

# AP

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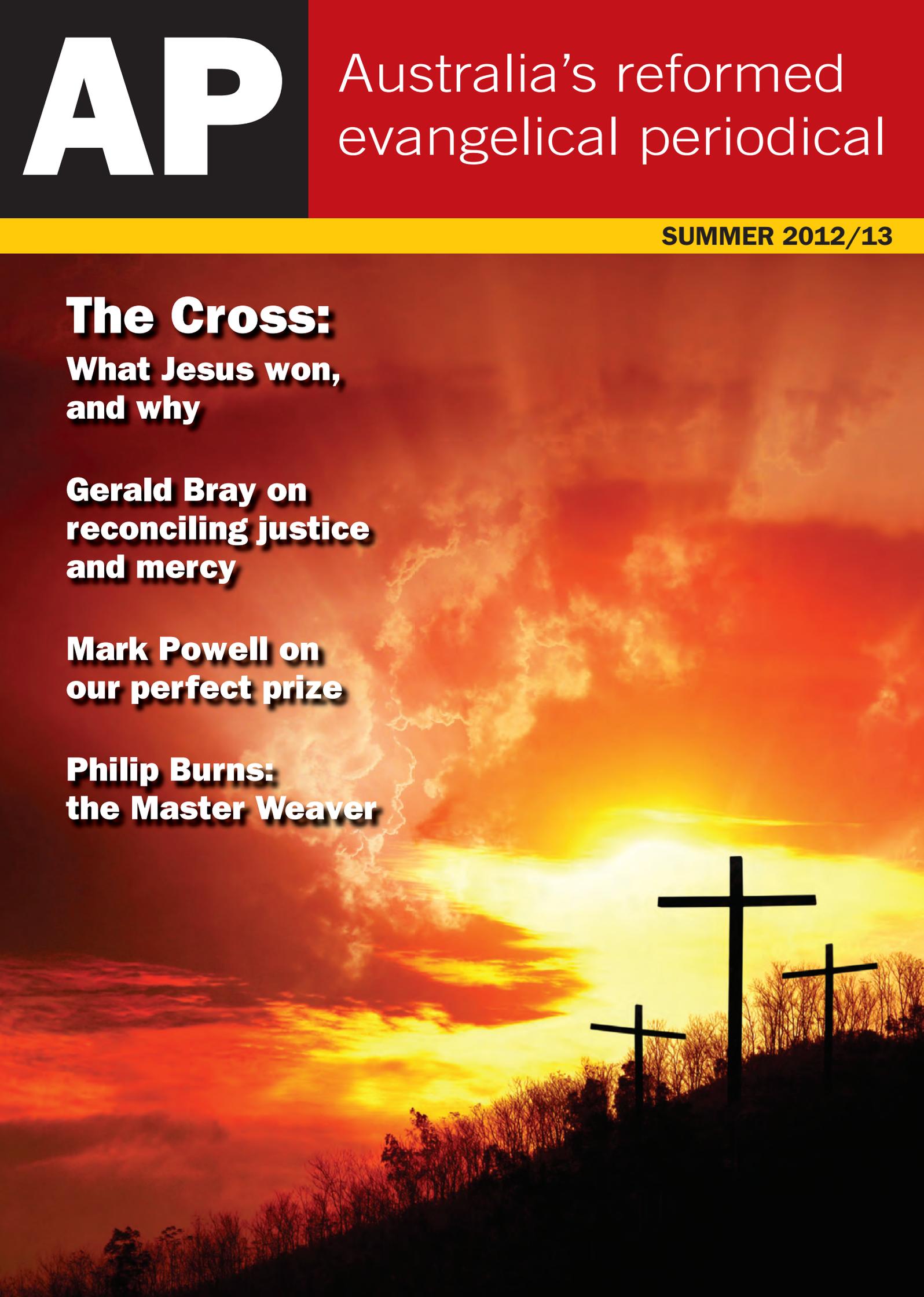
## **The Cross:**

**What Jesus won,  
and why**

**Gerald Bray on  
reconciling justice  
and mercy**

**Mark Powell on  
our perfect prize**

**Philip Burns:  
the Master Weaver**



# Editorial



Charles Spurgeon once called substitutionary atonement “the great net of gospel fishermen”.

That used to be taken as given in evangelical circles. Today, however, there is widespread embarrassment at what some have portrayed as cosmic child abuse. That Christ is our substitute is seen as a primitive and barbaric notion. Richard Dawkins opened a recent Q & A session with a blistering attack on substitutionary atonement, to which Cardinal Pell apparently felt unable to respond. The god of the modern world, if he is allowed to exist at all, is bland to the point where he would not offend the delicate sensibilities of anyone.

William Barclay used to say that the cross shows us that God will always love us. Very comforting, but how is this true? It is only true if it achieves something needed for our salvation. The Scottish theologian James Denney was too concessive in a number of areas, but he was right to say that unless this is shown it would be like someone leaping into the water and drowning to prove his love for me when I was sitting on the pier and not in any danger of drowning.

What, then, is the connection between the love of God and the death of Christ? Denney confessed that he had not seen any intelligible relation established between them, except “that which is the key to the whole of New Testament teaching, and which bids us say, as we look at the cross, He bore our sins, *He* died *our* death. It is so His love constrains us”. In short, Denney was saying what

the New Testament says, that Christ’s blood satisfies the justice of God.

Not only was God just, He was also the justifier of the guilty who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). That is, He was both just and merciful at once. Take away the cross, and God could be just by sending us all to hell for our sins. Or He could be the justifier of sinners, by ignoring our sins. He could only

exhibit one attribute by denying the other - which is clearly impossible. As Robert Haldane pointed out: “Mercy and justice are irreconcilable except in Christ.” Or, in the stark and moving words of ‘Rabbi’ Duncan: “There is nothing but Christ between us and hell; and, thanks be to God, we need nothing else.”

**Peter Barnes**

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# All we like sheep



## Our straying meant Christ had to die.

Peter Hastie talks to Gerald Bray.

