

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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SAVED: FROM WHAT? (Part I)

In a recent 2006 interview in *Newsweek*, with an aging Billy Graham, I read this discouraging bit of information: “A unifying theme of Graham’s new thinking is humility. He is sure and certain of his faith in Jesus as the way to salvation. When asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, though, Graham says: “Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won’t...I don’t want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his Son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have.” The interviewer, Jon Meacham concluded the interview by praising Graham for this change and declared, “But more recent years have given him something he had little of in his decades of global evangelism: time to think both more deeply and more broadly. As he has grown older, Graham has come to an appreciation of complexity and a gentleness of spirit that sets him apart from many other high-profile figures in America’s popular religious milieu—including, judging from their public remarks, his own son Franklin Graham, and men such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Others relish the battlefield; Graham now prizes peace. He is a man of unwavering faith who refuses to be judgmental; a steady social conservative in private who actually does hate the sin but loves the sinner; a resolute Christian who declines to render absolute verdicts about who will get into heaven and who will not...” Some of you might remember that Graham made a similar statement a few years back when he appeared as a guest on Robert Schuller’s *The Hour of Power*. Sadly, it appears Graham has backed off his earlier emphasis that salvation is to be found only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. But this has become common place among many who call themselves “Evangelicals.” Joel Osteen, dubbed by the media as “the next Billy Graham” made similar remarks on *The Larry King Show*. Brian McLaren is one among many who openly claim that the Grace of God extends beyond Christianity.¹ Consider the following commonly heard questions.

- “So if someone lives a good life, gives to charity, and never hurts a fly—will he go to Hell forever when he dies, just because he didn’t believe in Jesus?”
- “So what about good, moral Jews, or Moslems, or Buddhists, will people like Mahatma Ghandi, who live good lives, are just and kind and loving—Will they go to Hell if they’re not Christians?”
- “So what about folks who never hear the Gospel, but they’re not like headhunters or rapists. Will they go to Hell forever?”
- “My mother wasn’t a Christian, but she was a really good mother and a kind caring person. Is she in Hell?”

Well over a decade ago noted sociologist James Davidson Hunter documented this growing mentality among Evangelical college students in the 1980’s. The traditional doctrines of sin, salvation exclusively through Christ and the eternal damnation (hell) were an embarrassment to the majority of those who identified themselves as Evangelicals. But, as Davidson goes on to point out, this is not restricted to college students.² What is the primary source for this situation? Quite simply, it is a defective understanding of sin. “The biblical doctrine of sin,” observes J. I. Packer, “has been secularized in modern times. People today still talk of sin, but no longer think of it

theologically. The word has ceased to convey the thought of an offense against God, and now signifies only a breach of accepted standards of decency, particularly in sexual matters. But when the Bible speaks of sin, it means precisely an offense against God. Though sin is committed by man, and often against society, it cannot properly be defined in terms of either man or society. We shall never know what sin really is until we learn to think of it in terms of our relationship with God.”³ There is, perhaps, no single doctrine in the fabric of the Christian faith more despised and mocked than that of *original sin*. Regrettably, large numbers of professing Evangelicals have grown increasingly silent about the subject as well.⁴ PECCATUM ORIGINALIS, the famous theological Latin expression, refers to the hereditary guilt which is imputed to all mankind because of the sin and guilt of Adam, and to hereditary corruption which, because of the guilt and corruption of Adam (and Eve), is transmitted to all their descendants by generation. “Original sin,” wrote Bavinck, “includes *original pollution*. All men are conceived in sin and born in unrighteousness (Psalm 51:7) and are evil from youth on up (Genesis 6:5 and Psalm 25:7), for no one can bring a clean thing from an unclean one (Job 14:4 and John 3:6). This taint or pollution not only spreads itself out over all men, but it also saturates the whole of the individual being. It attacks the heart, which is deceitful above all things, sick unto death, and never to be fathomed in its guile (Jeremiah 17:9), and which as the source of the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23) is the source also of all unrighteousness (Mark 7:21-22). Proceeding from the heart as center, this pollution darkens the understanding (Romans 1:21), inclines the will to evil and makes it powerless to do the truly good (John 8:34 and Romans 8:7), taints or defiles the conscience (Titus 1:15), and makes of the body with all of its members, its eyes and ears, its hands and feet, its mouth and tongue, a weapon of unrighteousness (Romans 3:13-17 and 6:13). This sin is such that everybody, not by his own ‘sins of commission’ first of all, but from the time of his conception is subject to death and corruption (Romans 5:14). All men have already died in Adam (I Corinthians 15:22).”⁵ Unless we grasp this significance of the doctrine of original sin, we will never fully understand the import of Isaiah’s words, “Woe is me!” The prophet’s fear and amazement are described by two signs and two causes.

I. TWO SIGNS

- A. **His Exclamation.** “Woe is me!” The English word *woe* originally referred to an exclamation—a loud cry of pain.⁶
- B. **His Dejection.** “I am undone.” The Hebrew word NIDMEYTI expresses the thought of doom.⁷ Why? Isaiah’s cry stemmed from his own deep sense of shame, the blinding shock of a personal encounter with One he was utterly unfit to meet.

