

STUDY 16

Creep Back to Your Baptism¹

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It is May 15th 2009. I am starting to work on this paper and in the world around me—that is, here in New South Wales at least—the major topic of discussion seems not to be the federal budget but the Matthew Johns affair. It concerns a football code and sexual morality. As far as the police were concerned, no crime was committed and the incident took place in 2002 and in New Zealand anyway. But the alleged victim has now spoken to the media and so the subject has been made an open topic.

The responses from the public are along two lines: the first, including from the Prime Minister, is that the footballer should have demonstrated a far greater respect for women. Other responses along this line are far more insistent, coming from what one person called the ‘Feminazis’. The second line of response was also within a wide spectrum. It took a bit longer to emerge, probably because of the pressure for political correctness, but has generally wanted to minimise the behaviour of the man by referring to the behaviour of the young woman. Some of it has also betrayed barely disguised envy—from both sexes! The first group seemed intent on simply presenting the woman as a victim of male abuse, with one commentator referring to her as ‘young and naïve’. That was before it was revealed that she had boasted of her sexual exploits among the footballers to her work colleagues the day after the alleged incident. But the ‘young and naïve’ comments represented a view that she had little or no responsibility for her part in the affair, as if being a young female meant she could pass all or most of the responsibility on to the male participants.

All this is grubby material, but it certainly provokes heated responses and no doubt we all have opinions when these issues are raised. My concern is not with this particular incident but with the reaction which comes whenever such a problem arises. It is the demand for better rules and regulations, clearer boundaries, that is, for more law. That is accompanied by the demand that people be counselled and/or trained to keep those laws.

What we need to see is that those boundaries are already in place. Thus Romans 2:14–15:²

¹ This title is a phrase that has been attributed to Martin Luther. It is doubtful whether Luther actually said it, and I doubt he could have said many of the things attributed to him through sheer lack of time if for no other reason. However, there are those who believe it is at least his thought if not his words.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations in this paper are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation.

Creep Back to Your Baptism

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.¹⁵ They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them.

Human beings, as created in the image of God, carry the drive for moral consistency with the character of God within them. People do not need extra laws.³ What they do need is the moral power to live consistently with the truth; the truth of God and so the truth of creation and in particular the truth of mankind. We must constantly remind ourselves that sin is not simply wrong acts but the total refusal to be one with the truth. This is how the apostle Paul expressed it:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools;²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:18–23).

What this shows us is that if human beings suppress the truth they become involved in horrible complications (so verses 24–32). Sin as the suppression of the truth, by whatever method, means that the moral resources required for true living are also rejected, as those are in God alone. The drive for righteousness remains but men and women now stand over against the truth of righteousness. Alongside that drive there is now the problem of renegade flesh, which means acts of wickedness and a consequent continual reinforcement of guilt and awful pain from that guilt. In a planned book, Geoff Bingham has written:

I will share a few secrets; God planned every detail of what we call ‘history’ or *Telos*, and at the beginning made His law clear to us. As I have already written, this law, when obeyed, was to bring great joy to mankind. ‘Law’ is a word which brings heaviness to those who oppose it and break its liberating tenets. I once wrote a book whose title was a protest, *Oh no! Lord! Not law, Lord*. I hope its readers changed their protest to agreeing with God. ‘Oh Yes! Lord! Lovely Law, Lord! Perfect Freedom, Lord!’ It can be done!⁴

Left naked before the law of God, a guilty human being is deeply afraid and uncertain (so Gen. 3:7–12). There is no rest for the wicked (Isa. 57:21), since God will not allow peace to the conscience outside of the truth of his own holy being. We see this in such cries as Psalm 51 and Psalm 32:3–4.

Conscience is the faculty by which we discern the consistency of our thoughts, intentions and actions against what we understand to be the truth. If that truth is the truth of God and so the truth of all things, then we are destroyed, since we cannot possibly face living in the world nor face God whose eternal being is understood and

³ What should be stressed is that the law given to Moses was not ‘extra’ but was the law of God expressed in covenantal terms for Israel, so that the nations would see the truth of God and learn his *torah* (Isa. 4:3).

⁴ *Finding the Father: Living in the Telos*. Draft of 6th May 2009, pp. 162f.

Creep Back to Your Baptism

seen through the things he has made. Therefore people must constantly redefine the world and the law by which it functions in order to establish a righteousness of their own. By becoming, to our minds, like God knowing good and evil, we aim to relieve ourselves of the *angst* of living. The demands of a guilty conscience mean that either we change the standard against which conscience functions or try to show that circumstances or persons beyond our control or responsibility mitigate our circumstances.

Even with a replacement law that does not demand of us the righteousness of God, however, we have not solved the problem, namely the lack of moral power. Nor have we removed the truth of God; we have only hidden it from our own sight, so that we believe the lie.

THERE IS MORAL POWER

We have to admit that human beings are in the image of God and that sometimes they do those things which demonstrate that. They can display great nobility as well as great depravity. The image of God has not been effaced, which is, of course, part of man's dilemma. 'This divine image is neither losable nor reducible, but its ethical direction is reversible.'⁵ So mankind is at war with itself.

