EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 9

Volume 9 • Number 1 • January 1985

Evangelical Review of Theology

Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership, interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary living.

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Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

Editorial Beyond Contextualization

During the last ten years the major thrust in theological endeavour has been to make theology relevant to our different cultural contexts. In an era of escalating social change and with the rapid growth of the church in many regions, especially in the third world, this has been a necessary task. The crisis of our age is one of communication and it is right that theologians should devote themselves to understanding the Bible in its own context, the cultural thought patterns and behaviour of the recipients of the Gospel and the communicator's self-evaluation of his own horizons. The steady flow of theological consultations, research projects, journals and books published reflect this concern to translate biblical theologies into concepts that speak to local and regional cultures. However, in this process many theologians have gone beyond the task of communication to construct contextualized theologies that have given a radically different interpretation of the Gospel. They have worked within the framework of the world view and values of a given culture, usually non-Christian in origin, and have tended to use Scripture more as a proof text than as a final bedrock authority. Too often these cultural theologies have become syncretistic and ultimately reductionistic. The dangers of theological provincialism and obscurantism are becoming apparent.

Perhaps the time has now come to emphasize the need for reflection and evaluation of our theological scene from a fresh scripture perspective. This is essentially a hermeneutical task. It is a call to go beyond contextualization and to restate the universals of our faith which transcend culture and contemporary experience. Simon Chan's article in this issue is a call to do just this—to engage with new vigour in theoretical research in theology. The attempt to restate biblical theology systematically must be made not as a reaction to cultural theologies but in the light of them and the issues they raise. Theology is in danger of being too small wherever it is culturally conditioned as in the past systematic theologies of the west or in the cultural theologies of the third world. Our Christian theology begins with the assumption that biblical truth is divinely revealed truth. Our task is to lay bare this truth and then to communicate it faithfully and relevantly to our world. Good theology is both universal and contextualized. p. 8

Peace
A Bible Study on Ephesians 2:11–3:21

Cullen I. K. Story

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THE GOOD NEWS OF PEACE

In biblical history, the 'gospel of peace' appears as a most fitting rubric for God's good news. Witness, for instance, how—to an oppressed people—the great prophet of Israel's exile portrayed vividly a messenger moving across the mountains announcing the good

news of peace (*shalom*, cf. Isa. 52:7 with 52:4–5). Or again, consider that, in the face of the reign of a cruel Edomite king whose value for human life was sub-zero, the angelic evangel sang of peace on earth (Luke 2:14). Two powerful paradigms soliciting our reflection today. Not only do they cry out in opposition to a nuclear arms race threatening the world with a holocaust that defies description, but they also issue a clarion call for evangelical messengers who will proclaim pre-eminently Christ's peace.

Peace on earth was incarnation's first word for the world (Luke 2:14) and what a word it was! It encompassed the entire ministry of Jesus, for as he moved in and out among all levels of society, his word of peace implied wholeness for the one who was sick (Mark 5:34), forgiveness for the one who had sinned (Luke 7:47, 50), restoration for the one who had failed (John 20:19, 21, 26), and confidence in God's ultimate saving purpose for the one who faced death (Luke 2:29–30). The implication is clear. Twentieth-century Christians are to join hands with Christians of the first century in that invisible yet indissoluble bond of the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15; cf. Isa. 52:7).

