

Brief Notes — Grace Notes — on Our Sin, God's Re-Creation and Salvation

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Mr. Kevaghn Mattis, the young Director of this *Christian Journal* has asked some of us to give readers a brief summary of our views on sin and salvation based on our shared belief in Christ and the salvation he brings.

As everyone knows, there has been considerable variety in the ways different Christians have expressed themselves on these central beliefs at various times and places. And as everyone *should know*, if God was indeed in Christ, reconciling to himself people who are still sinners, then the full worth he gives them does not depend on their having had the right ideas or having said the right things about him. For if God was in Christ, salvation is entirely his gift, and in no way our own achievement — least of all through possessing a superior set of concepts or beliefs (compare II Corinthians 5:19).

Having said that, let us begin by remembering the great reassurance that is there for us all in Ephesians:

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... (By Grace you have been saved!) ... and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places... in order that he might in the coming ages, show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — through faith, not because of works. [Nothing for us to boast about!] For we are his workmanship..." (Eph.2: 4-10).

Our final worth and place in his creation depend, not on who or what we have been or become, not on our having had the right ideas, or having made the right decision, not even on our having accepted him consciously (as many of us tend to boast), but on who he has been on our behalf all the while and will always be — accepting us in awesomely tenacious, gracious

love — with a permanent promise of unexpected renewal, as full members of his own beloved community. For he has accepted us fully, seeing us already, as we are to be, re-created, perfect in his love.

In the background here it is important to remind ourselves that we can not realize how much we need to be saved, or from what, until we are shown the fantastic, undreamed-of prospect that is there for us, if Jesus Christ really did represent the permanent worth and promise our lives have with God.

A journalist reacting a couple of days ago to the publicity swirling around Mel Gibson's new film, *The Passion of the Christ*, wrote "don't you dare tell me this man died for my sins. *No one* died for *my* sins. I don't even acknowledge that I have ever sinned. I don't even believe in sins. So don't tell me some stranger died for me 2,000 years ago."^[1] How could any poor man know the extent of our human problem, until he has experienced and begun to hope his way into what our life is to be, as an everlasting, world-integrating gift: in short, that we are to be saved?

It is important also to remind ourselves that for the Bible, what is called *salvation* means a complete *wholeness* and life-fulfillment. This wholeness has inner dimensions, regarding both body and mind, including our potential for zesty physical pleasure, complete human satisfaction, for rewarding thought, joy, wonder and beauty. Equally, it extends outwards to include our potential for oneness with others, with God, and with his entire ecological creation — all to be enjoyed in mature freedom. If God was in Christ, as we are given to believe, each dimension of our life (inner or outer) is to be freely responsive to the Lord, who not only knows us inside and out, but has power to restore us to his highest promise — which includes our corporate humanity (the community of perfect love to which he has pledged or "covenanted" himself).

There is, of course, an underside to this promise of fullness and wholeness: We are confronted with an unavoidable though quite futile truth: Every dimension of our daily life-experience seems to writhe with brokenness, alienation, and unfulfillment. The people of the Bible, along with their vision of God's intended life-wholeness, were also open-eyed in recognizing our human shortfall. If there is a concerned Life-Giver, fearsome death itself shows a tragic separation or distance from him.

^[1] Kim Antieau, AlterNet, February 26, 2004 (The Independent Media Institute).

Physical illness, broken limbs, mental illness, mental anguish and confusion, social conflict, enmity and competition, natural pestilence and disasters — all are of a piece; all are equally symptomatic of our distance from life's potential and (as we can now see in Christ), its promised wholeness. These things all, equally, break out of God's ultimate will for us. Smacking of life's disintegration, they all cut against the grain of the Life-Giver's intent and cruelly despair of his gift.

They have this one thing in common: They are entrenched against joyful life — ranged, as it were, along a battle front, attacking the wholeness of our life together. As such, they are forms of incipient death. Willful defensiveness and malice, every form of moral alienation, indifference to God and man are among them — whatever is forgetful or destructive of life-wholeness — that is what is meant by “transgression,” “evil,” or “sin.”

