as mere purgatory. Apart from anything else, this quantifies grace. Some receive enough grace to be saved in this life, some need grace extended into the afterlife. In his appeal to the omnibenevolent God that makes hell redemptive, one could simply ask why the omnibenevolent God invokes hell at all and simply saves everyone forthwith, or, if there must be pain, through trials and revelations of truth in this life. Some form of hell must be invoked to maintain biblical warrant, but seems superfluous in a

universalist framework.

2) Where does the universalism end? If all humanity is restored, then given his hermeneutical framework, all creation is restored. Does this mean salvation, say, for the devil and the demonic cohort, who are creatures? I didn't see him deal with this but it raises significant questions both exegetically and theologically.

3) What does it do with our kerygma? While MacDonald usefully ties ecclesiology to soteriology, in application and proclamation he runs into difficulties in his framework. He says, drawing from Colossians, that "the Church must live by gospel standards and proclaim its gospel message so that the world will come to share in the saving work of Christ" (Page 52). But by his framework, this mode of proclamation is arbitrary and contingent – it will presumably finish, incomplete, at the day of judgement. Unless of course the redemption in hell is also done through the proclamation of the church but then we really are stretching into conjecture.

4) There are times when I think he mishandles corporate/individual salvation. His transition into considering Abrahamic covenant as a transition from nation to individual is too simplistic (Page 55). His desire to undermine categorical understandings of salvation for "all people" in Romans 5 ignores the context of Jew/Gentile categories (Page 83). Perhaps he has a need to extract individuals from the judgement on nations (and vice versa), but this again stretches into conjecture.

In the end, however, my problem comes down to "how would I preach this?" And the answer is, I don't think I could. The finality of judgement is what gives us the impetus to cry "Maranatha", it's what energises our nurture as we provoke one another "all the more as we see the Day approaching", it's what stimulates our mission so that the Son of Man may find active lively faith on earth when he returns. These are

activities, yearnings, longings, directions, purposes that inherently and rightly belong to this Kingdom, this age. To belay any aspect of these things to another mode of redemption appears antagonistic to the whole gospel imperative.

I agree with his theodical concerns. His hermeneutical critique has some merit. But if I must choose which framework to use I would still lean towards annihilationism as that which best encapsulates the biblical revelation.

This is a well written book. It does not dishonour Scripture. It is not intended to undermine the Christian gospel. It is worth engaging with. But in the end it takes us to places that are unwarranted and unhelpful.

Q&A: When do you think the rapture will happen than?... Is fall 2012 the season?

Anonymous asks: When do you think the rapture will happen than? There are now wars and rumors of war (IRAN), we will not know the day or the hour, but we will know the season. Is fall 2012 the season?

Yes, absolutely, autumn 2012 is the season. And so was winter 2011, and spring of 1804, and, and... pick a random date. We have been in the end times for approximately 2000 years and there has never failed to be wars and rumours of wars. Every war or rumour that occurs is a testimony that we are living in an age where the work of Christ's faithfulness must, in faith, be exercised.

I don't care when the rapture will or if it will happen. How will the answer to that help me fulfil God's purpose for my life? I suspect those who are still living will meet Christ "in the sky" somehow to welcome him to his eternal kingdom.

But in the meantime I will continue to worship him in every part of my life, whether it be planting a tree or writing a sermon, sharing fellowship in my church or drinking coffee with a new-found friend; with all my strength and by the love of Christ doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with my God.

Arguments about eschatological precision have always struck me as useless and vain controversies – they have no relevance to the real world! The Scriptures assures me that his kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven and so I will continue to pray that prayer and work that work with a sure and certain hope. That is enough.

Q&A: What do you think about charismatic visions [like Unity's Vision]

waffleater asks: what do you think about charsmatic visions like this one <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVyMPqvnw5k> do you believe in these gifts or not

Thanks for the question Waffleater:

I'll embed the video you link for ease of access:

It's interesting. I haven't heard of Unity before. Your question is a general one – what do I think about charismatic

visions *like this one* and do I believe in these gifts or not.

Let me answer generally, therefore. I do believe that God gifts his church with visions and revelations at times. Some examples in Scripture of such “extra-biblical revelation” include Agabus’ foreknowledge of a famine (Acts 11) as well as through a prophetic symbolic act regarding Paul’s likely imprisonment in Jerusalem (Acts 21). Paul himself had dreams that directed his movements (the famous “Man from Macedonia” in Acts 16). None of this is surprising in that the fulfillment of Joel (“Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams”) is applied to the church in and through the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

I know a number of people who have had similar experiences in their own ministry and mission work. I myself have had times of overwhelming conviction in certain circumstances. Surely this form of revelation/understanding/awareness/knowledge, whatever you would like to call it, can be a genuine and credible part of the Christian walk.

A key characteristic, however, is that revelations of this type are always SERVANTS of God’s clear and authoritative Revelation of himself through the Scriptures and its revelation of Jesus. If you like, the benefit of these forms of (little-r) revelation is that they help apply the (big-R) Revelation to a particular time and place. So the people of God can respond to the famine, Paul can be directed to Macedonia, and so forth.

I am ready to accept the revelations people experience from their walk with God – but they will always be tested by Scripture, and should always be a means of applying or grasping further the authoritative Truth of God.

Having said all that – let me consider Unity’s vision. It is interesting in that it is a broad statement with very little specifics. It draws on biblical imagery from Revelation 13

and Matthew 25. It does very little, however, to help us apply those Scriptures. In many ways my conclusion would be "Why do we need this vision at all? Reading Revelation 13 and Matthew 25 directly would be a lot more powerful."

But, bring on revival in Australia. I can admire that sentiment.