



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Re: The Gospel

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I am compelled to write this paper. I am compelled to write this paper now. I don't know why, and why now, nor do I know how I will feel about it when I finish writing it. I certainly don't know how you will feel about it when you read it. That's the risk I take.

It was going to be No. 3 of the 1996 series of Burney's paper, but it won't wait. I don't know why it won't wait. I do know that it is the product of a struggle that has been going on in me for a long time – maybe even all the way back to my teen years.

My struggle centers in the issue of what the Gospel lived, taught, and preached by our Lord Jesus Christ really is. Is it really about being lost in sin; about Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross so that my sins are washed away; about getting me saved; about getting me to heaven? Is it about my future?

Frequently quoted Scripture passages certainly seem to support the belief that the core message of the Gospel is about being saved. I cite a few of them:

John 3: 16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Acts 16: 31 – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

I Timothy 1: 15 – “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

John 11: 25 – “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

Matthew 28: 19 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”

These, and so many other Scripture passages, seem to make it clear that the Gospel is about being saved – for time and eternity – eternity being interpreted as a future state of being involving heaven and hell. I've heard and preached this message all my life. And I wonder if, in a very subtle way, I have been led down the garden path.

Am I mistaken? Doesn't the message invite me to be concerned about my salvation? Doesn't it invite me to take the necessary steps to assure that I am preserved – kept alive – for all eternity? Doesn't it invite me to focus on making sure I get the reward of heaven (eternal life), after I die?

After I die? The focus is on the future – on avoiding hell and gaining heaven. On making sure that I survive (keep my identity), even after death. Isn't it?

That's where the problem is for me. That part about making sure that I survive, now, and/or after I die. That's what gives me so much trouble. Is it the good news of the

Gospel? Is it the reason for Jesus' death on the cross? Did he die to make sure that I could – would – survive, even after the grave? Is that the core message of the Gospel?

The possible meanings of other passages of Scripture leave me to raise these questions:

Matthew 16: 25 – Jesus said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Or more familiarly, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Or, as this text is often quoted, “The way to save your life is to lose it.” But, the text says that if I lose my life to save it, I lose it. A real dilemma, isn't it?

I remember listening to a sermon on this text. The preacher quoted the full text and then repeated it with pulpit-pounding emphasis, “If you want to save your life, the way to do it is to lose it.” In the whole sermon, the preacher proclaimed the importance of saving your life and underscored what his hearers must do to assure that they would, indeed, save their lives. This he proclaimed as the Gospel. Not once did he go back to the first part of the text to point out that, if one's motive is to save one's life, the inevitable outcome is to lose it. He didn't seem to see that trying to save my life – even by losing it – just doesn't work.

It seems to me that, if I take Jesus' words seriously, I cease to do anything to save my life. To try to save my life isn't my task, nor is it my proper goal in life.

But the message of salvation (The Gospel!) as I most often hear it urges me to take the proper steps to avoid hell and gain heaven. How do I reconcile this message with that of Jesus' words about saving and losing my life? I can't. Not unless I change what I mean about salvation. Can I – and should I – make a change? If so, to what? Just what is the Gospel?

My search for the answer in scripture takes me back to the second and third chapters of Genesis.

The story is very familiar. God had instructed the man and the woman, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Gen. 2:16-17) Did God mean, “I will punish you with death?”

I paraphrase and interpret. Having given the man and the woman life, God instructed them, “I have given you life. I have provided everything you need to live fully. I want you to experience that fullness. However, I warn you that, if you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, (try to get our preserve your life) you will die.”

Or, a wilder paraphrase, God said, “I have given you life, and all you need is to live it fully. You must decide whether or not to accept and act on my gift. However, because I love you without any reservations, I also give you a warning. If you decide against accepting my gift, and also decide that your primary task is to see that you live, and you try to do so by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be unable to do so. Instead, you will die.” Notice the wording – not “I will punish you with death,” but, “The consequence of your decision and action will be your death.”

Then I paraphrase and interpret Genesis 3 as if it were I in the Garden. I say to myself, “I really like this life, and I must make sure that I will always have it (keep my life). True, God has told me that making sure isn’t my task. If I take it on by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I will die.”

I look at the tree. It is beautiful. I walk around it to see it on all sides. I see that its fruit is good for food. If I eat of its fruit, I will know all things. I’ll be wise. Wise enough to be able to make sure that I keep this good life. Why should I leave preserving of my life in God’s hands? Or in anyone’s hands except my own? To do so feels risky. I am tempted. I am sorely tempted.

So, I decide. I’m not going to risk trusting God, or anybody, to save my life – to protect me – to preserve my being. I will take that task on as my first priority. I eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

What a surprise I get! I discover that I can’t protect myself. All of a sudden, I see that I am vulnerable. My life is in danger. Nothing that I do makes me feel secure. Wise though I am, I can’t figure out anything to do to make sure I won’t die. I am doomed to a life of anxiety and fear lest I lose my life. What must I do to be saved?

Could God be saying, “I have given you life. If you deny that you have life and try to gain it, or, if you insist on trying to keep and preserve it, you lose it. Instead, I invite you to live it. Use it. Use it up. Enjoy it. That’s why I gave it to you. Don’t try to cling to it and preserve it. You won’t succeed.”

Indeed, could this be the Gospel?

Or is the Gospel really about God having provided the means, through Jesus Christ, for me to make sure I preserve my life for time and eternity.

Insofar as I can tell, the messages of the Bible routinely center in instructions and guidelines to enable me to live effectively – here and now – as a child of God. They aren’t about gaining heaven or avoiding hell.