When Paul states flatly that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:21-23), he is not chiding with frightening threats, but is simply reminding us of what sin is. In this light even a most faithful apostle can see himself frankly as “foremost of sinners” (I Timothy 1:15). Like the rest of us he has been embedded in the bleak health- and wholeness-destructive actions in which we express ourselves. The corporate whole with God's other creatures that we are all to share is already long-since broken. We all find ourselves in a death-embedded situation, virtually enslaved by it. We partake in our mortality in countless unhappy ways. Incipient death has taken hold among us. This may put us all in a dramatic learning situation, true; yet death is not God's final purpose for us (compare Galatians 3:1-4:11).

“Sin” or “evil,” then, refers to whatever breaks our life-wholeness (or whatever disables our freely whole-hearted love response to any of the others who are to be part of our own loving community.) See this clearly — and we won't be tempted into the grossly disobedient frame of mind that thinks of sin, or evil, or of death itself as an independent power, a Darth Vader over against God. A destructive flight from life should not be accorded the dignity of separate existence over against our loving Creator.

To avoid dignifying such bootless life-negation with any dynamic power of its own, the great theologian, Karl Barth, developed the habit of referring to such evil, not as a separate entity or power over against God, but simply as senseless negation, *das Nichtige*, nothingness or *néant*. How refreshing it would be, if we could be so grace-assured that we saw the evil

in and around us as of no further consequence than that — senseless, meaningless, lifeless.

Evil, then, is not a separate, abiding power or sub-deity (or “demiurge”) that has to be given its due. It has no future whatsoever. So we don’t need to celebrate death or idolize it, as some religions and groups have done. We don’t need to hammer people into deep depression over their sin, in order to lever them towards conversion, as the frontier preachers tried to do; we don’t need a complicated exorcism of evil, when we have the liberation of the Gospel to fill our damaged lives with promise.

Where God’s intention for our life is broken, it nearly always means failure to recognize and enjoy the **freedom** of love-responsive life in its fullness. The Ten Commandments, a summary of God’s promised law for the Covenant people, began with an often forgotten first word (that should also be a last word in our grasp of any authority or rules that follow): You, before all else, are to remember the Life-Giver is a Liberator. His purpose has always been to give you slaves the fullest status and freedom to be your whole, unfettered selves.^{2[2]} *Liberating promise is in command.* His authority means freedom.

If we’d only invest our energies on returning love now, and not regress to rehearse our past or dwell morbidly on the distorted shapes our lives have taken, whenever we’ve slighted their high promise! Paul talks here about letting such things slip behind us like a single-minded sprinter, who runs with his eyes locked forward on his prize (Philippians 3:12-14). The Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, in his attempt to restore this New Testament attitude towards past sin, could be quite graphic here: We’ve no need to be like dogs, he’d say, who return to lick their own vomit! Where our human brokenness is concerned, we can live forward, completely free of our past failures and act joyfully here and now in the fullest anticipation of our promised life together.

In objective perspective the entire Hebrew-Jewish experience issues into repeated frustrations that the prophets tried to throw into perspective. The Law and Prophets underscore the frequent failure, as the Covenant people fail to be themselves in terms of life’s joyful wholeness. They forget to uphold each other’s status and liberty in loyal love. It is as though the

^{2[2]} see Deuteronomy 5:6 = Ex. 20:2

wholeness of life claimed for them and promised to them has reached an impasse, and they can only wait for God's own future action to fulfill his promise of full and joyful life, as they enter a period of wistful messianic expectation.

St. Paul refers to Psalms which reflect this general shortfall and the pattern of yearning waiting that had developed. Against this background the exultant hope in Christ as harbinger of God's gracious re-creation emerges as that for which the whole earth is eagerly longing (see Romans 8:19).

The sad impasse of any human attempt to put together the Humpty-Dumpty fragments of our own existence becomes the key base-line in the message of Jesus, the Messiah, as he is remembered in the earliest Christian Gospel, Mark. At a focal point of the narrative, Jesus roundly declares that it is **humanly "impossible"** really to keep God's Law of Love.^{3[3]} This, of course, is complemented immediately by Jesus' key word, "**But all things are possible for God.**" Thus Mark points forcibly forward to our spontaneous life response of dependent relationship. That commanded perfection — which though humanly "impossible," is yet divinely promised (Matt. 5:48)^{4[4]} — is to become the subject of the child-like prayer and joyful thanksgiving that signal restored community.