Jesus did not sin, but on the cross He became sin for us. What does this mean? In this interview Dr Gerald Bray explains and defends the traditional Christian doctrine of the atonement. In recent times this crucial doctrine has been doubted by some, even within the church, and despised by many who are acclaimed in the world. One thing is for sure: the atoning death of Jesus provokes strong reactions.

Dr Bray is a research professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. He has earned a D.Litt from the University of Paris-Sorbonne and is an ordained minister in the Church of England.

Dr Bray's specialty is church history and historical theology. A prolific author, he has published many scholarly articles and books, including *The Doctrine of God* (IVP) and *Creeeds, Councils, and Christ* (Christian Focus Publications). His book *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (IVP) was voted as one of the 10 books every pastor should read. His book *Yours is the Kingdom* (IVP 2007) is a systematic theology based on the Lord's Prayer and his recent biblical and systematic theology, *God is Love* (Crossway), is a

**I certainly couldn't die for my own sin because I am already a sinner. I can't overcome it. Nor can I do this for you.**

conversational and contemporary overview of Christianity's leading ideas.

**Gerald, Paul says to the Corinthians that the death of Jesus Christ for our sins according to the Scriptures is of "first importance". What does he mean?**

He means that unless Jesus had gone to the cross and died as an atoning sacrifice for sin, then the basic problem of how to deal with sin would never have been tackled. He reminds us that the death of Christ makes a permanent difference to the nature of our relationship with God.

Of course, atonement had been going on for a long time in the Jewish context, but by its nature it was only temporary. It had to be constantly renewed.

However, the coming of Christ put an end to the temporary sacrifices and fulfilled a long-held hope in the Old Testament that one day God would put away sin forever through the offering of a special sacrifice. This took place when Jesus, the sinless Son of God, acting as God's appointed high priest, offered up Himself as the final sacrifice.

Our relationship with God either wouldn't exist or would be quite different to what it now is had that not happened, so the death of Christ for our sins is the key doctrine in Christianity. Without it, Christianity as we know it never would have existed.

**Why is atonement necessary? What is it about the nature of God and our own situation that makes the atonement our greatest need?**

I think the atonement is necessary because God created us in His image

and likeness so that we could enjoy a special relationship with Him. This relationship is similar but greater than the relationship that He has with the angels. We have been created, not simply to communicate with God, but to have fellowship with Him. Clearly, the angels can communicate with God too, but only as servants, whereas we are created to be God's children.

Now the problem we face is that we have spurned the love of our Heavenly Father. At the instigation of the fallen angel, Satan, we have followed him in his rebellion against God and have come under the sentence of death. You know the saying, "The greater they are, the harder they fall"? Well, that's true of us. God created us for an amazing destiny of fellowship and service, but He also warned us that if we ever rejected Him we would die in our sin. Rebelling against God has the most serious consequences. You can't paper it over or think it doesn't matter. Rebellion against God brings death. That is what defines our predicament.

Since God is the source of our lives the penalty for sin shows us how serious it is to rebel against Him. When Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Lord, they actually chose death. They chose to reject God's will, a choice with catastrophic consequences. And to overcome the tragedy that we have brought upon ourselves, God has to get into the mess of what is wrong and cleanse it at the root. It's like healing an infected wound or a cavity in your teeth. Unless you get right down to the bottom of the infection or decay and remove them, then there's no possibility of

healing. Our problem is that we have brought death upon ourselves through sin and, therefore, only by overcoming death is it possible to pay the price of sin.

**Where does it first become clear in the Bible that we need to be reconciled to God?**

Right at the beginning, after the fall of Adam and Eve, where they are expelled from the garden and were cut off from the tree of life. It's clear that while they were in fellowship with God the tree of life was something that they were intended to draw from but as soon as they defied God's word they were cut off from it. If they are ever to receive life again, they need to be reconciled with God.

You see this in the story of Cain and Abel. Abel offered the sacrifice of a lamb, and later we see Noah offering animal sacrifices to turn away God's wrath as soon as he left the Ark. Again, we see the need for sacrifice in the time of Abraham who realises through his attempted sacrifice of Isaac and the Lord's provision of a lamb, that the guilt of sin must be atoned for.

I think the need for a sacrifice for sin becomes really clear in the Mosaic law where there are detailed provisions that lie at the centre of Israelite worship. From the time of Moses onwards, the need for atonement is plain. To this day in Judaism the Day of Atonement is the

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most solemn day of the year. Jews still recognise it as the basic need.

**Can you explain why God requires the death of a substitute to remove sin from us?**

Well, the first thing to point out is that it is not just any substitute that can remove our sin. The substitute we need is the sinless Son of God. I certainly couldn't die for my own sin because I am already a sinner. I can't overcome it. Nor can I do this for you because I don't have the ability to take away your sin. If I can't die for myself or for you, our only hope is in the sinless Son of God. He is the only one who is righteous and in perfect relationship with the Father.

This explains why the Son of God had to become a man in order to be our substitute. Only God could help us because He has the power as God to bear our sin. He actually took upon Himself something that we are incapable of doing for ourselves. It's hard to think of a useful analogy, but if you are a blind person you understand the need for someone else to be your

eyes because you can't see for yourself. You have lost the power of sight and so you need someone who can see to help you. I know it's not a perfect analogy, but it does highlight that there are conditions from which we suffer when we need someone without that condition to help us because we cannot do it ourselves.

**British theologian James Packer has said that the phrase "atonement through propitiation" is the essential message of the cross. What is actually meant by the phrase?**

Well, this phrase preserves an important truth for us in understanding the atonement. It reminds us that the justice of God must be both acknowledged and satisfied in any solution for sin that leads to reconciliation between God and man.

Justice demands that sin is both condemned and punished. Some people think that we can pretend to ignore sin or allow it to go unpunished. However, this ultimately diminishes our greatness in the presence of God. We are too significant for God to turn a blind eye to our ruptured relationship. Our sin matters because we matter to God. Now propitiation is God's answer to the problem. It tells us that God's perfect justice – His wrath against sin – has been fully satisfied through the atoning work of Christ when He died upon the cross. It was sufficient to meet the demands of God's justice.