II. TWO CAUSES

- A. **What Isaiah was.** He pronounces himself unclean, and he dwelt among unclean people. “The fact that he speaks of ‘unclean lips’ probably springs from the contrast he senses between his speech and the clean lips of the seraphs and from his awareness that he, as well as his people, should be thus proclaiming the praise of this holy and glorious God.”⁸
- B. **What Isaiah saw.** He saw the LORD. How do we reconcile this with texts like Exodus 33:20, John 1:18 and I Timothy 6:16 that God is invisible and cannot be seen as such? The grand old puritan William Perkins long ago wrote: “He did not see the substance of God (for that is invisible and incomprehensible) but his glory. Nor did he see the fullness of his glory, for that cannot be endured. He was given only a glimpse of it. Nor did he even see this with his physical eyes in the ordinary way, but in a vision. To what extent physical sight was involved neither the prophet expresses, nor can we easily tell. The meaning is simply that he saw in a vision such glory and majesty that he knew there was an extraordinary presence of the Lord of Hosts who is the King of glory – at whose sight and at

the thought of whose presence his conscience was smitten with fear because of his own infirmities and the pollutions of his people.”⁹ We are told in John 12:41 that it was the pre-incarnate Christ that Isaiah saw. In other words, Jesus and the LORD are one and the same.

CONCLUSION: David Wells rightly captures an important theme that many Evangelicals have forgotten: The holiness of God. “Without this holiness of God, sin has no meaning and grace has no point, for it is God’s holiness that gives to the one its definition and to the other its greatness. Without the holiness of God, sin is merely human failure but not failure before God, in relation to God. It is failure without the standard by which we know it to have fallen short. It is failure without the presumption of guilt, failure without retribution, failure without any serious moral meaning. And without the holiness of God, grace is no longer grace because it does not arise from the dark clouds of judgment that obscured the cross and exacted the damnation of the Son in our place. Furthermore, without holiness, grace loses its meaning as grace, a free gift of the God who, despite his holiness and because of his holiness, has reconciled sinners to himself in the death of his Son. And without holiness, faith is but a confidence in the benevolence of life, or perhaps merely confidence in ourselves. Sin, grace, and faith are emptied of any but a passing meaning if they are severed from their roots in the holiness of God.”¹⁰ Isaiah was not an unconverted man when he was confronted with this vision of the grandeur of God. He was, in fact, a very godly man. We find the same kind of response in the New Testament when we read of the Apostle Paul. “There stands a declaration in the First Epistle to Timothy which has seemed to many strange. Paul writes here (I Timothy 1:15), that Christ has come into the world to save sinners and adds: ‘Among whom I *am* a chief one.’ Has he not miswritten? Ought he not to have written, ‘Among whom I *was* a chief one?’” He is certainly already washed, sanctified, justified; he is a servant of Jesus Christ, and His ambassador to the Gentiles. He has labored more than the others. But that is not his merit, but the merit of grace. Through God’s grace he is what he is. But just because he lives continuously by grace, the knowledge of his sin is ever before him. They condition one another. Because Paul cannot live without the Savior of sinners, he reckons himself permanently among sinners, not among sinners who wish to remain sinners and are far from God, but among those who have experienced overpowering grace but who also know that they need grace daily. Paul knows himself and his Savior. The Holy Spirit has opened his eyes.” “The Christians knows,” we read again, “that he is burdened with much more guilt than he himself perceives—guilt of unrecognized results of earlier sins, still greater guilt of sins of omission in the region of charity. The Christian joins in the prayer of the Psalmist, ‘Who can mark how often he fails? Cleanse me from secret faults’ (Psalm 19:13). Should he be willing consciously to increase the burden of guilt lightly? The Christian stands in daily conflict with sins of temperament, with sins of weakness and sins of habit. The grace of God has enough here to bear, to cleanse, to wash away. It were a sacrilege to draw on it deliberately by conscious transgression. God keep us, us Christians from security! The consciousness of sin, in the earnest sense in which we have described it, is a means of protection.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. his A Generous Orthodoxy (Zondervan, 2004). Here is a sample statement from the book. “In this light, although I don’t hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians. I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don’t hope all Jews of Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus. Ultimately, I hope that Jesus will save Buddhism, Islam, and every other religion, including the Christian religion, which often seems to need saving about as much as any other religion does.” p. 264.

² “Interestingly, this kind of reflection is not occurring independently of formal theology but, in fact, gains legitimacy from it. Writes one Evangelical theologian, “though our knowledge about God’s dealings with the unevangelized is slight, it is sufficient to dispel the notion that the hopes of untold millions are simply cancelled out *a priori*.” This was put even more strongly: “Of one thing we can be certain, God will not abandon in hell those who have not known and therefore have not declined his offer of grace.” Other Evangelical theologians have concurred.” J. D. Hunter, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation (Univ. Chicago Press, 1988) p. 34.

³ J. I. Packer, God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes (IVP, 1981), p. 72.

⁴ "If sin is defined, as it is in the Bible, as missing the mark, abandoning the path, and defying authority, the mark missed, the path abandoned, and the authority defied are from first to last God's. Sin is defying God, disobeying his law, rejecting his Word, and refusing his Christ. Yet in America today only 17 percent of people understand sin in relation to God. What in the Bible makes sin to be sin has disappeared for the great majority of Americans, and the consequence is a massive trivialization of our moral life. This happens because moral offenses against God are reduced simply into bad feelings about ourselves." D. F. Wells, Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision (Eerdmans, 1998) p. 29.

⁵ Herman Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine (Baker, 1956), p. 243.

⁶ "There does not seem to be much difference between 'ÔI and HÔI.' The latter may generally be rendered 'oh!' or 'ah!' with a tinge of sadness, or 'alas!' whereas the former is more equivalent of 'Woe is me!' cf. '*awailuli* (so often found in Loqman's fables). Isaiah's cry reminds one of Gidian's; cf. Judges 6:22; 13:22." E. J. Young, The Book of Isaiah I (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 247.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. Ridderbos, The Bible Student's Commentary: Isaiah (Zondervan, 1985), p. 79.

⁹ W. Perkins, The Art of Prophesying (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), p. 145.

¹⁰ D. F. Wells, God in The Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Eerdmans, 1994) p. 144.

¹¹ As cited in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield VII (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 231.