In such confidence, we approach our Bible study in Ephesians with its theme of peace, a theme that permeates the pivotal section of the letter (Eph. 2:11–3:21). The passage is divided by a number of printed texts into two main divisions (2:11–22 and 3:1–21). I suggest that the movement of Paul's thought in the two divisions is comparable to the second and third parts of Handel's *Messiah*. Part two of the *Messiah* opens with what may be termed the 'golden passional'[1] i.e., the chorus, 'Behold the Lamb of God.' It continues with a description of messengers on the mountain who bring with them the gospel of peace, and concludes with the 'Hallelujah Chorus'. Part three highlights the p. 9 triumph of Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of his people, concluding with the 'Amen' chorus. So, in Ephesians—similar to the chorus, 'Behold the Lamb of God'—we find a portrayal of Christ's passion (2:13–15), then a description of the messengers of Christ's peace (3:1–12), followed by a proclamation of Christ's victory (3:13–17). Then, commensurable to the 'Hallelujah Chorus', is Paul's praise offered for the incomprehensible dimensions of Christ's love—its length and breadth and its depth and height (3:18–19). Finally, similar to the concluding 'Amen' chorus of HandeL, Paul also ends with his own 'Amen' following his ascription of praise to God (3:20–21).

The letter to the so-called 'Ephesian' church is quite evenly balanced between what 'amazing grace' has done *for* the people of God (chapters 1–3) and what grace can do *through* them (chapters 4–6). One feature that distinguishes the two parts is the extensive use of the indicative mood in chapters 1–3 over against the imperative mood in chapters 4–6. Chapters 4–6 are full of exhortations or demands laid upon the Christian body for a well-ordered life among its own members as well as in society. For example, the writer urges readers to 'put on the new nature' (4:24), 'speak the truth' (4:25), 'be imitators of God' (5:1), 'walk in love' (5:2), 'be strong in the Lord' (6:10), and 'put on the whole armour of God' (6:11). There are almost forty of these 'imperatives' in chapters 4–6, all indicating what the people of God are to do.

In contrast, chapters 1–3 are characterized by the 'indicative' mood, i.e., what God has done. There is one imperative only—in 2:11, 'remember'. It relates to the past: remember what you were and the change which God has wrought in you. But as the lone imperative in the first three chapters, it is one of the important keys for understanding the letter. It points us to the basic need of the church today and likewise directs us to the heart of our concern for 'peace' in this study. For, the apostle says, in remembering what you were—

[1] The term is used by F. Delitzsch of Isa. 52:13–53:12.

strangers, alienated persons, without hope, and without God—while you remember all of these things, remember most of all, that

a. Christ Jesus is our peace (2:14),
b. He made peace through his cross (2:15–16), and
c. He came preaching the good news of peace (2:17)—peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near.

Remember. The verb—ever so important in the Bible—is the word which Israel needed to hear. Remember that you were slaves and that the Lord brought you out of Egypt; remember the days of old; remember p. 10 what wonders the Lord performed on your behalf. And how well Jesus knew that—like the butler who did not remember Joseph but forgot him (Gen. 40:23)—His disciples and His church could and would forget, and so He instituted the holy supper, saying, 'This do in remembrance of me'.

And now, two 'pegs' may help us to grasp the breadth of our passage:

> Peace—the provision of Christ for the world—Eph. 2:11–21.
>
> Peace—the purpose of God in Christ for the world, to be channeled to the world through the church—Eph. 3:1–21.

I

Peace—The Provision of Christ for the World

Christ breaks down the middle wall of separation between one people and another, between one culture and another, between one race and another (2:14). In a succinct way, Robert Frost's poem 'Mending Wall' has captured the meaning of barriers between people. He describes a scene where he and his neighbout, at an appointed time each Spring, walk down on either side of the stone wall that marks the boundary between their respective properties. They cut and bruise their hands as they replace the stones that have fallen down through the winter months. When his neighbour blandly states, 'Good fences make good neighbours,' the poet rebels. He says to himself, 'Why do we need fences? My neighbour has pine trees and I have apple trees. Surely my apples will not cross the wall and eat the pine cones under my neighbour's trees'. Then come the famous lines:

> Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offence. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.