I think it's also important to add that the Son of God made this sacrifice to God voluntarily. We often forget that Christ went to His death willingly. He came to do the will of his Father but He did so freely out of love. This validates the sacrifice. It meets all the demands of God's righteousness and is therefore accepted by the Father as a perfect sacrifice. This is why we call it a propitiation, because it satisfies God's justice and turns aside His wrath from us.

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## What's so special about the shedding of blood to bring about atonement in the Bible?

Blood is the symbol of life. The Bible tells us that without blood there is no life. So the idea of the "shedding of blood" is associated with sacrificial ritual where the death of a victim occurs.

Why must a death occur in the process of sacrifice for sin? The answer is that we are dead in the sight of God and unless another can assume that death for us we are not getting to the root of the problem. You see that in Cain and Abel. Abel's sacrifice was better than that of Cain although Cain's general intention to offer something to God was right.

His problem was that he didn't see that sin required death. It was at this point that Abel understood the real nature of the problem of sin. He knew that the penalty for sin was death so that the lamb that he offered had to die by shedding its blood. When Cain offered fruit he revealed that he didn't understand the problem that he faced as a sinner before a holy God. He didn't see the connection between sin and death.

However, Abel did and so he realised that his offering required the shedding of blood.

## Why do you think that many theologians today dislike the concept of propitiation and baulk at the idea of appeasing God's wrath?

People don't want to face the seriousness of what has happened. It's not that they think they are perfect and they don't have to live a good life. They just don't see the reality and depth of sin in their lives.

Anselm faced this question in the 12th century. In his famous book, *Cur Deus Homo (Why Did God become Man?)*, he tried to show why it was necessary for Christ to die.

Anselm's answer was that no one understands the need for the death of Christ until they have first grasped the terrible nature of sin. This is the problem. People don't like the wrath of God because they think of Christianity as a kind of moral system. They believe

it's up to them to put things right and this is something that's essentially within the capacity of everyone to do. They believe that God will be happy with that, forgetting that what He demands is something that goes beyond anything that we are capable of achieving on our own. That is the heart of the matter. They reduce Christianity to a kind of morality and forget the seriousness of sin.

The idea of "propitiation" reminds us that God treats sin very seriously indeed. The belief that we can avert God's just punishment for our sin by doing something ourselves is misguided. Only Christ can do it for us.

## Do you think there is one particular passage in the Old Testament prophets that speaks more clearly to us of our need of atonement and God's provision of a Saviour?

Isaiah 53 is the classic text, isn't it? There the prophet reminds us that "all we like sheep have gone astray", and "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:6). He also says, "He bore the sin of many" (53:12). If you have to take one particular text from the Old Testament this is the one, although there are others.

Isaiah 53 is important because it makes us realise that the prophet sees one person who is going to do all this. Although it is not clear who this person

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will be, he does suggest that he will assume the punishment for sin and bear it for everyone. There is a sense in which this mystery "servant" will deal decisively with our sin once and for all at some point in the future so that the sacrificial system of the Mosaic law will no longer be needed.

## Charles Wesley, in his famous hymn *And can it be?*, at one point suggests that God actually died on the cross. Did God die on Calvary?

It's an interesting question. I always ask it in doctrine exams. "Did God die on the cross?" The correct answer is that the divine person of the Son of God suffered and died in His human nature. It is found in Philippians 2 where the divine Son of God, who was equal with God, nevertheless humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant. I think it's interesting that Jesus voluntarily takes the nature of a servant in His



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relationship with the Father. He assumes a human nature so that He can get rid of sin and bring about a reconciliation between God and the human race. The incarnation is a means to an end because, without it, Christ could not have died in His divine nature since a divine nature cannot die. If Christ is to suffer and die for sin, He has to devise a way in which that is possible. This explains why He became incarnate.

So the answer is, "Yes, the divine Son of God did suffer and die on the cross, but only by taking on a human nature that made His suffering possible. He could not have died in His divine nature."

### **Why do people like Bishop Spong react so strongly against the idea of atonement through propitiation?**

I think the reason people like Bishop Spong react to the traditional Christian view of the atonement is that they underestimate the seriousness of the issues at stake. They fail to understand that the nature of sin makes reconciliation impossible on our terms. It's impossible for us in our own strength to go back to God. It's like leaping off a high cliff. Once you jump down you can't get back. Someone needs to come down and rescue you. Reconciliation is only possible if God reaches out to us. In reaching out to us He cannot say, "Oh, it doesn't matter what you've done." If He had said that then we might assume that what we did

## **The divine Son of God did suffer on the cross, but only by taking on a human nature that made His suffering possible. He could not have died in his divine nature.**

was insignificant and that we didn't really matter. I only understand the importance of the atonement when I realise that who I am and what I do is of real importance to God.

I think the other reason that people like Spong react to the traditional view of the atonement is that they have misunderstood it. They often think that the biblical view of the atonement involves God the Father demanding that the Son should die. However, this is a caricature of the doctrine. As I have already pointed out, the Father never demanded anything of the Son. Jesus Christ was never forced to go to the cross. Christ willingly took the form of a servant when He died for us. The idea that the Father was a tyrant who insisted that the Son should die is a total misunderstanding of the atonement. The Son volunteered to do

it without any sense of compulsion.

### **Can you explain what the writer of the Hebrews means when he says that the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse our hearts and guilty consciences?**

To cleanse our hearts is to make us think in the right way. "We have the mind of Christ," Paul says to the Corinthians. Jeremiah talks about taking out "the heart of stone and putting in the heart of flesh". The "heart" represents the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we perceive ourselves. It is the core of our identity. The atonement affects us at this deepest level by purifying our thoughts and desires and renewing our whole orientation to life.