The drama of frustration-restoration is vividly clinched by the "Sermon on the Mount" which is added in Matthew's later version,^{5[5]} in re-writing Mark's Gospel for a more Jewish, Law-oriented audience. The humanly overwhelming Law of God functions here to illuminate human need and out flank it with promise. That seems to be Jesus' view of the very purpose of the ancient Law, which, as he agreed, is summed up in the sloganed *Shema*, "Love YHWH, your God, with your whole heart, soul and might" (Deut. 6:4), along with the Levitical word, "Love your neighbor as

^{3[3]} This, despite the arch hypocritical claim just made by the rich young man in the story, who says he has "kept all the commandments" from his youth; see Mark 17 ff., especially v. 27.

^{4[4]} It may be significant here that the Greek verb for "You therefore are to be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect," has a double meaning — both imperative and future indicative in form (Matt. 5:48). The command, which is at the same time promise, has become the context for our prayer response (a theme of the following chapter).

^{5[5]} E. g., Wish someone were not there, and you are in effect breaking the murder prohibition in your heart; look at someone with an eye to using her or him and you show you are already an adulterer in your innermost core, etc. (Matt. 5:17ff.). Compare Paul's insistence with the Psalms that everyone, without exception, sins and falls short of the glory of God (see e.g., Romans 3: 9 ff. to Psalms 14:3, *et al.*).

yourself” (Lev. 19:18).^{6[6]} But that law of love, taken by itself, shows us as we are. It casts into dark relief our defensiveness. God’s law of love, taken by itself, as Paul tells us in various ways, slays all our pretensions to goodness.^{7[7]}

Jesus’ own ministry of all-healing salvation is exemplified in a cameo account placed near the beginning of the earliest Gospel written. Its message is epitomized by a leper (the AIDS victim of the day) who, unable to make himself whole again, calls out to Jesus, “If you will, *you* can make me clean.”^{8[8]} The divine answer for all human brokenness, reverberates in Jesus’ unqualified response, “I will; be clean.”

It has largely escaped scholars’ notice that it is for a very definite purpose that Matthew inserted the “Sermon on the Mount” at this very point when he supplemented the Mark narrative for his audience. Jesus’ interiorization of the ancient Law’s demands in the Sermon would be overwhelming, were it not matrixed within his gracious reassurance that those who are “spiritually impoverished,” are nevertheless being blessed (Matt. 5:6) and their prayers underwritten (Ch. 6). The Sermon on the Mount, taken seriously, must leave all of us standing in the shoes of the leper, deeply aware of our shortfalls, unable to re-create our own hearts, and ready to plead, “Lord if you will, you can make *us* clean.” All in order that we might hear his all-powerful reassurance, “I will. So be it!”

In this way the same theme [human impossibility = divine promise] is reinforced by the Sermon on the Mount: the life-wholeness promised by God is beyond our present capacity. But our sense of need, stimulated by Jesus’ unrelenting law of love, catapults us ever again into a drama, where we find ourselves reaching out for the interdependence only others can give us.^{9[9]} To **call on** the stability of God’s grace is to build our life together on a rock.^{10[10]}

Jesus’ emphasis on our human impossibility has not been enough acknowledged in our technologically emboldened age; but the Protestant Reformers, following Paul, Augustine and the early Church, fully

^{6[6]} See e.g., Mark 12:28 ff., Matthew 22:36 ff. *et al.*

^{7[7]} See e.g., Romans 5:18 ff.; 7:18 ff.; Galatians 3:10 ff.; 3:22 f.; *et al.*

^{8[8]} Mark 1:40 Jesus’ identity as healer of all comers is the generalized as the prime characteristic of his ministry (cf. e.g., Mk. 3:11 *et al.*).

^{9[9]} See. this progression in Matt. 6 and 7:7 ff.

^{10[10]} Matt. 7:24 ff.

recognized, that the ubiquity of human failure was ground zero for the Gospel of Christ, as its essential background realism.

What does Jesus manifest here, but the upsurging initiative of a healing God who will not simply ignore the dissolution and death of any of his creatures. For he loves them all — perfectly, endlessly, all-powerfully. From one end of the narrative to the other, the gospels — especially the earliest one, Mark, present Jesus as the healer of all comers. Here we should keep an eye on the dimensions of salvation [i.e., healing or restored wholeness] over against all the symptoms of incipient death that were related to each other in the Jewish mind. Each variety of healing is seen as a reversal of the process of death, a victory over mortality, sin and death, a harbinger of resurrection and restored community.