Does Frost, unconsciously, capture something of Ephesians 2? Does Paul suggest that the 'wall' is that which divided the court of the Gentiles from the Temple proper? Possibly. Over a hundred years ago, the French archaeologist, Clermont-Ganneau, uncovered an inscription that had once been written on the temple wall, an inscription that in clear, crisp terms forbade any Gentile to enter the sanctuary under penalty of death. Yet, by the 'wall' of Ephesians 2, Paul may provide us with a flashback to the curtain of the holy place in the temple—which curtain, at Jesus' death, was torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Whether either of these ideas be Paul's specific reference, the p. 11 text summons us to face the painful barriers of racial animosities that have plagued the church from its very inception. There was a sharp almost impenetrable wall that separated Jew from Gentile in the first century. We are aware of the prayer of the Pharisee in Paul's day, 'God, I thank thee that I am not a Gentile'—a prayer echoed pointedly, according to Jesus, by the Pharisee in the temple: 'God, I thank thee that I am not like the rest … or even like this tax-

collector' (Luke 18:11). Think what it took to get Peter to go to the home of the Gentile centurion (Acts 10). Or consider the anxiety and sleepless nights that Barnabas and Paul must have had prior to the Jerusalem council where they contended vigorously for the equal standing and status of Gentile and Jewish Christians in the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 15). Today, we remember that it was racial hatred that ignited the fearful holocaust of so many millions of Jews. We remember too the fearless stand of Martin Luther King, Jr., who aroused the conscience of church and society alike to a responsible commitment to human rights and human dignity for all races. The tragedy of racism drives us back relentlessly to Ephesians 2, where there unfolds before our very eyes the sociological miracle of the first century with all of its tremendous implications for the twentieth century. Jew and Gentile are placed in one body in Christ. The passage reverberates with the numeral *one*.

> He made us both *one* … that He might create in himself one new person in place of two … and might reconcile us both to God in *one* body … for through Him we both have access in *one* Spirit to the Father (2:14–18).

The church is called, not to mount a peace 'bandwagon', but to something far more serious. The word 'remember' (2:11) summons the church away from a theological amnesia to a renewed awareness of a peace that is full and profound, rooted indelibly in Christ's cross. In essence, peace is the provision of Christ for the world, for He is the one who breaks down the wall of hostility, who creates one new person, thereby making peace.

CHRIST OUR PEACE

Today, peace and the broken wall, in the words of Markus Barth, mean 'the end of separation and segregation, the end of enmity and contempt, and the end of every sort of ghetto!' (*The Broken Wall*, p.43). But beyond what Barth has said, there is a frank confessional nature to our Scripture, 'For he himself is our peace … so [he was] making peace' (2:14–15). It is confessional in the sense of Mark 8:29, 'You are the Christ', or in the sense of 1 Cor. 12:3, 'Jesus is Lord'. P. 12

'Christ himself is our peace.' The confession is both clear and revealing.

First, it is comparable to the confessions in Second Isaiah and in the Fourth Gospel that express respectively the self-revelation and selfdeclaration of God and of the God-Man, Jesus:

> I am he, I am he who blots out your transgressions (Isa. 43:25).
> I am the bread of life (John 6:35).
> I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

And so if we should put the confession of Eph. 2:14 on the lips of the risen Jesus, it would be, 'I myself am your peace' (cf. John 20:19–23, 26)—implying that our own plans and programmes for peace must always be subject to our confession of Jesus as our peace.

John Bunyan has described the point so well in his other masterpiece, *The Holy War*. The Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, successfully conquers the town of ManSoul and establishes his rule of peace within. At first the in habitants visit the prince regularly and take delight in his love feasts. But then, because of the craftiness of a Mr. Carnal Security, they begin to think of themselves—how impregnable is their town, how great are their heroic leaders—and they take to feasting and sporting and grow cold in their love for Emmanuel until He withdraws from their town and they do not even miss him. There is, however, one ray of hope, the continued presence in ManSoul of a Mr. Godly Fear who

probes and warns and preaches. Like a thorn in their side, he calls to remembrance who they are and who is the centre of their lives. 'I myself am your peace', says the risen Jesus. Armed with this assurance, as committed Christians we too are to probe and warn, to proclaim to our people and nation that Christ is our peace.