Cleansing the heart is the key to our salvation because the spiritual warfare in which the Christian is engaged is really the struggle of the clean heart against an evil world. If our hearts are not clean we are not in tune with God or with the world around us. If they are cleansed then we will think and desire the right things. So it's very important to receive this blessing and to have our guilt and defilement taken away.

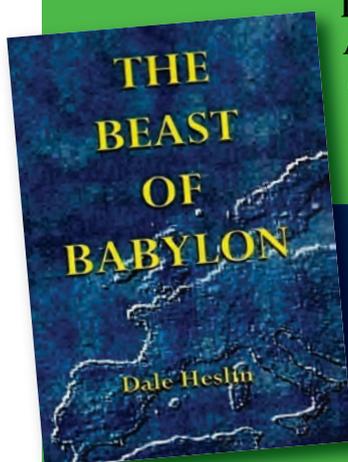
Sometimes I meet people who don't think this is possible. They say to me, "If you knew what I've done in my life you wouldn't be preaching forgiveness because God can't forgive me when I cannot forgive myself for all that I've done." And I say to them, "Well, you are not meant to forgive yourself because you can't. Only God can forgive you." One of the real joys of being a Christian is in knowing that our sins are forgiven even though we remain sinners. In other words, we don't have to be weighed down by our sins. And this is not because we don't care about them; it's that we are set free from them.

If I didn't believe in the power of the cross I could never preach the gospel. I'd stand up and think, "who am I to be doing this? I'm not worthy of this. How can I tell other people to repent when I'm a terrible sinner myself?" The reason I can now preach the gospel and call on others to repent is because I have repented myself and I have been blessed by the removal of my guilt.

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# Perfect prize

Many Christians underestimate what Christ won on the cross.

Mark Powell

A few years ago now my brother-in-law pulled me aside and asked me privately about a question he had been struggling with for quite some time. He said, “I know that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins and all that, but don’t you think it would have been better if he had stuck around a few more years and given us more instruction?”

His question betrayed what he really believed (or didn’t believe) as to what Jesus’ death and resurrection has actually accomplished. That is, he knew something of the “right answer” in his head, but what he truly believed about the matter was another question entirely.

What does the cross of Christ mean? It has become the central symbol of the Christian religion. Which is a little strange because in its first century setting, crucifixion was the worst form of punishment possible. It was a horrific, shameful way to be put to death, with people often suffering for days. How then has it come to have such pride of place?

The cross is obviously central to any account of Jesus’ life, with each one of the Gospel accounts devoting much space to describing what took place; so much so that some people have

described the Gospels not as “biographies” – which is a review of someone’s *life* – but rather “thanographies” – that is, a review of someone’s *death*. Everyone agrees that Jesus was born so that He might die, but what did His life, death and subsequent resurrection achieve?

Historically there have been three major ways people have understood the significance of Jesus’ death. Each one of them has a certain element of truth to it but it is the third one in particular that best represents the Biblical material and has also come under the most attack.

The first is known as the moral influence theory. This interpretation emphasises the inspiring nature that Christ’s love can and should have on us. The death of Jesus, then, demonstrates the love of God so dramatically that we cannot help but be convinced of it ourselves and share it with others. Just think of the great classic hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, by Isaac Watts. Who is not moved when they ponder the sacrifice of Calvary? The problem is, however, that this does not present the *complete* picture. Yes Jesus’ death should move us greatly, but to say that this is all that the cross is or does falls hopelessly short.

The second theory is commonly referred to as “Christus victor” with the emphasis being placed on a ransom being paid to Satan rather than God. It is sometimes also referred to as the “fish hook” view of the atonement since at the cross the Deceiver was himself deceived by swallowing the “bait” that the death of Jesus would mean His defeat. However, the “hook” hidden underneath was that in His resurrection Jesus defeated the power of death and therefore released the hold that the Devil has over us.

**Jesus’ death should move us greatly, but to say that this is all that the cross is or does falls hopelessly short.**

This particular view was especially popular among the early church Fathers and more recently was the position put forward by none other than C.S. Lewis! Just think back to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and especially how Edmund is redeemed from the claims of the White Witch. Aslan (who represents Christ in the story) offers himself in Edmund’s place but because

of the “deeper magic” he is able to break the stone table and reverse the curse of death.

Many evangelical Christians are unaware that Lewis himself rejected the third and most popular view of the atonement – commonly referred to as penal substitution. In his book *Mere Christianity* Lewis outlines his understanding of the position, as well as why he rejects it, as follows: “The one most people have heard is the one I mentioned before – the one about our being let off because Christ had volunteered to bear a punishment instead of us. Now on the face of it that is a very silly theory. If God was prepared to let us off, why on earth did

## When understood like this, Jesus’ death is the greatest act of love and sacrifice ever made.

He not do so? And what possible point could there be in punishing an innocent person instead? None at all that I can see, if you are thinking of punishment in the police-court sense.”

Significantly, Lewis almost argues himself back into the mainstream position when he immediately goes on to state: “On the other hand, if you think of a debt, there is plenty of point in a person who has some assets paying it on behalf of someone who has not. Or if you take ‘paying the penalty’, not in the sense of being punished, but in the more general sense of ‘standing the racket’ or ‘footing the bill,’ then, of course, it is a matter of common experience that, when one person has got himself into a hole, the trouble of

getting him out usually falls on a kind friend.”

Is it enough to say that Christ has paid the price for our sin “not in the sense of being punished” but rather in the more impersonal way of only “paying a bill”? The Bible clearly says that it’s more – much more! In both the Old and New Testament Jesus’ death is explained as taking away the punishment, which we personally deserved. Just consider the following passages.

*“He was pierced for our transgression, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah 53:5-6*

*“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21*

*“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24*

The so-called New Atheists, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, as well as many even from within the Christian church, are vehemently opposed to the whole idea of God sending His Son as a substitute to die in our place. They even go as far as to say that this particular view is essentially the same as cosmic child abuse.

The objection is refuted when one remembers that Jesus went to the cross *willingly*. He did not take upon Himself our sin by accident but by freely laying it down. When understood like this, Jesus’ death is the greatest act of love and sacrifice ever made.

