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Dear Clark:

Just a brief note to express appreciation for the visit this Summer.

I felt, Clark, that this matter of "pacifism" or not in response to enmity and power simply did not animate you. Your interests were elsewhere. I appreciated your polite listening to my concerns. But I was struck by the lack of engagement on this issue. On something so "life and death" and ultimate in terms of our earthly existence, I found you strangely "otherworldly".

Enclosed is a copy of the current issue of the Accord newsletter I edit. This was done jointly with my American colleague. As you can see, this issue does engage me, for I find peacemaking absolutely central to the Gospel.

I'll append a copy of a portion of a personal letter to Larry Dixon. I find that I agree entirely with you on this matter of the doctrine of hell. I could only wish you were consistent (as in my view you are not) in not willing "hell" to be meted out against Saddam Hussein, certain kinds of criminals, etc. I do not find your theology "seamless" here. I wish you would reconsider....

We'll doubtless interact again.

God's blessing to you.

Here is the portion of my letter to Larry:

I read through the chapter [5] you sent along with me, Larry. What can I say? You are doubtless a good scholar. You are also a careful exegete. You are fully committed to the finality of Christ and the ultimate authority of his Word. I think nonetheless that you read the texts wrong on this whole issue!

Some analogies come to mind. You and I could be handed a document in Roman script which we could "read", even rather fluently, to another person. But if that other person spoke only the language the document was written in, it would be a good likelihood that the person would understand very little of our reading. For obviously there are major nuances of pronunciation and accent which would render our reading fairly unintelligible.

Or another example might be a jigsaw puzzle with identically cut- out pieces. The only way one could be sure that the picture in the puzzle was "right" would be to check it against the box. Otherwise, though all the right pieces would be there, the picture could turn out entirely differently from what was on the box, and still be put together "right".

In our brief discussions about this question, I told you that one's starting-point is central. We both of course start with Jesus. But your Jesus reads as ultimately vengeful and malevolent. Mine reads as ultimately love. It's a question of accent, Larry, not of commitment to the basics. For instance, when you read the Matt. 18:23 - 35 passage, the accent for you falls on the punishment and nature of it threatened any who fail to forgive. The accent for me falls upon God's call endlessly to offer forgiveness. When you discuss the Lazarus text, the accent for you falls upon the exact nature and certitude of everlasting physical torment. For me, the accent falls upon the call to the rich to treat the neighbour with justice. Again and again, Larry, you would place the accent in a different, and I believe wrong, place from that which Jesus would have us do.

See the reflection on vengeance I did in the enclosed newsletter. I give another illustration involving seeing, but not seeing, the face of Jesus. I believe it too fits in this instance.

Another example, which I suspect you share with generations of Christians, is an understanding of biblical justice as primarily retributive and punitive. While there is that element in the Bible, I am convinced that the accent of biblical justice falls upon shalom and reconciliation. The enclosed paper argues this at length.

So, without meaning this harshly, I believe that your entire reading of Jesus on this issue is an illustration of Jesus' own words addressed to the Pharisees: "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness." (Matt 23:23) Hence, you somehow read Jesus as warning primarily of the danger of falling into the hands of a malevolent, punitive deity, unless we believe aright. On the contrary, I see Jesus principally offering a salvation from our own selfish grasping ways, which can only be demonstrated as salvation in the conduct of love towards God and neighbour. Salvation in this case means the losing of self to be taken over by God and his will. Loss of salvation, hell, is the terrible prospect of being left to our own devices apart from God: ever turned in upon our insatiably grasping ego. Thomas Merton puts it this way: " 'Hell' can be described as a perpetual alienation from our true being, our true self, which is in God." (New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 7) Beyond that, I don't believe Jesus or the New Testament would tell us, other than in pictures, what exactly hell is.

Once I participated on a panel of four at an evening criminology class thrown open to the public. The topic was capital punishment, which various persons on the panel addressed from their respective areas of expertise. I was asked to give a Christian view of the topic. I came out against it. Afterwards a Christian in the audience addressed his comments to me. He began by quoting from the KJV part of the Matt. 23:23 portion I quoted. He read: "ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment!!!" He practically screamed the last word at me, and went no further in his reading. He continued however

for about 5 minutes with a diatribe against me and my kind, using what could only be described as a stream of Christian expletives. When he finished and the moderator asked me to respond, I looked at the person in the audience and suggested it would be best perhaps for us to discuss the matter privately afterwards. I quickly went towards him when the program had finished, but he had disappeared!