Second, there is a breadth to the confession for the first century church but no less for the church today. It is a confession of Christians, but of Jewish Christians, and of Gentile Christians alike. He himself is our peace who has made the two one. The terms Jew and Gentile in the first century embraced all people, for if you were not a Jew you were a Gentile and vice versa. For us today, the confession is ecumenical. I doubt seriously if we have begun to explore its potential power in the worldwide church—Malaysian Christians, Christians in Indonesia, China, and India, in East and West Germany, in Kenya, Lebanon and Brazil, in Argentina and Great Britain, in El Salvador and the United States. For Christians everywhere to recover or to discover for the first time the timely meaning of the confession—this may be our most important task for the day.

Third, the confession ends with a unique expression, 'making p. 13 peace'. Ephesians finds its parallel so often in Colossians, where we read similar words, 'he made peace through the blood of his cross' (Col. 1:20). Apart from a brief reference in James (3:18), a comparable declaration is found only in the beatitudes of Jesus, from the sermon on the mount: 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God' (Matt. 5:9). As far as we know, there was no written Gospel of Matthew in circulation at the time Ephesians was written. But can it be that Paul was acquainted with the tradition of the beatitudes and can it be that he is consciously reflecting the seventh beatitude in Ephesians 2? You are to stretch your minds just a wee bit now as you see the two similar expressions in transliterated Greek and as you sense the similar 'ring' which they have.

poiōn eirēnēn
Eph. 2:14, 'making peace'
eirēnopoioi
Matt 5:9, 'peacemakers'
cf. *eirēnopoiēsas*
Col. 1:20, 'having made peace'

A link between the texts would imply two things:

PEACE THROUGH THE CROSS

It would imply that the one who gave his special blessing to peacemakers demonstrated in himself that peacemaking involved great personal sacrifice, for the peace that he made came by way of the cross, as Eph. 2:16 affirms (cf. Col. 1:20). That is to say, real honest-to-goodness peacemakers, who receive Jesus' blessing, according to Matt. 5:9, are led in Ephesians 2 not only to Jesus' sacrificial example of peacemaking but to the unique nature of his 'peacemaking' as well. His was indeed the solitary sacrifice, the sacrifice of the sinless one for us the sinners. He, the just one, suffered for us the unjust that he might bring us to God. He in his own person bore our sins in his own body on the tree. Our life in Christ is completely dependent on his life that was poured out for us. There is, in brief, a deep indelible substitutionary quality about the peace that Jesus made through the blood of his cross. I say 'made', and yet the verb tense used in Ephesians is not past but present, as though to describe what it is that Jesus continues to be about in the world. Unique it is, then, yet Ephesians 2 suggests that Jesus' sacrifice is also exemplary. It means that Paul's word linked to Jesus' saying affirms that peacemakers who receive the blessing of Jesus must be ready for personal sacrifice—even to the extent of death. P. 14

GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

A second implication emerges as we join Eph. 2:15 to the beatitude in Matthew 5. The peace that Jesus made through his cross is far more than a personal peace which you and I may claim to have with God. It is more than the peace that the church receives through the preaching of the word or the celebration of holy communion. The blessing of Jesus on peacemakers, in Matthew 5, does not mean a blessing on those who merely claim to receive and celebrate the peace and wholeness that Jesus brings. No, it means a blessing on those who are reconcilers wherever there may be enmity, hostility, hatred, and warfare. What Jesus preached He practiced. He proclaimed, 'Blessed are the peacemakers', and 'He made peace through the blood of his cross'. Peace in Eph. 2:14–16, therefore, has global consequences. Jesus bestowed his blessing on peacemakers. If he were here, he would bestow no blessing on our government which spends more than a million dollars an hour on military arms, a nation whose peacetime military budget has escalated to an all-time high. Whether it is known or not, Ground Zero Week and the clarion call that is being sounded in many sectors of our nation for a halt to nuclear arms production possess a biblical base in Ephesians 2 that is lucid and compelling. The agonizing question presses in on us on every side, a question that refuses to go away and get lost: 'To a nation that we love, whose heritage we have appropriated and much of whose heritage we appreciate, how do we, as Christ's witnesses, bear effective and sacrificial witness to the Christ who made peace through his cross and hence calls on us to be peacemakers?' The question brings us appropriately to the second part of our study. Peace is not only the provision of Christ for the world, but—