Ultimately the problem anyone has in coming to appreciate what the cross has achieved is a spiritual one within the individual. On our own, without the illumination of God’s Holy Spirit, it will always seem confusing and thus remain a mystery. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

What my brother-in-law needs then is not more instruction but rather for God to open his eyes to the meaning of the gospel. That he would see in Christ the perfect substitute for his sins. The One who paid the price – the personal price – for all the times he has failed to keep God’s Law and that in exchange Jesus is also offering to him a righteous standing in heaven since his sin has been replaced with Christ’s righteousness (see Zech. 3:3-4).

*Mark Powell serves as one of the ministers of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Burwood, Sydney.*



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# The Master Weaver

For now, we see only the tapestry's tangled underside.

Philip Burns

**A**nd we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose”  
(Romans 8:28)

All of us struggle with doubt, wrestle with issues and at times feel the weight of uncertainties. And one of those uncertainties we feel is this - do the things that happen to us in this world, happen because God allows them to happen under His control or do they happen because they are outside of His control? And if God is in control, is He always in full control or does He sometimes slip up in keeping that control— maybe even just a little? Just how do all those puzzle pieces fit? With that in mind, I want to direct you to this remarkable verse from the pen of the Apostle Paul. Among many things that could be said about this great verse, note these.

First, God's control of all things is inclusive. The verse says that “*all things work together for good*”. In this case “all things” means “all things”, excluding nothing. A lot of people believe that things happen because of coincidence and chance. Some believe that the stars of the zodiac control all that happens. Others believe that fate determines our circumstances. But the Bible's point of view is that we are not those who are subject to random happenings in the world. If it is chance

that determines whether tomorrow you and I live or die, then it is little wonder that many people find life so depressing! But no. It's not how the dice falls that determines what happens but He who writes the script. And He who writes the script here reminds us that He works in and through “all things” and He leaves no room for chance or co-incidence.

Second God's control of all things is active. The verse says “all things *work together for good*”. It is not as though God has or had some plan and He's left it sitting high up on a shelf in His study that He may or may not consult every thousand years or so. His control of all things is a reality even in daily experience. Sometimes some aspect of His control of all things seems obvious, and other times it seems hard to detect, but whether His people can see it is not

**Sometimes some aspect of His control of all things seems obvious, and other times it seems hard to detect, but whether His people can see it is not the issue.**

the issue. Creation is full of things that go on without us seeing them – consider the germination of a seed – and laws that are always in place, such as the law of gravity. Just as these all happen day in and day out according to the laws of His design, so too in relation to our circumstances God never sleeps or takes a holiday. He remains at work, even though our circumstances suggest He knocked off ages ago.

Third, God's control of all things is harmonious. The verse says “all things *work together for good*”. One commentator translates this verse as “we know that God intermingles all things for good for them that love Him”. Of course, His people should expect that with God. He has a habit of turning the varied and sometimes difficult circumstances of believers' lives into things that make sense.

Making a sponge cake requires a variety of ingredients that by themselves will not combine to produce the cake. And if a cook were to view each ingredient in isolation, she might be tempted to leave one out. But when the right ingredients are mixed together in the right way under the right conditions, the finished product will be what it should. In the same way God knows how to take the varied circumstances in which His people find themselves – even if those 'ingredients' involve

suffering or pain or trial – and to work them together to bring about whatever He intends. The Old Testament story of Joseph is a wonderful illustration of that truth.

Fourth, God's sovereign control of all things is beneficial. The verse says "all things work together for good". But Christians often have a problem with the good intent of God's control of all things, and that problem is very easily put. The "good" that God intends is interpreted in a very superficial way to mean that anything that helps them or brings them joy or increases their bank balance is surely good, while anything that causes them to struggle or increases their anxiety levels or decreases their bank balance is surely not good. The modern principle that anything that makes one happier is good may often be a long way from God's idea of good. But pain, temptation, illness and trial are all tools that God uses for His purposes that can be beyond our sight.

Many, many years ago now, I started work on a cross-stitch pattern of an old gum tree which I never did finish

## But pain, temptation, illness and trial are all tools that God uses for His purposes that can be beyond our sight.

because on the underneath side of the cross-stitch all my stitches were badly tangled. The front didn't look too bad, but the other side looked like a disaster zone. Now if God is Sovereign and the Master Weaver of all that happens to us, then it is not beyond Him to blend some dark threads in with the lighter ones. From a human perspective these darker threads might seem threatening but, as part of the "all things", the darker threads are needed to complete the whole picture, which we may not see until the Day comes when we shall know fully, even as we are fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12). It is in this – God's sovereign control of all things – that we can take great comfort, just as the poet wrote;

"My life is but a weaving, between the Lord and me;  
I may not choose the colours – He knows what they should be.

For He can view the pattern upon the upper side  
While I can see it only on this, the under side.

Sometimes He weaves in sorrow, which seems so strange to me;  
But I will trust His judgment and work on faithfully.

'Tis He who fills the shuttle, and He knows what is best;  
So I shall weave in earnest, and leave to Him the rest.

Not 'til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly  
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needed In the Weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver In the pattern He has planned."

Benjamin Malachi Franklin 1882-1965

*Rev. Philip Burns is minister of Bendigo Presbyterian Church, Vic.*

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# World news

## Muslims defend girl

Islamic groups in Pakistan, including the country's leading body of Muslim clerics, have come out in support of Rimsha Masih, the Christian girl with Down's syndrome falsely accused of blasphemy who has been released from prison.

The All Pakistan Ulema Council (APUC), which includes representatives from fundamentalist groups, called for an "impartial and thorough investigation into the case" and for "strict action" to be taken against Rimsha's accusers if she is found innocent. An imam who led the charges against her was later arrested on suspicion of planting evidence.

APUC chairman Allama Tahir Ashrafi said this was "a test case for Pakistan's Muslims, Pakistan's minorities and for the government". He condemned the mobs who regularly pressurise police into registering blasphemy cases, saying that it was like the "law of the jungle", and called for the government to "make this case an example so that nobody will dare misuse the blasphemy law in future".

