



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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An Escapist Theology

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“I need to talk with you.” In this characteristically blunt fashion, Jo presented himself at my study door one day.

Fortunately, I didn’t have an appointment just then, so I could turn my attention to him. “Sure, Jo,” I responded, “Come on in.”

Jo settled himself on the couch – with much twisting and turning, I noticed. It wasn’t like him to be that uneasy. I wondered what had unsettled him so much.

It didn’t take long to find out. “What do you mean – an escapist theology?” he blurted.

I was surprised. “AN ESCAPIST THEOLOGY” was the title of my next Burney’s Paper, but I didn’t know how he knew that, or why it would upset him if he did. It turned out that he had overheard me say that that was the title of the paper on which I was working. And he wasn’t so much upset as intrigued by it.

Consequently, I didn’t quite know how to respond to his question, so I said, “Wouldn’t you rather just wait until the paper is written to find out?”

“No,” Jo replied, “I wouldn’t rather just wait. That title bugs me, and I want to know right now what it means.”

I want you to meet Jo (not Joe). He is a long time friend, and I am, in a matter of speaking, his mentor. He is not anyone. And he is someone. He could be you, or someone you know, or someone else. He is male. He is female. For all I know, he may even be me. He is a quester and a questioner. He is a believer and a doubter. Like me, he likes for things to make sense. If all goes well, now that you have met him, he may appear often in my writings.

Mostly, I don’t know when Jo will show up, nor do I have much forewarning about what subject he will have on his mind. With an uncanny sense of timing, he appears most often when I am struggling with a question or an issue of some importance to me, and, with his questions and comments, he always helps me think it through.

Again, this time, Jo’s timing was uncanny.

I didn’t say anything to him immediately. I needed to gather my thoughts first. “Jo,” I finally said, “I’m glad you have come in. You’re going to be a big help to me in working through what I really mean to say in this paper, and you’ve asked an excellent question to start with.

“You know that I, for a long time, have struggled to make sense out of theology as I hear it most commonly expressed. Salvation Theology we usually call it – or Fall-Redemption Theology. And it has its origins in our interpretation of the meaning of the

Garden of Eden story told in the third chapter of Genesis. You know the story as well as I. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, so the usual interpretation goes. They fell from Grace. They became sinners. And God punished them by putting them out of the Garden. Ever since, we tell ourselves, we human beings have lived as fallen sinners in need of salvation. But we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. We must look to God for our redemption. And Jesus Christ is our Redeemer.”

“I know all that,” Jo said. “Isn’t that how it is? Don’t I have to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved? What’s escapist about that?”

“That’s what the Bible teaches, Jo,” I replied, “or rather, that’s what we interpret it to teach.”

“You lost me there,” Jo responded.

“All right, Jo,” I explained, “what I am saying is that, maybe, our commonly held beliefs about salvation and about our continuing to live even after death may not express the real messages of Scripture. Maybe they – the beliefs, that is – give us a way to escape from coming to grips with those real messages.”

“Wow!” Jo exclaimed. “You don’t fool around when you start exploring, do you? Are you saying that Fall-Redemption Theology is an escapist theology?”

“You don’t mince words either, do you, Jo?” I replied. “It isn’t so much that I am saying Fall-Redemption Theology is escapist as it is that I am saying I am exploring the idea. Or maybe it has to do more with what people do with that Theology.”

“You lost me again,” Jo said.

“I’m not sure but that I lost myself,” I answered. “Let’s go back to the Garden of Eden story, and think about the possibility of a different interpretation. Suppose the man and the woman didn’t disobey God. If they didn’t, then God didn’t punish them. That means there must be another reason why they had to leave the Garden.”

Jo thought for a moment. “How could there be another reason?” he asked. “God told them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they would die. God commanded them, told them the punishment, and they disobeyed.”

“Of course, Jo,” I responded. “If that is what happened, they disobeyed God and were punished by being ejected from the Garden. They didn’t die as God said they would. Not then. But suppose that isn’t what happened.”

“If that isn’t what happened, what did?” Jo wanted to know.

“Fair question, Jo,” I said, “but I can’t tell you what really happened. I can tell you another interpretation of the story.”

“All right. Interpret away, then.” Jo replied.

“OK.” Again, I took a few moments to gather my thoughts. “Suppose it all has to do with who God has created human beings to be. Suppose it has to do with making decisions and being responsible – and people not wanting to be responsible. We have to make decisions, you know. We have no choice about that. And, one way or another, we always act on those decisions. There is always an outcome. There are results. There are consequences.

“Now suppose that God’s intention in commanding the man and woman not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not to order them, but to instruct them. The Hebrew word usually translated ‘command’ really means ‘to say’, and it has the force or thrust of ‘instruct.’ Suppose God was telling them that, though it was up to them to make the decision, it wasn’t really wise to eat that fruit because to do so would mean that they were choosing death instead of life. They were already experiencing a good life in the Garden. But suppose that they still needed to choose that life before they could know the fullness of it.

“Suppose one of the things meant by ‘in the image of God’ was that we were created with the responsibility to decide for ourselves where and how we intended to be about the business of living. We call that free will. God doesn’t control our decision making. Nor does God control what happens as the result of our acting on our decisions. Decision making includes the consequence of action taken to give expression to the decision.”

“So you are suggesting,” Jo said, “that it wasn’t so much God forbade them from eating that fruit, but that God told them the consequence if they did.”

“Yes,” I replied, “that is what I am suggesting. Besides living in the Garden with all that it offered them, they needed to go one step further. Since they were deciders (their free will, you remember), it was necessary for them to decide to stay there, or not.

