

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

Press Review

Rev C Bouwman

Peter Carnley

Archbishop Peter Carnley, head of the Anglican Church in Australia, contributed an article to the April 17 issue of *Bulletin*, in which he offers Australians a meditation about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

We need to note: to the average Australian, Archbishop Carnley is not just an anybody. As the head of Australia's Anglican Church, he is seen as the leader of all Australia's Anglicans. More, as head of Australia's largest protestant church, he is seen to be one of the leading figures in Australian Christianity. His words carry weight.

That Archbishop Carnley supplies Australians with an Easter meditation is in itself a good thing. As everyone else called to the office of preacher, Rev Carnley too is expected to expound the good news of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. The tragedy is that this man-of-the-cloth does not proclaim the gospel, but leads Australians (as well as so many other preachers) astray. We do well to take note of the Archbishop's address, so that we might in turn understand the better where Christianity in Australia is headed, and how the Christian community of Australia is fed and led. For that reason I print portions of his meditation below.

His meditation begins like this:

When Christ died by public execution on the Cross, he died isolated and alone, deserted by his friends. As the gospel record has it, with the exception of some of the women, those who had been with him observed all that happened only from a distance.

It does not take much by way of imagination to appreciate their very mixed and confused feelings – feelings of sheer anguish and grief, of anger, of outrage at the injustice, of disbelief that it could have happened at all. Naturally they were traumatized. But they probably also entertained feelings of guilt. After all, Christ died but they had gone free. "Take me but let these go," Jesus had himself said at the time of his arrest. Some, like Peter, vehemently denied knowing him at all. So Jesus died, while they saved their own skins.

In this sense, he had died in their place while they scattered in all directions and escaped to freedom. As they processed the trauma and their own guilt, they began to describe what had happened in metaphors: their freedom was won in just the way that the payment of a ransom by someone secures the freedom of others. Or else, using language from their religious tradition, they spoke of Christ's death as a kind of sacrifice from which they emerged as the living beneficiaries. Thus they remembered his own saying about there being "no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends".

After the Resurrection, the significance of Christ's death took on a more expanded meaning. As the first Christians reflected on it, particularly in the light of the Old Testament scriptures, they saw that "like a lamb he had been led to the slaughter". He was a kind of "Suffering Servant", a man of sorrows, reminiscent of the one of whom Isaiah had spoken in quite another context many centuries before.

The significance of Jesus' death began to take on a unique and cosmic significance as it came to be understood as a death that had meaning, not just for that small band of followers who had actually escaped the vindictive Jerusalem crowd and gone free but for all humanity and for all time. The Easter release of new life put their guilty scattering from the Cross into reverse. In the light of their joyous regathering in community around his forgiving presence, his death could be seen not only to have secured their freedom, way back then; somehow, it has significance by obtaining an eternal deliverance for all. Hence the claim that Christ died once and for all, and for the sins of the whole world.

There is logic to the line of thought in Carnley's opening section. Notice how, in the second paragraph, the feelings of the onlookers are put on center stage. Their feelings of guilt resulted –says Carnley– in their concluding that Jesus had died in their place – for Jesus had said to "let these go." As the onlookers gave further thought to Jesus' dying-in-their-place, they came to describe Jesus' death in pictures ("metaphors"), be it in ransom language or in the sacrificial language of the Old Testament.

Do you recognize, dear reader, what Carnley is doing? Carnley has the Bible's message *grow spontaneously within the minds of the disciples*. So, fourth paragraph, the early Christians paged through their Old Testaments, noted phrases from Isaiah 53, and began to see Jesus' death on the cross in light of those phrases – and so began to think and speak of Jesus' death in terms borrowed from Is 53. And when the disciples got together on Easter Sunday in the belief that Jesus had arisen, His death came to be understood as having eternal significance for all people.... How? Carnley doesn't say. But the critical thing is that Carnley sees the gospel as *evolving slowly but surely from within the minds of the early Christians*.

This pattern of thought is typical of contemporary Christianity. As a result of the developments in science that marked the twentieth century, people around the world have come to doubt, or even deny, that the God of the Bible actually exists. But if this God does not exist, the Bible can –logically– not come from this God. So you are left with the question of where its message comes from. The answer is simple: it comes from human imagination. Carnley attempts to explain how some Bible writers could actually conclude that Christ died "for us", how Christ's death could be understood in terms of atonement and sacrifice, etc. To the mind of the average Australian, this manner of thinking goes in like cake. What makes matters so horrifying is that recognized *office-bearers in the churches* preach this way. No wonder that the Christian faith has lost its power in Australia; since preachers do not proclaim its heavenly origin, people no longer accept that "the gospel of Christ ... is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

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What, then, is the value of Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Australia's leading protestant clergyman first makes a caricature of some "explanations and theories" about the value of Christ's death, and then tells Australians that

"Fortunately no theoretical explanation has ever been universally accepted or deemed sufficiently adequate to be elevated to the status of a required belief by dogmatic definition. The Christian Creeds are wisely silent when it comes to theories of the Atonement. This very silence is itself significant; it is something with which those Christians who are ardently and exclusively wedded to a single theory must come to terms.

Perhaps this reticence is because deep down the Church has sensed that all its attempts to explain the meaning of the Cross are halting and feeble, historically and culturally conditioned attempts to probe a mystery that ultimately passes human understanding. It is an event too full of portent to be reduced to a mere

formula."