He, ironically, is a classic illustration to me of "omitting the weightier matters of the law" in his very use of that passage! For the accent there to my mind is not remotely "judgment" in harsh, retributive fashion which Jesus was upbraiding the Pharisees for failure to practice (on the contrary!), but "justice" as in the Micah 6:8 passage, on which Jesus' words are based, which is on a continuum with mercy and faith[fulness]. It is justice for the fatherless, the widow, the oppressed, etc., in line with God's 'hesed'.

In a way, though without any of the vehemence or harshness, Larry, I believe that you treat Scripture similarly on this issue. (Jesus quite likely himself was a "pharisee" who shared essentially the same beliefs as the Pharisees and Scribes, but who put the accent ever upon God's love and mercy over against their harsh punitiveness, which he said made them essentially religious addicts, "twice the sons of hell" (Matt 23), and slaves to sin (John 8:32ff).)

You put the accent for attaining salvation upon right beliefs, unlike Jesus who placed it upon allegiance to his person and demonstrable justice to the neighbour. Likewise, for you the accent on the result of failure to commit oneself to Jesus is some kind of retributive action from God, instead of upon God's sorrowfully giving us up to our own grasping egos (as in Romans 1), saying, "Very well, thy will be done!" The freedom Jesus offered was not based upon some acceptance of a rote formula of salvation, abstractly believed and recited, rather upon a dramatic metanoia which literally means turning from a lifestyle centered upon our fallen, transitory self to one centered in Jesus. Relationship to Jesus, or non-relationship is central, not abstract doctrinal correctness about "the way of salvation". Failure to enter into this relationship means hell now and ultimately. But Paul seems not even interested in conjecturing on what exactly hell is beyond the overwhelming fact of loss of relationship to Jesus. And Jesus, I believe, only used picture- language, hardly to be taken literally (any more than his call to cut off a hand, etc., in the same context), to describe the awesome darkness, joylessness, etc., of non-relationship to him (which is known already in this life by many). This is the argument of the author of the paper I am sending you, entitled "Born Again". Last week, this person read the paper to our staff. He is a philosophy professor at a Christian liberal arts college, who preferred to have the paper circulated without his name attached. He is convinced of the biblical legitimacy of the paper, but aware of the potential hassle from some of his evangelical peers at the institution where he teaches.

Further, I copied a quote from C.F.D. Moule on this to you before. It is so well stated, in my view, I'll quote it again:

If God has willed the dire consequences that ensue on sin, it does not necessarily follow that he has willed them retributively, punitively. It may be that he has willed them as the

only way of doing justice to the freedom and responsibility of the human personality, as he has created it (See enclosed Punishment and Retribution, p. 6).

I asked you if you had read *Christ and the Judgment of God* by Stephen Travis. His study is a case of putting the accents differently, or seeing a different picture emerge in the jigsaw puzzle from the one you have come up with. He says:

What happens in the New Testament is that [the] non-retributive understanding of man's relation to God becomes dominant. Retributive concepts are almost displaced because of the nature of the Christian gospel. It is a gospel which proclaims Christ as the one through whom people are invited into relationship with God. Once this relationship to Christ and to God is seen as central, retributive concepts become inappropriate. The experience described by terms such as forgiveness, love and acceptance overrides them. And the experience of those who refuse to respond to this gospel is not an experience of retributive punishment, but is the negation of all that is offered in Christ. (p. 168)

Doug Frank, an historian, our contemporary, and a committed evangelical, in *Less than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century*, argues that a core characteristic of evangelicalism is "pharisaism" of the kind condemned by Jesus. I believe his analysis is true, and that it has too often "fundamentally" (pun intended!) distorted the picture of Jesus. One British historian, Alistair Kee, in *Constantine versus Christ*, argues that this way of reading Jesus is in fact a "triumph of ideology" which originated in the era of Constantine, at which point Christ's ethical teaching was profoundly reversed, with the resultant horrors of for instance the Inquisition, the Crusades, the Calvinistic theocracies, the endless wars in Christendom, and the harsh punitiveness of criminal justice systems based upon a complete skewing of the biblical doctrine of the atonement - including the ongoing use of capital punishment in the U.S. and the waging of the Gulf War by the most "christian" nation on earth!