But there is a further dimension to this when we see a person who is righteous acting righteously. Joseph was such a person and we can well understand his story being told by the godly within Israel. As Hebrews chapter 11 shows, being righteous does not indicate that a person is faultless, as in the cases of Noah and Abraham for example, but it does mean that the desire is to do what is righteous for God's own sake. So we see Joseph, faced with what must have been severe temptation:

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.'⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand.⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' (Gen. 39:6–9).

There is behaviour which is right for its own sake or for the sake of the person doing it, but Joseph's response was based on his refusal to do 'wickedness, and sin against God'. The same desire is evidenced by Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1–6). We see in them all a deep passion for God, a love for him and so a love for *being* his image. We see this in the case of David, whose sin against Uriah and Bathsheba (whom we should understand was a willing participant in the sin and not merely 'young and naïve') was defined as being against God alone (Ps. 51:4). David's longing for God flowed from his knowing and yet failing to live in the joy of God's salvation (Ps. 51:12).

Within the New Testament we find Paul telling the Romans that 'all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, 'Genesis', in D. Guthrie, et al. (eds), *The New Bible Commentary Third Edition*, InterVarsity Press, London, 1970, p. 83.

Creep Back to Your Baptism

(8:28). He is not saying that, in some contractual sense, *if* we love God all things will work together for good, rather that, even given our weakness, there is a purpose of God and that we who love him can know that purpose being worked out through all that happens in history. The apostle Peter also recognised the experience of salvation worked out in this way:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).

This love for Christ and indescribable joy is part of us presently receiving the outcome of faith, namely the salvation of our souls (1 Pet. 1:9). Godly behaviour is now because we invoke God as Father (1 Pet. 1:17; cf. Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15).

Furthermore, this godly behaviour is ‘native’ to us. What was written on our hearts at creation may have been defaced by the guilt of our refusal to be truly human, but now we have been baptised into Christ—into the last Man, the second Adam—and a total reorientation of our being has taken place. The goal of God is upon us, even though we do not see it fully revealed.

What is intended for the whole creation was given in promise to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31–34:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It is nothing less than the restoration of the truth of creation. The law, once written on the heart and then graciously written on tablets of stone, will again be inscribed on the hearts, not just of various individuals but of all the peoples of God. Obedience will be the fundamental orientation of the heart because of the sweet intimacy of knowing the Lord. Ezekiel promised the same thing in 36:25–27, with the observation that this is the restoration of creation: ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden’ (36:35). With the new heavens and the new earth in plain view, John wrote, therefore:

And [the angel] said to me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹ Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy’ (Rev. 22:10–11).

We should note also the imperatives of such passages as Romans 6:12, 13:11–14, Galatians 5:16 and Colossians 3:5:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions (Rom. 6:12).

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is

Creep Back to Your Baptism

near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:11–14).

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Gal. 5:16, NIV).⁶

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) (Col. 3:1–5).

These commands to godly living are not presented as ideals at which to aim, but as matters for simple obedience. So Jesus' simple observation: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15).

STEADFAST IN YOUR FAITH

No matter how easily we may give nodding assent to all this, I suspect that most of us will also admit to an awareness of ongoing failure.⁷ For many, that may, indeed, mean a deep sense of shame and even fear of being exposed, either to the scrutiny of others or to more temptation, and perhaps a consequent constriction in our ministries. In other words, all these commands, taken as 'law', confront us with our lack of moral power. The reactions to that confrontation then range from a heavy defeat to a self-justifying legalism, with most Christians simply choosing to remain silent about it all.

What needs to be said first is that we are not alone in this. Given the attacks of the devil, Peter reminds his readers: 'Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering' (1 Pet. 5:9). 'Steadfast in your faith' tells us that Peter is not suggesting that Christians should wallow in mutual sympathy. There is a framework within which to understand what is going on. So, briefly, I want to turn to Romans chapters 5–8.

Romans 5:12–21 establishes that Jesus Christ has become the righteous man who has dealt with the sin of humanity. 'Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all' (Rom. 5:18). Far from that providing an opportunity to 'use' the abundant grace in his act of righteousness to justify our lack of moral power, Paul explains that we

⁶ The NRSV has: 'Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh' (Gal. 5:16), making the second verb an imperative 'do not', while the NIV, with most other translations, has an indicative 'will not'. The difference lies in the approach to the Greek οὐ μὴ τελέσητε (*ou mē telesēte*). Both translations are technically valid, though I suspect that the NIV maintains the sense of the double negative better, whereas the NRSV gives the sense of the negative subjunctive. Sadly, the NIV translates σαρκός (*sarkos*) as 'sinful nature', obscuring the meaning of Paul's use of 'flesh'.

⁷ Recently, an Anglican bishop told a large gathering of men that he had a problem with 'lust'. Judging by the response of those present, most of those men were quite relieved to know they were not alone in that. That does not imply that we should all publicly confess everything. There is no need for that, and almost certainly not enough time.

