

“The Works of the Devil?”

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Presbyterians for Renewal (breakfast at General Assembly), Wednesday 23, 1999

W1038.5

Introduction

Roberta and I appreciate this invitation and we consider it an honor to be listed with the others previously recognized.

It would appear that we should in these few moments give some explanation or defense for our decision to turn the gift we are receiving to become seed money for a new enterprise called the Institute for the Study of the Origins of Disease. An equal amount is coming by request of Christy Wilson Jr—who was honored last year. He and I have been close friends for many years. A few hours before Christy recently died a friend of his offered \$5,000 as a memorial gift, and asked Christy how he might dedicate it. Christy suggested the very thing he and I had talked about in his son’s presence the week before, namely, what we envisioned as the Institute for the Study of the Origins of Disease. Thus, for Roberta and me to designate an additional \$5,000 makes ours the second gift to this new Institute.

In the moments I have here I feel that you might reasonably expect some sort of explanation for what we regard as momentous reasons for this new project. In missiological terminology it involves no less than a major correction in the mainstream of Christian theology. (Are Presbyterians for Renewal supposed to cut that deep?)

I could wish that Nelson Bell were here. I believe he would heartily concur with what I will be saying. The same is true, for different reasons, with John Mackay (a former professor of mine). For though Mackay was one of the five presidents of the World Council of Churches, and very concerned for unity, he was also the one who upheld the equal ecumenical legitimacy of the *divergent* confessions. Most specifically he upheld the Evangelical stream within world Christianity. But he did not regard any particular stream as complete, and so left unspoken the question of the completeness or full adequacy of any one of them. Both Bell and Mackay lived to promote globally the glory of God. Note, incidentally, that I

will not be speaking of a major correction in one of these streams of Christianity but rather an urgent Biblical insight lacking in all of them.

One reason for a correction is that our theological structure of interpretation of the meaning of the Biblical witness took place centuries before we had any inkling of the dark intelligence invested in the micro world of disease germs, and our current theological sensitivities have, amazingly, not yet adjusted to this new information. *We not only do not commonly accuse Satan for destructive germs, we have no mission theology for destroying such germs.*

What I am about to present, then, has poignant significance to a man of medicine like Bell, but also to a man like Mackay, who was profoundly aware of both the values and limitations of all particular streams of Christian belief. What I will say is significant to both men in the sense that they too sought to glorify God to the ends of the earth. I can hope we here today can fathom that significance.

A Staggering Thought

In the past almost three years of the gradual progress of bone marrow cancer in my wife’s physical being, we have both been pressed to ask out loud some unusual questions, and have begun to develop some unusual answers.

First of all, an idea we did not think of. It is an arresting and even staggering idea that looks upon the need for theological renewal as long ago as the fourth century AD. That was the first public and political century of Christianity. It was the kind of mix in which syncretism is often spawned. According to this theory it was the time when a virulent form of pagan syncretism lodged itself deeply into our Western Christian theological tradition. A detailed exposition of this amazing proposal can be found in a fairly recent Princeton Seminary Ph.D. dissertation done by Gregory Boyd who is a currently a professor of theology at the Bethel Seminary in St. Paul. While we do not need to agree with all Boyd’s ideas, what he has done in his dissertation is clearly an exten-

sive and intellectual achievement, now a stout book published by Intervarsity Press entitled *God at War*. Some of the flavor of the entire book can be caught in these few words:

We see...[someone with] polio...and piously shake our heads...saying "It is the will of God...hard to understand...we have to wait to get to heaven [to understand it]"...[By contrast] Jesus looked at [sickness] and in crystal clear terms called it the work of the devil, and not the will of God—[something to be fought not something to which we should simply resign ourselves.] (Boyd 1997:183)

This contrast, Boyd contends, reveals a pagan neo-platonist strand in our theology coming through Augustine no less, and later through Boethius and his winsome and incredibly influential *Consolations of Philosophy*. An exclusive focus on a "mysterious good" which God may indeed faithfully and lovingly bring out of evil thus becomes an expectation of good "following" evil and distracts us and prevents us from turning decisively against and crushing the source of that evil. While pagan, it sounds to our ears like an attitude of noble resignation in the midst of suffering. It works itself out as a curious passivity in the presence of evil. It takes "all things work together for good" as though God—who does in fact work good out of evil—as the author of evil.

Thus, for example, we cannot be totally surprised that a godly medieval woman guided by this kind of theology believed that a worm under the skin in her forehead must have been sent by God for her edification, and accordingly, when stooping over one day the worm fell out, she dutifully replaced it.