To put it baldly, in the area of social ethics, I believe that much of church history, including much of evangelicalism, has been simply pharisaical ("ethically heretical" is not too strong a term), missing entirely the point of what law and justice really are about. In the enclosed paper already alluded to, which is in more or less its final draft before publication, I go into greater detail on some of this. An author, whose name I forget, wrote a book on this entitled: *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up!*

C. S. Lewis used wistfully to wish the Enlightenment had simply never happened. I share that. As strongly, I could wish the Constantinian Great Reversal of Christian ethics had never occurred. I believe in the area of ethics its effects have been as drastically negative to the propagation of the faith as the Enlightenment has been in the area of doctrine.

I'll also enclose a copy of the current issue of our newsletter, *Accord*, which you would find interesting in light of this discussion. And I'll enclose a copy of C.F.D. Moule's article on this theme, which I had reprinted. Moule was very influential on Travis' work. Moule just wrote me to indicate his thrill about my colleague's recent publication, *Changing Lenses*, which takes this kind of biblical orientation and applies it to a "New

Focus for Crime and Justice". Now an octogenarian, Moule is delighted that what he has been asserting all his life in New Testament theology (for example in *Essays on New Testament Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press), often without a hearing, is showing up in actual programs in the criminal justice system! And you might notice in *Accord* the review I did of Millard Lind's recent *Monotheism, Power, Justice on Old Testament material*.

Of course, in the 1500's, many anabaptists were murdered for such beliefs - by Lutherans and Calvinists! - as well as by Catholics. Increasingly, however, there is a convergence of Reformed and anabaptist theology here. I believe that evangelicals in some instances are further behind in this, still holding onto an image of God as Harsh Sentencing Judge, when the image given by Jesus overwhelming is one of Father, even "Daddy". This was precisely the point of the tension between the elder brother's understanding of the father in the Prodigal Son story, and the prodigally forgiving father who, like Jesus, totally scandalized the morally, doctrinally correct Pharisees! The point of that story is precisely to illustrate the lavishly forgiving way of the father, out of all proportion to anyone's notions, least of all the Pharisees', of what God's justice means. But of course: for it is precisely the justice of the atonement passage in Rom. 5 that overwhelms one's enemies with the offer of peace, wildly desirous of effecting reconciliation, tirelessly pursuing everyone like the Hound of Heaven.

An outstanding study in my view of this kind of christology is C. Norman Kraus': *Jesus Christ our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Herald Press). Likewise, an outstanding study of the atonement seen in this way is the one I use a lot in the paper I'm enclosing. It is entitled *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Herald Press) by John Driver.

But you, Larry, may say similarly that I completely misread the texts. You obviously must think so, or you wouldn't be so exercised about it as to publish a book! That is precisely why I say that this ultimately comes back to one's vision of God: to one's starting-point. Thomas Merton gently points out that "Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than Him." (*New Seeds...*, p. 15) I wonder about this in the punitive reading of Jesus' teaching on hell.

A Catholic Bishop I read about a few years ago described his journey to pacifism as one primarily of spiritual conversion, not of rational process, though he carefully did his theology too! Finally, I think that is what brings one to the pacifism of Jesus. It amazes me, and saddens me, that so few comparatively in the history of the church have discovered that Jesus was a pacifist! I do a reflection in part on that in *Accord* too.

What is of concern is not so much theological correctness (Pharisees and scholastics had/have that, after a fashion, cf. Matt. 23:1 - 4) , as theology proper: Who God Is. As I indicate in my paper, I see God's wrath and vengeance as aspects of his wounded covenant love, finally redemptively, restoratively intended. God's penultimate word is wrath, his ultimate utterance: love (I John 4). Walter Wink in his trilogy on the Powers, and Kraus in the book I mentioned, both argue thus. God is out to eradicate evil, yes!