Creep Back to Your Baptism

have been baptised into Christ and into his death with the purpose that ‘we too might walk in newness of life’ (Rom. 6:4).

We are to walk in this newness of life because our ‘old man’, that is, Adam, was crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6). That is to be understood as the judgement which Adam’s act of sin brought upon him and all those in him. As Walter Marshall put it, ‘all mankind were in Adam’s loins, when the first sin was committed’.⁸ If that judgement has been effected, then the purpose is:

... that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin (Rom 6:6–7).

And Paul’s argument is that this is indeed what has happened:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:11).

But, far from being destroyed, the body of sin seems to be alive and well and fully active. However, the word ‘destroyed’ needs explanation. Even Paul himself admits in Romans 7:24 that he yet waits for deliverance from ‘this body of death’. ‘Destroyed’ translates the verb *καταργέω* (*katargeō*), which means, ‘I make idle (inactive), I make of no effect, I annul, abolish, bring to naught’,⁹ so the question to be asked is not concerning the presence or activity of the body of sin, but its *effective* presence. In what way has it been destroyed? The answer is that the body of sin has been rendered powerless to condemn and so to control our destiny in any way. ‘Whoever has died’ is a reference to the judgement having taken place, not to the eradication of the body. The same principle applies with regards to the devil in Hebrews 2:14, where the same verb is used. So the issue is that sin cannot rule because the law’s demands have been fully met in Christ’s death.

This is the point in Romans 8:1–4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The just requirement of the law has been fulfilled in us, and not *if* we walk according to the Spirit either, as the following sentences indicate:

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom. 8:9).

‘Might be fulfilled’ (v. 4) is an aorist tense, usually indicating a single action in the past, and that is so here, but it is what some have called an ‘inceptive’ aorist, meaning that it actually is a single action which sets in train a whole new course of action, in this case bringing about the transformation which we have already seen. Perhaps,

⁸ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, (1692) 1999, p. 60.

⁹ Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Oxford University Press, London, 1916, p. 128.

Creep Back to Your Baptism

then, we would do well to begin with seeing that there are so many times when we do, indeed, love the law of God and obey it from the heart. We will admit that there are times, too many times, when we are not like that, but at least we can say that the command not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies is one we *do* so often long to obey. And we should also take note that sin can only reign through guilt *and* that we are in Christ who has dealt with our guilt. When we were baptised into Christ, we were baptised into his death, the death by which our sin and our old man were judged and our guilt removed.

So what of the sin which brings a holy shame? Within the argument of Romans, chapter 7 does provide an answer:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

^{8:1} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 7:14–8:1).

The question of whether this section is autobiographical or not ought to be answered in terms of the promises of Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Ezekiel 36:25–27 discussed above. Whatever the line of argument within the letter, only a person transformed by the Spirit of God who has poured the love of God, namely the work of the cross, into the heart (Rom. 5:5–8) could ever speak of ‘the good *I want*’. The law is spiritual, ‘the commandment is holy and just and good’ (Rom. 7:12), and only a purified mind could or would ever see this (see Titus 1:15).

Verse 14 identifies the problem. While the law is spiritual, a matter of (the) spirit/Spirit, ‘I am of the flesh’. ‘Of the flesh’ is the Greek, *σάρκινο* (*sarkinos*), which refers to being material, consisting of flesh. It does not mean ‘having a mindset of the flesh’ which would be *σαρκικός* (*sarkikos*).¹⁰ To have that mindset would indicate that a person is still outside of Christ (see Rom. 8:5–8) and Paul rejects that entirely: ‘But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Rom. 8:9). So the cry of verse 24, ‘Who will rescue me from this body of death’ is the cry of a man who groans inwardly as one still waiting for the redemption of his body (Rom. 8:23), for the full revealing of the coming glory (Rom. 8:18), when the sonship we have through the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15) will be fully seen and no

¹⁰ That Paul does not use these words synonymously but has a clear distinction in mind is demonstrated by 1 Corinthians 3:1–3 where he carefully distinguished between them:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh [*σαρκίνους*], as infants in Christ.² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,³ for you are still of the flesh [*σαρκικοί*]. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh [*σαρκικοί*], and behaving according to human inclinations?

Creep Back to Your Baptism

longer contested. Then he will know the freedom of that glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

We were baptised into Christ Jesus and so baptised into his death so that we might walk in newness of life. *And we do!* Faith hears the word and lives it. And the word spoken is not ‘perfection’, not yet, but it is the word of ‘no condemnation’. Not yet freedom from the presence of sin, but certainly freedom from its power through guilt. And the fact that we long for that, that we have this hope, is clear evidence to faith that we have been born again, that we are indeed in Christ.

When the heart aches because of the sin which dwells in us, when the accuser loudly declares our guilt because ‘We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done’ and we also sense that ‘there is no health in us’,¹¹ we must ‘creep back to our baptism’ and remind ourselves—and each other—that we are in Christ and that nothing can separate us from his love. His grace has brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home.

¹¹ ‘A General Confession’ to be said at Morning and Evening Prayer, from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662).