Or, in accord with with our by-now-instinctive Augustinian neo-platonism we cannot be totally surprised that when a godly young preacher in Puritan Massachusetts sought to fight smallpox the other pastors with one voice opposed him. In the perspective of their Presbyterian theology he was, and I quote, "interfering with Divine Providence." No wonder that when that young man died in the process of trying out a smallpox vaccine on himself, it was assumed that God killed him. Strangely, that comparatively young man attempting to spare the suffering of the Indians at his mission outpost is known today for his

philosophy not for fighting evil in the form of a virus—I speak of the saintly Jonathan Edwards.

But, in actual fact, *Edwards' keen thinking challenged a seriously syncretistic element in our theological tradition*. By Edward's day the syncretized Christian tradition was so durable and so impervious to change that not for two hundred years did any individual or group decide to eliminate smallpox. And when it finally happened it was not to the credit, this time, of a preacher, a missionary, or a Christian theologian. That eradication took place only 21 years ago!

Edwards' insight could and should have displaced that particular pagan element in our theology—the passive acceptance of disease as being God's direct will which we are therefore not to fight against. Edwards' insight could have replaced the pagan element with a theology informing and guiding a serious attack on what the Bible calls, simply, "the works of the devil."

But, that insight died with Edwards. I have concluded with profound sadness, that had that insight not died with him, our form of faith might have regained a Biblical zeal to set out deliberately to vanquish the works of the devil. In other words had that insight not died with him my wife today undoubtedly would not have a terminal form of cancer. And the rest of you would not have to be daily gambling that you won't be next.

Are We Really Passive before Evil?

You may quite readily wonder if I am unaware of enormous research that is going on. Three years ago—when Roberta was first diagnosed—I had the idea that surely a lot of money in this country and around the world was flowing into *foundational* cancer research. Having by now had reason to look into this supposition I am astounded that actually very little goes into foundational cancer research compared to what we spend on cancer *treatment* (once we wait until this deadly malady attaches itself to us). To understand and eradicate cancer we spend less than one thousandth of what we pay for cancer treatments. Indeed, it may even be less than that. The truth is actually scandalous—a Satanic achievement?

However, the main point here is not how

little goes to understand disease compared to the perfectly enormous amount we spend frantically for treatments once we are individually attacked. That huge imbalance is itself curious and puzzling. But the more significant point is that there is absolutely no evidence I know of in all the globe of any *theologically driven* interest in combatting disease at its origins. Not only have I not found any work of theology, any chapter, any paragraph, but I know of no sermon urging us—those of us in the pew or in professional missions—to go to battle against the many eradicable diseases. Jimmy Carter, our former president, is the only Christian leader I know of who has set out, in his phrase, “to wipe Guinea worm from the face of the earth.” Note that his insight did not come from a seminary experience but, perhaps, from being a Sunday school teacher.

Granted that Christian missions spend literally millions of dollars around the world taking care of sick people. And we nourish hundreds of thousands of children in one program or another, raising them up so they can die of malaria. (Every sixty seconds four children die of malaria.) Yet in all the earth I know of only one very small clinic in Zimbabwe where two ill-equipped missionary doctors are working toward the actual elimination of the astonishingly intelligent malarial *plasmodium*. And in secular circles the outwitting of that evil bug is not being pursued by the World Health Organization, nor the US National Institutes of Health, nor the Atlanta Center for Disease Control. Only the U.S. Navy, amazingly, is seriously involved.

Note that I am not talking about efforts to *avoid* disease but efforts to eradicate the very source of a disease. Thus, I am not talking about contributory environmental factors or nutritional factors. All such good things are *defensive* measures. We recall that people tried their best for centuries to *avoid* smallpox. But it was better finally to exterminate the virus that was the source cause.

Defensive measures are good, but notice our strange theological (and pagan) reluctance to set out to destroy the disease germs themselves. That would be to go on the *offense*. Yet isn't it Biblical—to *destroy the works of the devil*?

In I John 3:8 we read very simply “The Son of God came into the world that He might destroy the works of the devil.” We don't hear much of that verse, partly because we yield in our every day consciousness to secular denial of Satan's existence.

Is There an Active Satan? When Did He Get Started and What Is He Doing?