"This is the first time in the history of Pakistan that the Muslim community and scholars have stood up for non-Muslims," said Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League

*Barnabas Fund*

## 'Stop atrocities'

Italian foreign minister Giulio Terzi has said that a drive to stop anti-Christian atrocities should be a top priority of world leaders.

Citing the killing of 800 Christians in Nigeria by the Boko Haram terrorist group since the beginning of this year,

Terzi said that violence against Christians has been particularly common in Africa. "Stopping these atrocities must be the priority of the international community," he said.

Terzi was speaking at a conference sponsored by the newly established Observatory for Religious Freedom in Rome, set up to monitor and combat violations of religious freedom.

*CWN*

## 'Thuggery' in Egypt

The Church in Egypt is being subjected to "cheap political blackmail and political thuggery" as Islamists demand that its funds come under state control in what could be seen as a ploy to deflect growing scrutiny of Muslim Brotherhood finances and affairs.

This was the assessment of Christian rights group Copts Without Chains to the recent call by Islamists that the government monitor church finances. Khaled Saeed, spokesman for the Salafist Front, said in a debate on Egyptian TV on 28 August that the measure was "necessary" to know where the Church's money goes and "if it is on the right track or not".

Absurdly over-stating the power of the Christian community in Egypt, Saeed claimed that the smallest monastery in Egypt was larger than the Vatican, and he alleged there were concerns of a "church state within the Egyptian civil state".

*Barnabas Fund*

## Elvis Bible fetches \$92,000

A Bible used by Elvis Presley until his death in 1977 and containing his handwritten notes, thoughts, annotations and underlining has been bought by an American man based in the UK for £59,000 (\$A92,000).

The holy book was given to the American singer on his first Christmas in Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee,



in 1957. He used it until he died in 1977, aged 42. One of the lines emphasised by the "King of Rock and Roll" is, "What is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world and lose himself or be cast away," according to UK's Press Association.

*Christian Post*

## Nurses poisoned

Police in Pakistan are investigating allegations that extremists targeted hospital nurses by putting poison in the tea they were drinking one afternoon during Ramadan. Latest reports state the 11 nurses taken ill at the Civil Hospital Karachi are now out of danger, but at least some of them were rushed to intensive care soon after consuming the tea.

The nurses included three Christians and, according to local reports, the Masihi Foundation, a Christian rights organisation, said that if true the alleged attack was "a vile act" against religious freedom and tolerance.

According to Catholic news agency AsiaNews, most Muslim staff at Civil Hospital Karachi do not tolerate non-Muslim colleagues eating or drinking during Ramadan.

*Aid to the Church in Need*

## No 'ecumenical cathedral'

Catholics have snubbed the idea of the world's first ecumenical super-cathedral in Christchurch, where both Catholic and Anglican cathedrals were destroyed by earthquake last year.

Anglicans in Christchurch have been talking about rebuilding a shared super-cathedral with Catholics, a move that would be unprecedented worldwide.

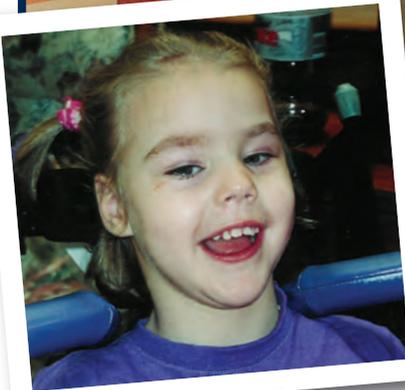
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Christchurch Bishop Victoria Matthews has confirmed the controversial idea has been discussed informally. If approved, it would bring Catholics and Anglicans together under the same cathedral roof for the first time in the world since the churches split in the 16th century.

Long-time Anglican Michael Earle asked how the two Christian churches could justify spending millions to repair or rebuild both broken cathedrals, when they were suffering dwindling congregations before the quakes hit.

*UCA*

### Vietnamese Christians jailed

The People's Court in Ho Chi Minh City has jailed three Christian bloggers in a case that has polarised the religious community and drawn international criticism. Nguyen Van Hai and Marie Ta Phong Tan received sentences of 12 years and 10 years, respectively, with five additional years of house arrest, while Phan Thanh Hai received a four-year sentence and three years of house arrest.

The bloggers were charged with spreading anti-government propaganda

under Article 88 of the country's criminal code. They were founding members of the Free Journalist Club, an organisation not recognised as an official body by the government.

*UCA*

### Humanists: "we do"



More weddings in Scotland are now conducted by the Humanist Society than by the Catholic Church, according to newly released government statistics.

Of the 29,135 marriages that took place in 2011, there were 15,092 civil weddings, 5557 Church of Scotland

weddings, 2486 humanist weddings, 1729 Catholic weddings, 865 Assembly of God weddings, and 694 Anglican weddings. In addition, there were 554 homosexual civil partnerships registered in 2011.

Scotland began to recognise humanist wedding ceremonies in 2005.

### Jewish Christian leader dies

Jhan Moskowitz, 64, one of the founders of Jews for Jesus, the best known Jewish evangelism agency in the world, has died after falling and hitting his head on a subway in New York City.

Moskowitz was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. His parents were refugees from Nazi Germany and spent four and a half years in a concentration camp.

"I learned at an early age what it means to be a Jew and to be loyal to my heritage and my people," says Jhan. He was disenchanted with religion in his teens, but was committed to the survival of his people and became a short-term volunteer on a kibbutz (communal farm) in Israel.

