

## Harrison Gospel Chapel, January 18, 2004

### *Introduction*

It is a pleasure to be back to share about the Gospel in the context of the ministry of restoration we do in the prisons in British Columbia, through M2/W2 – Restorative Christian Ministries.

### *Biblical Hermeneutics and the Picture of God*

I was raised in the Church. We were always told that it was the “Liberals” who practised “scissors-and-paste” on the Bible, picking and choosing what they wanted to believe, and what not to believe. Those “Liberals” didn’t like things like miracles, especially the Virgin Birth, or the Resurrection. So they simply cut them out of their Bibles. A valid enough critique. But they were at least upfront about their cutting and pasting. People from my tradition did the same thing, I later discovered, only *protested* to be Bible-believing and therefore hid their scissors-and-paste activities behind notions of “biblical inerrancy”, etc.

Will Campbell, a Southern Baptist preacher and writer, tells the humorous story of a man who came to his door one day to share his faith. Campbell let him go on for a time, not revealing that he was a Christian pastor, and a Southern Baptist like his visitor. The man at the door mentioned that he believed in the Bible, 100%. Campbell quizzed him closely on that to be sure he had heard correctly. When he repeated his statement, Campbell ceremoniously walked over to his coatrack, picked up his coat, and said to the man: “Sir, I’ve been looking for someone just like you! Come along with me right now! Let’s go! For doesn’t Jesus say somewhere in that Bible of yours that he has come to *set the prisoners free*? Well sir, there is a prison just a few miles from here, and I want you to come with me right now to knock on the front gates, and in the name of Jesus declare with me: ‘We have come to set your prisoners free!’ “

The man was horrified and said back to Campbell: “When Jesus said that, he meant spiritually not physically....”

“Don’t you go doin’ any fancy exegetin’ on me!” Campbell shot back with a twinkle in his eye. “You say you take the Bible to be literally true. The Bible says that Jesus came to set the prisoners free, and I say that we ought to act on it right now! Further, I understand there are at least 15 million Southern Baptists like you in America who believe in taking Jesus and the Bible literally. I want you to help me mount a campaign all across America to ‘set our prisoners free!....’ ”

That would-be door-to-door evangelist that day got more than he had bargained for.

The point of the story according to Campbell is: we all interpret our Bibles. And we are therefore in an immediate dilemma about *how* to understand them. The fancy word for the “how” is *hermeneutics*.

### *Story of the Photographer and the Dark Blotches*

An unusual picture was once circulated around our Church when I was a kid. I remember it well. The brief notation below the picture explained that a man had been travelling along the highway after a pristine snowfall sparkled its brightness everywhere under a glorious sun. At one point he stopped, and noticed an unusual play of shadow against the backdrop of the freshly fallen snow. Being an amateur photographer with his own dark room, he took out his camera and snapped a few pictures of the strange phenomenon. He was astounded when, upon developing them, one in particular displayed an amazing likeness to the traditional artists' depictions of the face of Jesus. We all were invited to see what he saw.

What I saw first however, as did most, were dark blotches against a snow-white background. There was no face of any kind to see. Except there was!

It took some doing, some adjusting, but finally I got it! I saw the face too!

Then, what was fascinating after that was, no matter how I looked at the picture, sideways glance, upside down, laterally inverted even when held against a mirror, I never failed immediately to recognize the face of Jesus in that photo.

We all know this phenomenon.

But some never did see the face. Their eyes simply never adjusted. They even doubted that we who saw really "saw". According to studies, the majority of people cannot "see" in this way.

Once an editor (in his 50's) of a theological piece I had written and was publishing said to me as the task was completed: "I have never been able to shake a picture of God I have had since my childhood. That picture is one of a God who is stern, harsh, totally demanding, punitive, a 'Hangin' Judge' ready to condemn me severely for anything I do wrong, and likely to relegate me to hellfire should I ever so slightly step out of line." He was a Christian, to be sure, and a faithful church-goer, he acknowledged, but he wasn't entirely sure that spending an eternity with such a "god" would not be more like his understanding of hell!

