

CONVERSATIONS



GUIDE

BY KIM ENGELMANN



GETTING THE ELEPHANT
OUT OF THE SANCTUARY:
ATONEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION
AN INTERVIEW WITH DALLAS WILLARD

BY GARY W. MOON

Gary Moon interviews Dallas Willard on the three theories of atonement. The launch of this discussion centers on the very real fact that, in terms of the way people live, there does not seem to be that much difference between Christians and non-Christians. Dallas suggests that perhaps what we are “selling” as a Christian Church is simply irrelevant to human life. When we look at theories of the atonement for instance, each theory falls short of fully embracing the mystery of what happened on the cross. Dallas says that the focus on the cross is not comprehensive enough. When we read John 3:16 it is not simply a passage about forgiveness from the

cross; rather it is a passage about receiving life from above—from God. That is atonement, because atonement is a matter of our fellowship with Christ, the person—the life of the Son of God in us. Paul speaks of this over and over as a kind of dynamic pursuit of our whole life. The result of atonement is our salvation since we are not under the power of sin and death anymore. Justification is the first step—a door into this relationship through God’s forgiveness. Salvation as life is the continual transformation of Christ at work in us so that we think different thoughts, believe different things, and we are strengthened and directed by grace. Evil continues in the world, because as Dallas concludes, the death and resurrection of Jesus does not “impose a necessity but opens up a possibility.” People continue to live in alienation from God. The important point here is that Christ, living in us, causes us to live differently and causes us to grow spiritually. This is a process that goes on for all eternity. Sometimes the

death of Christ has been so overemphasized, and our own death – to take up Christ’s cross and follow him – underemphasized. Our unity is with Christ and with his death, so that Jesus’ cross becomes our cross too, and we are willing to die daily. What actually happened on the cross is a mystery and imposing one theory or another on it, as Dallas states is “intruding into the mysteries of the Trinity” even though the cross did make possible the plan of salvation. Jesus’ blood shed does show us, however, the depths of God’s love for us; therefore, receiving that blood and body in the Lord’s Supper is very powerful. Dallas’ definition of hell is partly “it is God’s best for some people. It’s the best God can do for those who don’t like him.”

If you got to heaven and found that you didn’t like God—couldn’t stand him—well heaven would be agonizing. Those who go to hell are only those “who will have it no other way.” Those who go to heaven are “Everyone who can stand that much love.” Essentially salvation begins now, as life with God—an active friendship. This involves obedience, the willingness to sacrifice, and living everyday as an act of invocation. We don’t just “get saved”—we live it out as we participate in the life of Christ in us.

1. Have you had the experience of “salvation” being taught by an institution, or person as something you did once and then it was done?
2. Has salvation seemed to you irrelevant for now, and more important for the afterlife? Explain.
3. How would you interpret Dallas’ comment that we ought to live everyday as an act of invocation?



**THICK CHRISTIANITY: C.S. LEWIS,
TRANSFORMATION, AND THE ANCIENT
DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS**

BY CHRIS JENSEN

This article begins with Lewis' metaphor of "thick soup" and "thin soup" to describe world religions. The "thick soup" represents mystery, ritual and matter. "Thin soup" represents philosophy, thought and ethics. Lewis found in Christianity both thick and thin. For instance, salvation is not just accomplished by intellectual consent (thin) but involves transformation—becoming like Christ—which implies a mystical union with God (thick). For Lewis, the whole purpose of Christianity is to turn people into "little Christs" and "Sons of God". The concept of theosis is not just a decision (thin) to receive an external divine pardon. Salvation as theosis also means human healing and transformation as we are changed and become "new creatures," sharing in the glory of God. Lewis however stresses the boundary between God and creation. God is wholly other than us, and we do not change by losing our distinctive human nature



**RE-HEARING THE BIBLE:
THE STORY IT TELLS FORMS THE SOUL**

BY LARRY CRABB

In this article, Crabb emphasizes the importance of scripture. Kierkegaard called scripture the 66 love letters from God as definitive and essential for doing ministry and experiencing authentic growth. Everything must have a thought-through biblical foundation, and to the extent that we exclude scripture, we distort the value of whatever we may be hearing from God through the venues of human wisdom, mission, or ex-

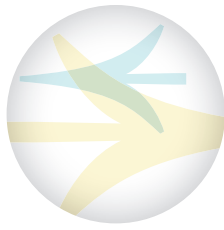
and dissolve into God's essence. Still, "deification" or becoming like God is the point and process of salvation. "Deified human beings forever remain human while at the same time sharing in divine grace or energy, just like iron in the fire shares the properties of flame but doesn't cease to be iron." Deification doesn't destroy the human body, but fulfills and resurrects it. Christianity is unique in the fact that God actually loves the stuff of life—the matter that he created. Salvation is the fulfillment of what we were meant to be, not an annihilation of it. Communion is an example of how tangible elements are celebrated and work as a means through which "the veil between the worlds gets thin." As we partake, we are transformed. Lewis states, "Here is big medicine and strong magic... and I should define magic in this sense as 'objective efficacy which cannot be further analyzed.'" (thick or mystery!). Again, prayer is another discipline by which we are transformed with both thick and thin dimensions. Lewis' prayer was corporate as well as personal, fixed as well as spontaneous. Ultimately Lewis shows us that salvation is not just an idea but something to be done, and a process by which we are transformed by the very sacramental scaffolding and participation in the mystery of God's presence that has helped countless seekers stay on track for centuries.