*Christian Today*

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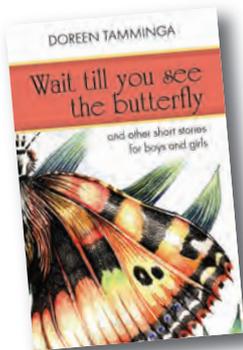
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# books



## Wait Till You See the Butterfly

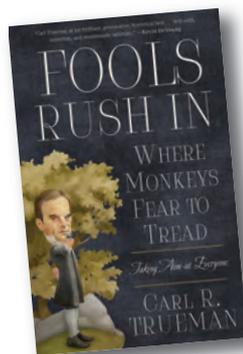
**Doreen Tamminga**

*Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010.*

*All reviews by Peter Barnes*

This is a collection of 44 short stories for children – 13 for four to six-year-olds; 11 for seven to nine-year-olds; and 20 for older readers, aged 10 to 12. This is a good idea, but it is not obvious that it has worked well. The stories are not particularly imaginative or clever. In fact, they are very predictable.

As a hook to grab the attention of the reader, they lack something. Paul White's *Jungle Doctor* stories, for example, are much more captivating. C. S. Lewis always maintained, rightly, that Christian literature should be good as literature. It would be worth trying these out on some youngsters, but the fact that there is a good gospel intention behind these stories does not mean they work well as stories.



## Fools Rush In Where Monkeys Fear to Tread

**Carl R. Trueman**

*Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2012.*

The subtitle of this collection of essays is appropriate enough: "Taking aim at everyone." The result is certainly a feisty effort, and well worth the read. Trueman apparently possesses a coffee mug with the inscription: "The truth shall set ye free; but first it shall make ye miserable." He jokes that his motto as academic dean at Westminster is "The man who has no enemies has no honour". He is not afraid to describe liberal ecumenism as "sophisticated on

paper and in the classroom; moronic and exclusionary in practice".

His targets are hit, hit hard, and they stay hit. He wants to foster not the celebrity, for "we all need to cultivate that certain unmessianic sense of non-destiny that will make us better citizens of the kingdom".

Occasionally, one begs to differ and offer a correction, albeit with timidity. But Kris Kristofferson's lyric that "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose" does not capture the Lutheran notion of the freedom we have in Christ – especially when Janis Joplin sings it!

The two chapters on death and funerals (20 & 21) are both provocative and compelling, while chapters 16-18 offer an incisive critique and appreciation of Roman Catholicism. Trueman is truthful, funny, and stimulating. He has a verve all of his own, and will liven the spirits and challenge the thinking of all who peruse him.

## What is Evangelicalism?

**Joel R. Beeke**

*Darlington: EP, 2012.*

1976 was dubbed 'The Year of the Evangelicals' in the USA by *Newsweek*. Yet now evangelicalism seems to be a movement in some disarray. D. G. Hart wants to drop the term altogether, while Roger Olsen wants to portray it as "a never-ending journey rather than a fortress to be defended". Small wonder that Spurgeon declared: "It is mere cant to cry, 'We are evangelical, we are all evangelical', and yet to decline to say what evangelical means." Nobody much wants to be an open liberal today, but the spirit of liberalism still prevails.



Today, there are more evangelicals in Africa and Asia than in the areas of the world where they have traditionally been most numerous. This must lead to changes in how evangelicalism is viewed and how it operates, but these changes need not be doctrinal. Joel Beeke is a clear-headed and faithful guide to how we should proceed.

According to Beeke, "Evangelicalism is gospel-driven Christianity recognisable by the biblical fundamentals of the gospel of Christ, the Reformation fullness of the doctrines of Christ, and the practical fruit of the Spirit of Christ". In a short work, Beeke has provided much help and encouragement for those still wishing to be called evangelical.

## Socrates in the City

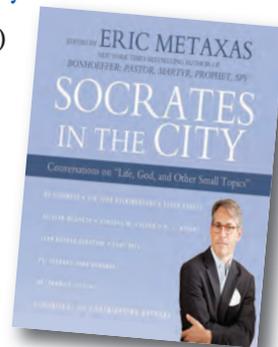
**Eric Metaxas (ed.)**

*London: Collins, 2011.*

Socrates famously said that "the unexamined life is not worth living", and this is the inspiration

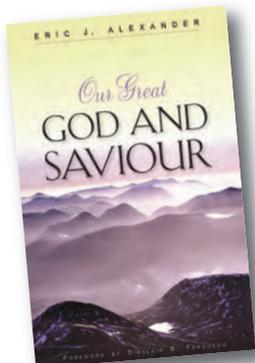
behind a group which meets in New York City to discuss the Big Questions of life. All kinds of issues are discussed: religion and science; suffering; the good life; the place of fathers; Christians in politics; why Christianity makes sense; as well as other topics, with the final chapter being a potted biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Metaxas himself. None of this is done in a ponderous and pretentious intellectual way, but in what is called "a freewheeling Marx Brothers approach to the search for truth". Indeed, Groucho always made more sense than Karl.

The introductions by Metaxas are, in a different way, of similar worth to the essays by the experts. He can be very funny, although the danger for any comic is that he occasionally trips over himself. Metaxas' final words on the resurrection, in dealing with the martyr Bonhoeffer, indicate a true seriousness and depth in what is being attempted here. It is not to be expected that every essay would be convincing. When Sir John Polkinghorne was challenged to produce examples of beneficial mutations, all he could point to



was bacteria. He then went on to indicate that he is a universalist. For all that, this is a rollicking and stimulating piece of work, which is thoroughly enjoyable and recommended to all.

### Our Great God and Saviour



**Eric Alexander**

*Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010.*

Eric Alexander has been in the Church of Scotland ministry for more than 50 years, but

somehow has retained a firm and clear grasp of the gospel. Here we have 16 wonderful studies on the character of God, the salvation of God, and the Church of God. The beginning of each chapter would have been enhanced, I think, by giving the text in part or in full, as is the case for chapter 8 on Isaiah 52:13-53:12, but that is a minor criticism. My only other criticism - again, rather minor - is that the young man mentioned on pages 79-80 is said to be converted when the only evidence supplied indicates regeneration.

Personally, I found these studies to be refreshing and challenging; they are a delight to read. It was John Newton who said that “grace has long and strong arms”. Eric Alexander is a man of the same ilk, and he preaches accordingly. There is nothing superficial here, only a thoroughly biblical and appropriate presentation of the great truths of our great God and Saviour. Reading this work can only do much good to your heart, mind and soul.