“Another way of saying it is that it was necessary for the man and the woman to decide about their relationship to God. Either they were in it, or they were out of it. This is a way to describe the temptation part of the story. To have a full and satisfying life, they must have the necessities (food, shelter, etc.), the less tangible things that brought the delights of life, and wisdom to make the decisions that would bring these about. In relationship with God, or not, they wanted these things.

“On the one hand, relationship with God was the way. On the other hand, if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (‘all knowledge’ is another way of saying it), it would seem that they wouldn’t need relationship with God. They could provide for themselves without God’s help.

They, as the Tempter had suggested, could be like God themselves. They would

have no need of God. Only God had said that to decide to eat the fruit was to decide to die.”

“How could that be?” Jo wanted to know. “If they decided to eat the fruit, they would have everything they already had – maybe more – and wouldn’t be dependent on God. How would that be deciding on death?”

“Good comment, my friend,” I replied, “but we haven’t finished the story.”

“The man and the woman (the woman, the story says) chose in favor of eating the fruit to get what it seemed to promise them. They chose not to have the relationship with God. They chose to go with their own skills and resources to get that good life – the one, incidentally, that they already had in the Garden.

“Another way to say it is that they chose to be vulnerable, or take on the responsibility of depending upon themselves alone, without any help or any relationship with anyone else, to get what they already had.

“And that may be exactly what the Tempter meant when he told them their eyes would be opened and they would be like God. If they chose to eat the fruit, the ultimate level of responsibility for what happened would be theirs. It would be up to them to provide all things that they would have in life, although God had already provided for them. So they ate. Their eyes were opened. They saw that they were naked. That is, they saw that they were vulnerable. They realized that they had no other resources on which to depend than those that they developed all by themselves, both to live and to keep from dying.”

“Wait a minute,” Jo said. “You’re going too fast for me. You’re suggesting that the Garden story centers in the decision of the man and the woman to go it alone instead of keeping the relationship with God? That’s not disobedience. That is exercising their right and responsibility to decide for themselves what they would do with their lives – what they would do about whether to be in relationship with God, and what they would do about living and dying.”

“Suppose that is true, Jo,” I replied. “Suppose disobedience was not involved, but choice and consequence. Seen in that way, the story describes three consequences.

“The first consequence. Having chosen as they had, they realized that it was up to them to try to preserve themselves, to assure that they could stay alive by not getting killed and not dying. Salvation became their first priority. What could they do? They could clothe (protect) themselves, and the best resource available to them (at least as they saw it) was fig leaves.”

“Fig leaves,” Jo questioned somewhat disdainfully, “to protect themselves? Not much protection, I’d say.”

“If that was the best I could do, I wouldn’t feel very protected,” I said. “And I think I would be pretty anxious. Everything and everybody would seem like an enemy to me.

“The second consequence. No wonder, then, that they were afraid when God came into the Garden to walk with them. Having decided to depend solely upon themselves, they couldn’t trust anybody, not even God. So they were afraid and tried to protect themselves by trying to hide from God. That, too, was pretty poor protection. Now, as they saw it, God was their enemy. Maybe the ultimate enemy, who had to be avoided at all costs. Or else pleased in some way.”

“But what does all this have to do with escapist theology? Jo asked.

“With your question,” I responded, “you have introduced the third consequence. Notice the details of the story at this point. God wanted to know why they were hiding, and the man answered by blaming God for the plight in which they found themselves. ‘The woman you gave to be with me,’ he said, ‘gave me the fruit and I ate.’ The woman blamed the tempter. ‘Don’t hold us responsible for our decisions and actions,’ they might have said, ‘It isn’t our fault.’ They declared themselves to be victims. They weren’t responsible for what was happening to them, and, therefore, they should not suffer the consequences. They shouldn’t die.

“It strikes me that right here is the beginning of the escapist theology, and maybe the bottom line. I decide and act, but I’m not responsible for what happens. In fact, holding this belief, I’m not even responsible for my decisions and actions. Something or somebody else is. Things happen to me. I am forced by circumstances to decide and act as I do. It isn’t my fault. Ultimately, it is God’s fault. After all, God made me the way I am.”

I paused, and then said, “Jo, I want to insert something here. A particularly important detail of the story points out that, despite the decision and action of the man and the woman, God did not break relationship with them, even though they had decided against being in it. God continued to provide care and protection, making garments of skin for them and clothing them.

“In the subsequent development of an escapist theology, I see this declaration of where God is in the relationship with human beings as crucial. Over and over, God repeated, ‘I am your God and you are my people.’ That message has never changed.”

Jo was rather pensive as he considered what I had been saying to him. “So that’s what you mean by escapist theology. God commands. Human beings disobey. God punishes them by making life hard and by imposing death upon them. It is all God’s fault. We say it somewhat more softly by seeing ourselves as sinners because the man and the woman originally sinned and fell out of God’s favor. Nonetheless, we are all lost and in need of salvation.”

“Yes, Jo,” I said, “That’s what I mean by escapist theology. If I believe this way, even my being a sinner is not my fault. Even so, if I want to escape death, I have to try to figure out what to do to make sure I am saved. I’ve already figured out how to escape being responsible for my life. I just blame whatever happens on something or somebody else. Being saved is another matter.”

Jo stood up. “I have to go now, but I’m not through with this discussion.”

“Neither am I, Jo,” I assured him. “I want you to come back soon so we can discuss it further. I need to say more about an alternative theology that comes from the other interpretation of the Garden of Eden story about which we have been talking – a theology that encourages and enables me to be the responsible person I am created to be, and that does not see death as an enemy.”

I don’t think it will be long before Jo comes back to talk with me.