II

Peace is the Purpose of God in Christ for the World, to be Channeled to the World through the Church.

The word 'peace' itself does not actually occur in chapter 3 but, given the way in which chapter 2 flows into chapter 3, we are to understand, I believe, that to preach the good news of peace (2:17) means to proclaim 'the mystery of Christ' (3:4), and the 'wisdom of God' (3:10) is nothing less than the peace which comes through Christ's cross (2:15–16) or the confession, 'Christ Jesus is our peace' (2:14). p. 15

The indication that Eph. 3:1–12 constitutes one extended sentence[2] points to the difficulty we face in grasping adequately the thought of the apostle. Apparently, Paul's intent is both to unfold the special stewardship of God's grace with which he was entrusted (3:1–9) and to show no less the awesome responsibility that is laid upon the church to proclaim divine grace (3:10–12). Much like the pretentious wrapping around a gift that gives an aura of mystery to the quality of the gift within, so, when Paul mentions 'the mystery of Christ', we wait in expectancy for him to unfold the mysterious nature of the gracious gift. He does so by using three rare expressions that affirm the singular relationship of Gentile Christians with Jewish Christians: fellow-heirs, fellow-members, and fellow-sharers of the promise of Christ through the gospel (3:6). If peace means a broken barrier (Eph. 2), it also means a bridge built between hostile peoples (Eph. 3). Jew and Gentile come to realize that they have become siblings, heirs of all that their Father offers, that their life is organically and socially intricately intertwined much like the interrelatedness of members of the human body, and that they share in the promised

[2] Thus the Westcott-Hort Greek text.

Spirit and thus experience the power that is inherent in the good news of Christ (cf. Acts 2:39).

THE CHANNEL

But we dare not forget two other items of great importance. First, the very existence of this interracial body of Christians springs from God's purpose of peace through Christ. That is to say, Christ's body, his church, appears in the text nestled between 'the mystery of Christ' on the one hand (3:4) and 'the free gift of God's grace' on the other (3:7). And second, it is through this body as well as through Paul that God plans to carry the peace of Christ to the world.

Paul stands in awe and amazement before the gift of God's grace ('less than the least of all saints'), yet he moves irresistibly to proclaim and interpret that grace to all (3:7–9). Far more than his own individual task, however, he is concerned with the task of the church.[3] It is through the church that God's ultimate purpose of peace may be realized in the world (3:10–11). I say 'in the world', though Paul speaks of the object of God's peace as 'the principalities and powers in the heavenly realm' (3:10). The terms 'principalities and powers' occur in three places in the letter. They are said to be, ultimately, under the control of the risen Christ (1:21, cf. 1 Cor. 15:24), to be the adversaries p. 16 of the Christian church (6:12) and at the same time to be the objects of her witness (3:10). It is extremely doubtful that, by these terms, Paul reflects a gnostic or mythical view, as some have imagined. After all, he uses one of these two terms (i.e., 'powers') to describe the very mundane Roman government of his own day (Rom. 13:1–2). Given his own commitment to evangelism of men and women in all walks of life (cf. Acts 26:22), it cannot be that he encouraged any less of a commitment for the church. Yet, it is indeed curious that the goal of his own mission is 'the nations' (3:8) while the mission of the church is to 'principalities and powers' (3:10). Is there indicated here part of the greatness of Paul in that he can sense that the corporate witness of the church exceeds by far his own individual witness? But the basic question is whether the church of Christ has caught the vision of God's goal that is indicated in 3:10. The phrase 'principalities and powers in the heavenly places' suggests both demonic persons behind these ruling forces (cf. 6:12–16) as well as the pervasive nature of the power which they wield (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24, 'when he shall render ineffective every principality and every authority and power'). Markus Barth seems to be right on target when he explains:

> Paul means by principalities and powers those institutions and structures by which earthly matters and invisible realms are administered, and without which no human life is possible. The superior power of nature epitomized by life and death; the ups and downs of historic processes; the nature and impact of favoured prototypes or the catastrophic burdens of the past; the hope or threat offered to the present by the future; the might of capitalists, rulers, judges; the benefit and onus of laws of tradition and custom; the distinction and similarity of political and religious practices; the weight of ideologies and prejudices; the conditions under which all authority, labour, parenthood, etc., thrive or are crushed—these structures and institutions are in Paul's mind (*Ephesians*, 1–3, p.174).

There will be times when we sense that these structures or powers are of God (Romans 13), but, on the other hand, we may often find them to be inspired by the evil one. Ephesians 6 tells us of the real spiritual warfare which men and women of God are to wage against principalities and powers, against the world-rulers of this present darkness. And,

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[3] The *hina* clause in 3:10 ('in order that') makes this clear.

by the way, these Christian men and women not only are to wear the breastplate of righteousness but to have their feet shod with the equipment of the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15). Appropriately now, as we come to the close of our study, we discover that the witness of the church to the world (3:10–12) is buttressed by Paul's prayer that the church be gripped and held ('rooted' and 'grounded') in Christ's measureless love (3:13–19). And, as a fitting conclusion to the passage, p. 17 Paul ascribes all praise to God (3:20–21). And so, enmity between nations and the militarism of any one nation can be countered effectively only by a people who are rooted and grounded in the love of Christ (3:17) demonstrated in his cross. A friend of mine put it this way:

> The cross is a declaration that there is no violence so horrid, no despair so comprehensive, no mindless brutality so thorough-going that it is beyond the pale of God's peace. The cross is 'the more excellent way'. The cross with all its horror becomes in fact our hope. God wills his peace and the world cannot contradict it. The cross—irony of ironies—is the consummation of the angelic song, 'peace on earth' (Dr. John McCoy).

CONCLUSION

Here then, my brothers and sisters, in Eph. 2:11–3:21, is the message of peace which, I believe, God would give to the world through the church today. Ours is a world of which God has a purpose, a world of axioms, of religion, of politics, of history, and of culture. And what is that purpose? It is that the wisdom of God be made known to this very world through the church. God's wisdom is nothing other than the peace of Christ that comes through the cross, for 1 Cor. 1:23 tells us, 'We preach Christ crucified … Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

The Revised Standard Version affirms that the wisdom of God is 'manifold' (3:10). The word occurs only here in the whole New Testament. Does it mean many-faceted, variegated, many-sided? How would Paul intend for us to describe it in English? The picture which comes to my mind is the kaleidoscope with its small cardboard telescope. With each successive shake of the hand you peer through the telescope only to see ever-succeeding scenes of ornamental beauty and arrangement which point to some imaginative creator who put it all together. And so the kaleidoscopic wisdom of God, the manyfaceted peace of God, is to be channeled through the church to the principalities and powers of our own day whose growing stockpiles of weapons of destruction are designed to wipe out cities and people en masse. To confess that Christ Jesus is our peace in the face of the devious and demonic militarism of our day demands from us far greater wisdom that you and I possess. And yet to be called sons and daughters of God means that we are inevitably peacemakers who follow in the path of Him who made peace and makes peace through the blood of his cross for, through us, God deigns to make known his variegated wisdom which implies, pre-eminently, his global peace through Christ.

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