### Killing Calvinism How to Destroy a Perfectly Good Theology from the Inside

**Greg Dutcher**

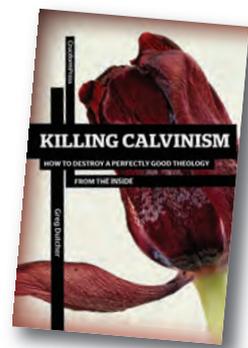
*Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2012.*

This is a worthwhile addition to the sum total of Calvinistic literature on the market. Greg Dutcher sets forth eight ways for Calvinists to discredit their own theology: by loving Calvinism as an end in itself; by becoming a theologian instead of a disciple; by loving God’s sovereignty more than God Himself; by losing an urgency in evangelism; by learning only from other Calvinists; by tidying up the Bible’s “loose ends”; by being an arrogant know-it-all; and by scoffing at

the hang-ups others have with Calvinism.

There are timely reminders that God is beyond our comprehension (Rom. 11:33), that election and evangelism go together (2 Tim. 2:10), that love is greater than knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1), and that we are to live with a loving and creative tension so far as our discerning the divine attitude to unbelievers is concerned (Matt. 23:37). Not everything, however, can be applauded. Dutcher mentions that his favourite podcast preachers are Piper, Driscoll, and MacArthur, but is very apologetic about citing a non-Calvinist like C. S. Lewis. In my view, more apologies would be needed for citing Driscoll than Lewis. Also, it is a little disturbing that Dutcher can plant a church where Calvinism is not known by name. “Calvinism” is not the password to heaven, but ignorance of the term is no guarantee of grace either. Having said that, this is a stimulating and needed piece of work, which should do much good.

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# Studied irrelevance

## Liberal Christianity is merely unbelief dressed up.

Normally one looks to the *New York Times* for wisdom in the same way that one might look for gold in a rubbish dump – it may be there, but it will take a lot of digging, and the prospects of success are not great. Yet, on 14 July, 2012 the *Times* published an article by Ross Douthat on ‘Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?’

Douthat referred to John Shelby Spong’s book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and noted how the Episcopal Church in the USA had essentially followed Spong’s lead, and transformed itself from being a rather sedate pillar of the WASP establishment to being a self-consciously progressive body in terms of its beliefs and its ethics. Yet the result has not been life but death.

As Douthat writes, “if conservative Christianity has often been compromised, liberal Christianity has simply collapsed”. There is hardly a lunacy that the Episcopal bishops have not embraced, from blessing homosexual liaisons to proclaiming that our stewardship of the earth demands that we not reproduce ourselves. Indeed, there may well be secular liberals out there who would be embarrassed by the weird combination of Pollyanna and Peter Singer that gets passed off as the Christian gospel these days.

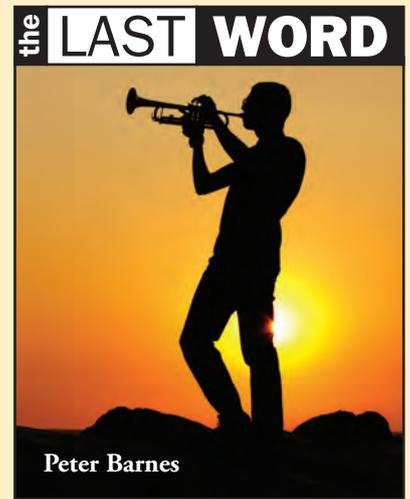
**I wondered whether anybody else was as embarrassed as I was...it was a struggle to remain silent and not laugh.**

Responding to the recent dispute over the Sydney Anglican marriage vow where the wife professes submission to the husband, broadcaster Mary Kostakidis pontificated in a Spong-like fashion: “The writing is on the wall for the church in the West; unless they (sic) get with the times, they’ll become increasingly irrelevant.”

There is nothing new in this approach. Lloyd Geering, an apostate Presbyterian in New Zealand, states: “Christianity... needs to be seen not as something eternally fixed but as an ever-changing and developing process. The modern secular world is all part of that evolving process.” Actually, the liberal denominations have done a good job of getting with the times and so becoming irrelevant.

When theological liberalism or modernism emerged as a dominant force in the second half of the 19th century, not everyone could have guessed its direction. As Alexis de Tocqueville put it: “With a revolution, as with a novel, the hardest part to invent is the ending.” We now have more idea of the ending – it is banality at best and rank unbelief at worst.

Recently I was exposed to what liberal theology means in practice when it comes to prayer and devotions. A university chaplain read a story about a little grape stem that was glad to be alive, but could only survive the wind and snow when another grape stem called to her: “Here, reach out ... hang on to me.” After some hesitation, the grape stem agreed, and finally learnt the lesson that strength comes through



sticking together with other grape stems. At the end of the reading, I wondered whether anybody else was as embarrassed as I was. We were all meant to be deeply moved, no doubt, but it was a struggle to remain silent and not laugh.

Back in 1937, H. Richard Niebuhr criticised this liberal and rather vacuous view of Christianity which he summarised as “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross”. There was a time when liberal Christianity appeared progressive. Now it has surely run its course, and its doctrinal and ethical emptiness has become obvious to all, even some writers for the *New York Times*.

The main problem is, of course, that liberal Christianity simply parrots what the world already thinks it knows and believes. The same buzz words are there in both groups: tolerance, not judging, being inclusive, acknowledging that we are all on a journey, we all belong to faith groups, what this text means to you, sharing our insights. Finally, it has all collapsed, and we can see that the emperor has no clothes, only platitudes.

In his *Letter to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C. S. Lewis commented that “Liberal Christianity can only supply an ineffectual echo to the massive chorus of agreed and admitted unbelief”. That about sums it up: liberal Christianity is only unbelief dressed up in some Christian words. It is revelation without the Bible, life without the Holy Spirit, and salvation without Christ. It speaks of God but does the work of the devil.

*Peter Barnes is editor of AP*