### *The Hangin' Judge*

In 1986 I was asked to participate in a public forum on the death penalty organized by then Fraser Valley College in Abbotsford. In Canada the issue was heating up, as many may recall. In 1987, there was a free vote on the matter in the House of Commons. You are doubtless aware that the 1976 decision to abolish the death penalty for our nation was upheld at that time.

The forum was not in a Christian context. But the Fraser Valley is know as the "Bible

Belt”, so the criminology instructor who organized the event invited a Christian view on the matter to be given. I was part of a panel of four. The disclaimer was that of course I was only giving *a* Christian view.

When the question time came, a man stood up right away with a question for “Mr. Northey”. He began by quoting Matt. 23:23 in the KJV: “... ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, **JUDGMENT!!!**” He thundered out that last word with all the gusto he could muster - reminiscent of preachers who come to a point in their sermon notes where is inserted: “Weak point. Thump pulpit loudly now!” Then he proceeded with a diatribe against me and my kind for having neglected the law precisely in this way in my opposing the death penalty. If “Christian expletive” is not an oxymoron (a contradiction in terms) he unleashed precisely that kind of violent vituperative invective upon me and my ilk for the next several minutes. His strongest accusation was that I was not, as I had claimed, an Evangelical, rather a Liberal of the worst kind, who could not see or accept the plain teaching of Scripture. He proceeded to call down judgment upon me, and issued a warning of dire consequences for the safety of our nation if Canada continued in its lawlessness by refusing to reinstate the death penalty. So vehement was he that I felt genuinely embarrassed as a Christian to be associated with that display of “Christian” sentiment. I realized too with a sudden chill that he apparently would have wanted the death penalty to be carried out on me for the offence of “wrongly dividing the word of truth” (according to him)!

When he finished, the moderator asked if I wished to respond. I indicated, as I tried to lock eyes with him, that it would perhaps be better if the two of us talked the issue over more at the end of the evening.

I looked for him immediately afterwards. But he was nowhere to be found. He had seemingly come to dump on me (if I failed to take the right position) and had no interest whatsoever in dialogue.

What I would have raised with him, had he given me the chance, is the following: *First*, he was quoting from the KJV where the Greek word, *krisis* used can have that connotation of condemnation and judgment indeed! But it can also mean “justice” especially with reference to divine justice. In fact, most other translations use the word “justice”. By this time (Chapter 23) in the Matthew text, we know from Jesus that the Pharisees are a highly self-righteous, judgmental lot. It is a little hard to believe that Jesus would be challenging them on their failure to show condemnation and judgment!

*Second*, the text is misused if a huge exclamation mark is placed after the word, “judgment”. In the KJV, the text says actually: “ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith.” There is already a hint of a continuum or even a parallelism here, that argues against the sense of this statement to mean “judgment” in the way my accuser meant it. Jesus is quoting from Micah 6:8, already read this morning, which often is considered to be the high water expression of Old Testament spirituality. Here is what the passage says in the KJV:

*Micah 6:8*

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

The passage follows a specific disavowal of mountains of sacrifice, in favour of “justice, mercy, and faithfulness”. It precedes God’s castigating his people for their failure to treat others justly, compassionately, mercifully, caringly. Twice already in Matthew’s Gospel (9:13, 12:7), Jesus says explicitly: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” with reference to God’s way, God’s “face”. The Gospel is nothing if it is not about a dismantling of the very scapegoating mechanism to be found in all cultures and all times that led in fact to putting Jesus upon the Cross! The Gospel is nothing, in other words, if it is not about denying harsh punishments including capital punishment! Jesus died after all by brutal state execution!

The terse statement of Jesus about desiring “mercy, not sacrifice”, slightly more fully reiterated here with reference to the Micah 6 text, is in fact the death knell of the death penalty and all forms of violent punishments in our homes, communities, or criminal justice systems!