The Christ, who took the initiative to heal all comers, was the ante-type for any future expectations of God. Healing, remember, for Jews suggested salvation, it testified to the purpose of the all-powerful Life Giver, who need not accept death, finally, in his beloved Community. If Jesus cured the blind, restored mental health, forgave sin and even raised the dead, it pointed towards a future corporate joy. Christians symbolized this promise in the messianic banquet scene they often painted over their graves in the Catacombs.

Prominent, in every separate strand of New Testament writing, as well as in the earliest creeds of the Church, is an image that apparently lay close to the heart of Early Christians' thought: *Jesus as our sole final judge*. Psalm 110 had spoken of a kingly figure who would sit enthroned at God's right hand and represent him fully. If the Jesus they remembered had fully represented the Life-Giver's own freedom and power when he took the initiative to heal all comers and restore their life, then they must picture him as shaping the content of this familiar messianic role, as judge.

Now, how glorious for them, if their only final judgment is to be characterized by none other than the one they already knew for his unlimited forgiveness and healing. Christ's loving re-creation becomes our sole destiny. All hindrances to our fully joyful and freely loving life together are to be "subjected under [the] feet" of this new Davidic King and, along with death itself, banished forever (I Corinthians 15:25 ff.).

The phrase for this in the Apostles' Creed was not intended as a baleful warning: "Tremble in your boots, you're going to be severely judged." But rather it was an exorbitant, excited hope: It is **HE**, who shall come, finally. "to judge the quick and the dead — the one we have known. None other! This enemy-blessing, all-forgiving healer, represents God's last word for us. No other judge. A fantastic hope! No wonder the new gospel caught on and spread like wild-fire across the world!"^{11[11]}

The wide-open scope of this message towards the entire cosmos that God "so loves" (John 3:16) is all too often slighted in our zealously individualistic and competitive society. Our Christ-response should have an open-hearted clarity for the communal dimensions of the covenant life the Bible envisions under the liberating reign of God. Here life's wholeness is corporate. Because of its very nature a person in breaking her own wholeness does not simply affect herself alone: Her single alienating action breaks the mutuality of love that God intends — breaks it for all other persons as well. Likewise, by its very nature, restored wholeness and salvation is not something any of us can appropriate, possess or enjoy for ourselves alone. It is our corporate whole that is being re-created for good, or there would be no true wholeness for any of us.

If we share salvation hope in Christ, it implies full membership in the open-hearted "body of Christ." To the extent we consciously begin to share it through faith, we will begin to recognize our entire corporate wholeness, as we are engendered, "born again," em-bodied in each other's fully restored love along with all the others God loves.

This hope had and still has mind-blowing sweep: Our own restored being includes that of all others. It is mind-blowing!

Our hope does not lie in the fact that the transcendent power will [finally] belong to us. It lies in the fact that the transcendent power will never belong to us, but that it belongs to God — the God who meets our sin with his grace, and who meets our misuse of his grace with his healing and corrective power.^{12[12]}

It is as a mere foretaste of God's promised kingdom that we are limbed-in here, already "engrafted in Christ" into the corporate body of all God loves. Of course we can in no way make his final judgments for him.

^{11[11]} I Corinthians 15: 25-28. See further Mark 12:36; 15:61 f.; Romans 8:34 ff.; Acts 2:33-36; 7:55 f.; *The Apostles' Creed*; et. al.

^{12[12]} Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, Oxford, New York: Oxford U. Press, 1961:50

But, as far as we ourselves can judge, “in Christ” may well include all he has ever created; for his love remains immeasurably greater than our own. We are not to “categorize” or judge others at all.^{13[13]} Our greatest danger here is not that we will come to be lulled into carelessness by “easy grace,” or an indifference to real pain under a cloak of “feel-good religion.”

Ordinary society will always tend towards the defensive mind set of the Pharisee (who thanks God that he is not as other men are [Luke 18:9-14], and thereby soundly breaks the corporate wholeness we are to enjoy together. Instead, we are enabled to identify with all and enter into a mode of hope for all — if indeed our Prodigal Father loves, as Christ represents him, in free, self-squandering grace. Our very pathos in having been so freely accepted moves us to grateful acceptance of others in turn. At the very least, we are drawn to be healing in Good Samaritan terms and care even for our enemies’ needs, as we trek along to our own way to Jericho — or Baghdad — today.

^{13[13]} See the Greek of John 5 — especially v.45, where Jesus says that not even he himself will categorize us; for Moses’ Law has long since done that quite sufficiently.