It needs to be granted that Christians around the world and through the ages have not accepted as truth one single theory of how Christ atoned for sin. Dictionaries of theology will tell you of the theories of Aulén, of Anselm, of Abelard, to name but a few. The question, though, is this: what message is the Archbishop giving Australians through the above quote? Is it not that there is a confusion within Christendom about the purpose and value of Christ's death?? Yet on this point there is no confusion amongst Christians of the ages or around the world. The Nicene Creed says specifically of the Son of God that He "for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven...", "suffered, died, and rose again. The Athanasian Creed adds that Christ "suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead..." The significance of the Cross of Jesus Christ is in no way a point of confusion or reticence within biblical Christianity. That theologians have discussed *how* the Cross is significant for atoning for human sin is a very different matter from discussing *whether* the Cross is significant. Carnley, though, would place questions marks around the meaning of the cross, and the reason, I suspect, is that Carnley –in typical contemporary fashion– declines to speak of 'sin' – I did not find in his article a single occurrence of this word that's so critical to understanding the significance of the cross.

What leadership does this give to Australian Christians? They're told that there is something uncertain about the purpose of Christ's death on the cross! With preaching like this, it's no wonder that the churches of our land run empty. For why come to hear about a cross whose significance is unsure??

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Despite Carnley's admitted inability to describe the meaning of the cross, he nevertheless feels the need to probe into the value of Christ's death. The first thing we can learn from Christ's death, says Carnley, is that Jesus lived what He taught. As He taught people to forgive not just seven times but 70 times seven, so Jesus on the cross did not reply to His accusers, or seek Himself. Rather, He prayed for those who crucified Him. "In other words, the Cross brings into focus a quality of human being that was remembered to have characterized his entire life." By so doing, Carnley adds, Jesus shows us the Father:

"...the Cross as the center and symbol of Jesus' entire life also reveals something of the significance about the nature of God from all eternity. It gives us a clue to understanding at least something of the cosmic meaning of sacrificial love in the service of others.

The Cross reveals at a moment of history something that is changeless and eternal about the being and character of God. The nub of it is this: God eternally gives his life to us, generously and unconditionally, sacrificially, even wastefully. Despite our all too apparent unworthiness, he forgivingly invites us to have to do with him, to gather in his presence and to share his life, that we might forever live harmoniously together in communion with him. The invitation of the Gospel is to become partakers of the divine nature."

Here, then, is to Carnley what the message of the cross might be for Australians: "*God eternally gives his life to us, generously and unconditionally, sacrificially, even wastefully.*" God in heaven is presented as ever trying to 'sell' Himself to us, to show by example how we should be. Not –let the reader understand!– that Carnley now imagines God to be actually existing in heaven as Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Rather, 'God' represents the ideal form of behavior that people ought to adopt. So, "*the invitation of the Gospel is to become partakers of the divine nature.*" That is: we need to give ourselves too, "generously and unconditionally, sacrificially, even wastefully" to each other. Carnley continues:

"Moreover, what is revealed in the suffering and death of the humiliated one, the marginalized and despised one, the one written off as nothing, gives us the clue to the way God always operates in the world. To get this right may be much more important to the ultimate wellbeing of the world than we may think."

What does Carnley mean with "the way God always operates in the world"? He explains:

"God reigns but in a patiently quiet, unassuming kind of way that does not constantly draw attention to itself.... God does not push his own cause in the flawed and off-putting way of those humans who are 'full of themselves'. Indeed, it is God's own self-effacing modesty that gives us humans the freedom to overlook him...."

"This means that God's power is not every or just any kind of power but pre-eminently the power of persuasion. God does not compel a human response by forcing himself upon us but puts himself at our disposal...."

Do you follow Carnley's message? The Cross displays how God gives Himself to people. He presents Himself as weak, as meek, willing to be trodden upon, ignored, ridiculed.... Never does He push Himself onto people, never does He present Himself from a position of authority, of *God-ness*. The application?

"Inevitably we are prone to assimilate and live by the worlds' values; we get drawn into its power plays. When things go wrong in the workplace, but also in our personal relationships, in our families and in our homes, it usually has something to do with the human jostle for power and control."

Instead of Australians insisting on their own way (be it in the work place or in the home or in marriage or even in church), Carnley would have his readers follow the example of God as displayed on the cross: *"God does not push his own cause."* Carnley would have Australians become as modest as God is.... Which means in practice, in relation to the leadership the church should give to issues of doctrine or morality:

"Even in the Church, in its committees and decision making, we succumb to manipulative power play from time to time, when generosity of spirit, and mutual self-gift give way to forces that belong more properly to the world. Ironically, some even seem compelled coercively to foist preferred theological theories on everybody else as required belief: Think as I think!"

In other words: let the church not be dogmatic on what people must believe to be saved, nor insist that certain patterns of behavior are sinful (let alone provoke God's wrath!). Let the church only, through word and deed, show *"God's own self-effacing modesty that gives us humans the freedom to overlook him...."*

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So far Archbishop Carnley. There was a time that leaders in the Anglican Church stood up for the honor and glory of God. But once one denies that God is in heaven as Creator and Sustainer of life, that this God has revealed Himself to men through word and Word (so that you have to find a new explanation for where the Bible comes from), there is no telling what sort of stones a church leader can feed his congregation. Pity Australians who look for spiritual guidance from such preachers; no wonder people flock to other religions. Would that Australians were told that Christ "suffered for our salvation" – and therefore one needs to repent and believe!

God remains in heaven, sovereign Lord of all the earth. It is true: God does not forcibly

compel every knee in our land to bow before Him today. Why, though, might that be? Certainly not because He's too modest for that! Paul gives a radically different answer. He writes:

"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds' ..." (Rom 2: 4ff).

This is a reality God has told to us. As Australians amongst Australians, it is our privilege – while there is still time– to speak accurately of the God whom Archbishop Carnley so obviously misrepresents.