But he is not out to destroy, let alone torture eternally, those made in his own image. For many of us, to see our personal evil cut away, the "operation" is terribly painful. For some, it will never be consented to. And that is finally hell, a description of which the biblical text, other than symbolically, does not give us.

Let's continue to dialogue, Larry. Jon Bonk would be an excellent colleague to discuss some of this with as well. From what I can see, he and I are fairly much on the same wavelength on these issues.

I'll look forward to remaining in touch.

Sincerely

Wayne Northey

P.S. Upon my first reading of *Christ and the Judgment of God*, I wrote out the following reflection. Not with any reader in mind. It says very similarly what I said to you already, but I thought I'd copy it to this letter nonetheless:

God's Judgment: A Longstanding Christian Misunderstanding, Aug. 26, 1990

C.S. Lewis said something like: there are only two kinds of humanity, those who say to God, "Thy will be done", and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done".

I have just completed reading *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* by Stephen H. Travis (Marshall Pickering, 1986). The more I study about God's justice and judgment, the more I become convinced that Christianity has been done an immense disservice by Anselm et. al. in applying judicial categories to God's response to sin. Rabbinic Judaism had more than its share of retributive justice notions, and the Old Testament certainly in places lends to this, though overall points to the New Testament. But in the New Testament the note is struck much more that God is not a sentencing Judge, who has passed the sentence of death upon all sinners.

Rather, because God is sovereign and Creator, he has structured the moral and physical universe such that the consequences of sin are death, just as the absence of light is darkness, a moral/physical, not a forensic, reality.

The message of the Gospel is therefore overwhelmingly on a positive note: there is no condemnation! And if there is after all, it is because humans have made choices over a lifetime (our works) which say 'No' to God.

When the light is turned on, the darkness is dispelled. The purpose of turning on the light is not so much to destroy the darkness, as to allow one to see. So the question of accent

in the Gospel is crucial: the very offer of light in the darkness means death to the darkness. But the Good News is, that is liberating, and all may come to the light if they choose!

So in the Last Judgment, God will not deal with us any differently from how we have dealt with him throughout our life. Heaven will not be closed to anyone who wants it! There will be no sentencing to death against a person's will. That choice will long since have been made throughout a lifetime of smaller choices to opt for darkness rather than light. To put a person at the Last Judgment into the light against his or her will would go contrary to God's overwhelming respect for the dignity of the human personality. And it wouldn't work anyway! Light only comes when invited.

C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* therefore is a brilliant fanciful interpretation of this deeply biblical concept.

It is understandable, however, why so many react against the Christian faith when it is presented in a judgmental way: which roots are medieval feudalism, rabbinic Judaism, and pagan notions of justice - but not the Bible! Understandably, they do not like such a judging God at all. And worst, Christians who hold to such a view of God tend towards being that way themselves. Hence, Christianity of this ilk rightly is perceived by the outsider as ugly, self-righteous, and highly uninviting: something to be scorned and spurned, rather than to be taken seriously.

Is this not why sensitive humanists the world over react negatively to such an anselmic view of God? For it is not a biblical view. Instead, such an understanding of God has been perpetuated by 'conservative' Christians of all traditions, intent upon conserving a doctrine 1,000 years old, to be sure, but not the biblical picture over all.

Just as Augustine seriously misrepresented the notion of original sin (Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*), so Anselm has done the Christian community an immense disservice by foisting upon subsequent generations for 1,000 years an understanding of God and the Gospel which is simply alien to the biblical revelation: rather is rabbinic, pagan and feudal.

This calls for a major reindoctrination of conservative Christian culture. A culture which, like the Pharisees, 'sits in Moses' seat' (i. e. - has the overall facts about God and his rôle as Creator right), but has missed the entire point of God's revelation, both as to how God acts, and how we should act, namely with justice, mercy, and faithfulness. (Matt. 23)

The Good News is that Jesus sets us free from everything that takes away our joy: a joy which only arises when we serve our neighbour, including the enemy and the creation. And that's something to crow about!