*Third*, one could not therefore have chosen a better passage to put the point home that true spirituality sees a face of God that is simply opposite to the face showed that night by such an angry diatribe, a face that rules out capital punishment and harsh punishments. It is a face that (Matt. 5:45) “*Causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good*”, that (Luke 6:35) is “*kind to the ungrateful and wicked*”, that says (Ezek 33:11) “*As surely as I live, ... I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?*”

### **Glenn Flett**

Our fall Dinners’ speaker last October was Glenn Flett. Three years ago, I told you a little of his story. It bears retelling.

Glenn spent several years committing robberies with violence, until one day he and a partner shot and killed a man during a Brinks Armoured Truck robbery. Through Christian friends inside and outside the prison, Glenn eventually chose to follow Jesus. Changes happened remarkably quickly. But a supreme test came after a woman in Victoria, a Christian pastor, was brutally murdered. She had been a grandmother figure to Glenn through all his criminal years. She had loved him unconditionally.

By a strange twist of circumstances, the man who murdered her ended up in the same prison as Glenn, and finally, in an English class he was teaching! Glenn was a “wheel” in the prison, had a lot of power, and could have called in favours. He could have had this guy killed. Not only did he not do this, but ultimately helped him successfully apply for and obtain parole. Glenn’s new love for Jesus helped him embrace the man who had murdered the most accepting person in his life at that time.

Today, Glenn, who also had M2/W2 visits throughout his jail time, serves Jesus by reaching out to ex-prisoners through a local government-sponsored program that helps them reintegrate into society. It is called L.I.N.C.: Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community. He tells his story widely, and is well-known in the larger criminal justice community, and also works closely with M2/W2. His wife serves on our board.

Glenn is a delightful illustration of our Romans and Ephesians texts: not only is he a walking example of God's love reaching out while Glenn was God's enemy, but he also demonstrates reaching out to his enemy in love, the murderer of his closest supporter. And the ripple effect continued on in that young man's life, since he has a crime-free existence in the community now.

### *Conclusion*

On December 28, 2003, *The New York Times* published an article entitled: "Report on Brutal Vietnam Campaign Stirs Memories". It said in part:

"The report, published in October and titled 'Rogue G.I.'s Unleashed Wave of Terror in Central Highlands,' said that in 1967, an elite unit, a reconnaissance platoon in the 101st Airborne Division, went on a rampage that the newspaper described as 'the longest series of atrocities in the Vietnam War.'

" 'For seven months, Tiger Force soldiers moved across the Central Highlands, killing scores of unarmed civilians – in some cases torturing and mutilating them - in a spate of violence never revealed to the American public,' the newspaper said, at other points describing the killing of hundreds of unarmed civilians.

" 'Women and children were intentionally blown up in underground bunkers'," the [newspaper] said. 'Elderly farmers were shot as they toiled in the fields. Prisoners were tortured and executed - their ears and scalps severed for souvenirs. One soldier kicked out the teeth of executed civilians for their gold fillings.' "

The *New York Times* article continues:

"In recent telephone interviews with *The New York Times*, three of the former soldiers quoted by *The Blade* confirmed that the articles had accurately described their unit's actions.

"But they wanted to make another point: that Tiger Force had not been a 'rogue' unit. Its members had done only what they were told, and their superiors knew what they were doing.

'The story that I'm not sure is getting out,' said Mr. Causey, then a medic with the unit, 'is that while they're saying this was a ruthless band ravaging the countryside, we were under orders to do it.'

“ ‘Burning huts and villages, shooting civilians and throwing grenades into protective shelters were common tactics for American ground forces throughout Vietnam’, they said. That contention is backed up by accounts of journalists, historians and disillusioned troops.”

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the U.S. Over against the brutality of the above-mentioned war, of the contemporary “War on Terrorism”, of war on crime, of all state violence, listen to the words of Dr. King spoken at Riverside Church, New York. These were given the year the Tiger Force unit was operating in Vietnam, and hundreds others like it. They were given a year to the day before King was assassinated, April 4, 1968:

“My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years, especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked, and rightly so, ‘What about Vietnam?’ They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.”

He said a little later:

“... I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me, the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men—for communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved His enemies so fully that He died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?

Let us go now to our neighbours, to our enemies, to the criminals amongst us, and all others, to share our lives with them.

Amen!