But an additional reason we don't hear much of that verse is partly because our theological tradition does not list for us exactly what the works of the devil really are. The respected Dutch theologian Berkouwer made the rare comment that “You cannot have a proper theology without a sound demonology.” Another theologian dared to suggest that Satan's greatest achievement is “to cover his tracks.” Note that if in fact Satan has skillfully “covered his tracks” all of us may therefore be extensively *unaware* of his deeds. Paul suggested that we are not to be ignorant of his devices. We are told that Satan and his angels once worked for God. If so, I ask, When Satan turned against God what precise kind of destruction and perversion did he set out to achieve? Where would we see evidence of his works? Would we get so accustomed to evil that we would be slow to connect Satan with evil and suffering? Would Satan successfully tempt us to think that God is somehow behind all evil—and we must therefore not attempt to eradicate things like smallpox lest we “interfere with Divine Providence”?

In the last 20 years paleontologists have dug up more evidences of earlier life forms than in all previous history. One of their thought-provoking discoveries is that the pre-Cambrian forms of life *included no predators*. Then, at a very distinct juncture destructive forms of life suddenly appeared at all levels, from large creatures to the microbiological level.

Is this what Satan set out to do from the time he fell out with the Creator—that is, he set about to pervert and distort all forms of life so as to produce the vast jungle of tooth and claw that reigns today? Recent lab results indicate that retroviruses are smart enough to carry with them short pieces of pre-coded DNA which they insert into the chromosome of a cell so as to distort the very nature of an organism.

Can a lion that will lie down with a lamb become vicious by such DNA tinkering? We do know that many diseases reflect defective genes. Very recent literature indicates that, in the case of the major chronic diseases, *infections* are now seriously thought to underlie everything from heart disease to cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's and even schizophrenia.

A Double Enigma

But we confront a second and separate mystery here—beyond the scientific facts. Speaking in colloquial terms we face a “double whammy.” We are not only suddenly aware that our medical people have been looking in the wrong direction. We are aware that some force is *delaying that awareness*. For example, it has been two decades since it was clearly proven that 95% of duodenal ulcers are caused by a bacterial infection, yet today half the doctors in the state of Colorado still do not employ the simple remedy now available. Is this not a clear case of demonic *cultural* delusion added to demonic *physical* distortion? Will we see a similarly ominous and tragic lag in the application of knowledge with regard to the relation between infectious agents and the major killer diseases I just mentioned? Can and should the church speak out on these twin problem areas? *Where are our theologians when we need them?*

The Proposed Institute

The proposed Institute for the Study of the Origins of Disease will have to confine itself in its early days of severely limited funding to the collection and dissemination of information about what *is* and *is not* being done. It will endeavor to attract serious attention to this sphere. It will use both secular and theological weaponry, especially the latter. It will try to upgrade our desire to bring glory to God by ending our apparently neoplatonist truce with Satan in the realm of all his ingenious and destructive works. Our global mission agencies which already have to their credit the discovery of the source of leprosy, will declare war on all sources of disease instead of merely being kind to sick people and preaching resignation.

Our actions (which speak louder than words) will no longer proclaim loudly and embarrassingly that our God can get you a hospital bed to lie on and a ticket to heaven but

that He is either ignorant, uncaring, or unable to do anything about the origins of your disease. We cannot blame Augustine or Calvin or Luther for not knowing anything about germs or the enormous complexities of microbiology. Can we repentantly accept blame for the continuing fact that three fourths of all Presbyterians die prematurely from major chronic diseases which are now suddenly more defeatable than ever?

Mobilized Christian response may not come soon enough to materially help my wife—or yours or you. But it will be in part to the credit of the Bell-Mackay prize that at least something will be set in motion to rectify our understanding of a God who is not the author of the destructive violence in nature and who has long sought our help in bringing His kingdom and His will on earth.

Demonic delusions:

1. When we get sick all we need to do is to pray and inquire of God what his reason is for allowing this kind of thing.
2. In case we did something unwise that caused or invited the sickness we don't need to feel responsible to roll up our sleeves and fight the source of the disease. God can always use disease to teach us.

What is it that allows us to simplify the growing issue of homosexuality—that is, the question of whether it is an organic or cultural distortion—without taking account this recent research that declares it to be a physical distortion resulting from an infectious agent? Perhaps even curable by laboratory insights? We are left to two undesirable alternatives: to think that homosexuality must be perfectly normal or to think that homosexuality is entirely cultural, not stopping to think that it may be the result of a *disease*. We often read of the widespread so-called “feminization” of wild life, grievously distorting everything from frogs to alligators, but apparently few people think this can happen to humans.