1. In your own spiritual journey, do you most relate to the "thin" or the "thick" soup concept of salvation?
2. Think about or discuss how thick and thin belong together in Lewis' framework and why both are important. What traditions emphasize "thin" soup? What traditions emphasize "thick"? What are the pros and cons of both?
3. How does thinking about God "fulfilling" who we are as distinct entities meant to reflect his nature, yet not be subsumed by it, speak to you about who God is and his love for you personally?

perience. This distortion, that comes when we exclude scripture, moves us toward a self-focused purpose. Crabb has two convictions. 1) something is wrong in our hearts that only the Bible can expose as lethal 2) something is alive with transformational power in God's people that is liberated by hearing counter-intuitive truth from God as delivered in his Word through the Holy Spirit. The trend toward making faith practical and experiencing God personally is good, but this trend must not lead us from a dependence upon hearing God speak to us through His Word. The combination of Spirit and word empowers living worship, preaching and transforming conversations and this moves us forward missionally into the dark world with divine love.

1. Do you find scripture to be an essential component in your walk with God? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever been in a situation where ones "personal experience of God" or "social action" was valued above God's word? How might one or both of these emphases cause distortion?
3. Name some parts of scripture that you know about that could be considered counter-intuitive. Why do you think this sort of counter-intuitive message is a part of God's word to us?





TRANSFORMING RETREATS: LIVING AND LOVING THROUGH THE “TORTUOUS MIDDLE PLACES”

BY CAM YATES

Yates speaks in this article about the power of transforming retreats. He tells us that many times we look for exuberant beginnings and victorious endings and we fail to see that maturing spirituality enables God’s people to live confidently in the “sometimes tortuous middle places.” Since spirituality is about transformation, this can only be realized in living through the times of plodding, fear and difficulty. The retreat experience is an invitation to be attentive to these middle places and journey through them with others. The way of transformation is 1) to deeply believe we are loved by God 2) to recognize that the love of God changes our way of under-

standing and accepting ourselves 3) to experience how God’s love changes our way of being with others and 4) and choosing to have a love response to the world. Yates does four retreats in succession focusing on each of these parts of the transformational process. He advocates for a rhythm between mind and heart. “When the heart finds intimacy with the mind, we enter the way of knowing God’s love as an abundant, embracing fullness.” Sometimes we can go into hiding because we fear God. Yet we can come out of hiding (which is often hiding from our own true self) when we see that God is searching for us as “longing love seeking reunion and companionship lost.” Sharing stories together also leads us into real, felt encounters with Love Incarnate. Yates also talks about attentiveness and its very prominent place in Jesus’ ministry. As we are attentive to others, to God, and to our own inner journey we experience transformation, healing and comfort to companion with one another through “the middle places.”

1. What are some middle places that you recognize in your own spiritual journey?
2. How might a retreat or get-away with other Christians help you walk through the middle places?
3. Who do you remember as being especially attentive to you, when you were going through a hard time? If you could define attentiveness, how would you do it? How is Jesus attentive to you?



REAL PEOPLE, REAL PROGRAMS, REAL CHANGE: WHAT TWELVE STEP HAS TO SAY ABOUT TRANSFORMATION (AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE)

BY JAN JOHNSON

Jan Johnson begins by stating that more change happens in 12-step programs than in the sanctuary. Transformation occurs in the “grace-drenched” context of AA, and Johnson goes on to describe this for us. Part of the grace-based approach is seeing alcoholism as a disease, as well as allowing and encouraging people to speak to God as they understand him. In addition, trying harder is not the answer. It is surrender that is key to even beginning to work the steps. Nor are participants allowed to “judge” each other. Sharing is done in a safe environment where people simply listen and share their stories. Although 12-steppers may not have their theology right, they have had profound experiences of God working in their life. People who 12-step, recognize that transformation is their only hope. They are at a point where they know they need help from a Power beyond themselves. Johnson calls this

“anguish of soul” and connects it to statements made by the spiritual formation community such as Bernard of Clairvaux’s statement of the war of the mind that resembles the Big Book in many places: “When I am at rest, I accuse myself of neglecting my work; and when I am at work, of having disturbed my repose...the only remedy is prayer...”. Another slogan of 12 step programs is “Progress, not perfection” as bite sized goals are encouraged and celebrated. These programs also involved the whole person, and go beyond just an intellectual assent of “accepting Christ”. Johnson compares this to Wesley’s model, in which it was possible to believe ones way into faith, behave ones way into faith, or belong one’s way into faith. These three ways allowed for different people to enter into faith in their own unique ways. Johnson provides a chart that compares the tools of recovery with the spiritual disciplines and practices of Christianity. For 12-steppers the goal is always recovery and wholeness, not the tools. Sharing life together in authenticity, and in a safe place, ought to be the model for the church. It is more about talking hearts and talking heads. Out of such shared life in Christ, through confession, reconciliation, and restitution, transformation can emerge.

1. Do you find that in your church you have more talking heads, or talking hearts?
2. Do you think that others, on the outside of church, view the church more as an institution of compassion or of judgment?
3. What are some ways the church community can begin to emulate the transforming power of AA and other 12-step groups?