The Ten Commandments are a case in point. “You shall not ...” they say. I know, both from experience and from observation, that to ignore those directives is to have a miserable life.

Or, the oft-quoted Micah 6:8. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” I don’t know a better guideline for living.

Or, I can cite any part of the Sermon on the Mount – or the Parables told by Jesus – or any teaching of Jesus for that matter. I can also quote Paul’s writings to the Churches. Wherever I read, the Bible instructs me about how to live this life as a child of God. Certainly Jesus showed me by his manner of living.

Remember the lawyer who stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25)

And Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:26-27)

And Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:28)

“Do this and you will live.” The principles quoted by the lawyer are the core of the Law, as both he and Jesus knew. Certainly Jesus knew and practiced them, and taught them to his disciples and to any who heard his teachings. At no point did he set as his priority to save his own life – not even when he was being tried, convicted, and crucified. If I understand him at all, he already had his life. God had given it to him. He wasn’t seeking salvation. He was already saved, and living as one who was saved and knew it.

If this is true of Jesus, what does it say to the question, “What is the Gospel?” Maybe it is the good news about what I do with the life God has already given me. Maybe it is about whether or not I decide to entrust my life to God and live the principles, as Jesus did.

It is as if I am a guest at a great banquet, with everything for my comfort and well-being provided – everything I could possibly need. Only it isn’t just for one meal. It is for all my life.

But I refuse to believe that I am a guest at this great banquet. Instead, I act as if it is not true. I spend much time and energy – pretty much all my time and energy – trying to get the food that I need to live. The object of each of my days is to get that food. I must save myself.

Though I manage to stay alive, I am not as successful as I think I need to be. I fail to get all the food that I need, must less get a surplus. When I do get a surplus, I hoard it, even though people around me are hungry. Often, I am hungry, too, or fear I am going to be. I can’t help the others get food. Nor can I share mine, since I don’t believe there is

enough for everyone. I'm not going to risk losing my life. I won't let anything interfere with my efforts to make sure I have enough food to sustain me.

But no matter how hard I try, I never believe I have enough. I fear that I will just get hungrier and hungrier, and more isolated. No one is going to come forward to help me. I can't expect that to happen.

And all the time, I am surrounded by all that I could possibly need to have a rich and satisfying life. I am a guest at a great banquet and am for all my life. So are all the others.

This is the end of the picture. In it, I sought and did not allow myself to find what God has already given me. I can't save my life. I can live it fully. This, it strikes me, is good news, indeed.

It appears to me that, in all of creation, only human beings are preoccupied with trying to make sure to keep identity even beyond the grave. Only human beings take on the responsibility of trying to make sure to get and keep the life God has already given. I observe nature. I see no evidence that suggests that a single animal, plant, insect, or anything having life is preoccupied with saving itself beyond death. Only human beings. All other life forms, it seems, focus on living, growing, and bearing fruit. They go about being themselves. They feast at the great banquet.

You remember the parable of the pounds. Two risked losing the pounds that had been entrusted to them. One took no risk and brought the pound back to the owner, unused – only to discover that, in trying to save the pound given him, he had lost it. If I focus on saving my life, I lose it.

What must I do to be saved? Nothing. Why should I focus on saving my life? I am already saved. God has taken care of that.

What, then, do I do with those salvation Scriptures – “God gave his son...so that I, believing, may have eternal life.” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,” “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” – all the scriptures that seem to speak to the subject of saving my life. Of course, I can interpret them as urging me to take the steps indicated to save my life for time and eternity.

Suppose, however, that I interpret them in terms of already having my life and living it fully each day – here and now. Suppose they are describing the great banquet already prepared for me. Suppose the Gospel is that God, through Jesus, the Christ, has given me a full and joyous life that cannot be taken from me unless I throw it away by deciding against living it. Suppose I trust the Word of the Lord and decide to live this life in keeping with the principles I find throughout Scripture, and in the life and teachings of Jesus.

If I do, the punishment of hell and the reward of heaven cease to be issues. I have no need to be anxious and fearful about surviving, or keeping my identity even after death. All that is in God's capable hands.

My task – if I see it as a task – is to love God, and my neighbor as myself.

If this is the Gospel, then why did Jesus die? Given the Biblical attention to the cross and resurrection, I have to try to answer the question.

Why did Jesus die on the cross? Because human beings had – and have – decided against being guests at the great banquet table of life, and are trying to make sure they save themselves. Jesus is a threat to that effort – such a threat, we believe, that he must be removed. So, let's kill him. And we did.

Only Jesus did not stay dead – not the life Jesus lived, nor the message he brought. Jesus is alive, and, because he is alive, I, too, can be alive if I choose to be. The amazing reality is that I can't save my life, but I can lose it.

I've almost finished writing this paper, and, as I said at the beginning, I'm not sure how I feel about it, or why I feel so compelled to write it. I think I will summarize what I have written.

It appears to me that the Gospel, as it is most commonly understood, seems to center in getting saved – believing the right things and making the right professions to assure survival. Many proclamations of the Gospel put subtle and insistent pressure on the hearers to take the right steps to gain the reward of heaven and avoid the punishment of hell.

However, Jesus quoted as saying, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25)

To try to save my life isn't my task. Living it fully is. That's when I find out what it means to be alive.

My survival isn't the issue.

The invitation of the Gospel is to become like Jesus – to live like Jesus today. When I allow myself to really believe that Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), I don't worry about getting saved. I am saved. I am free to love myself, and my neighbor as myself. I am free to love my enemies; do good to those who abuse me; give a cup of cold water to a thirsty person; be kind, and merciful, and forgiving. I am free to experience all that it means to be a child of God in the world today. I feast at the banquet table God has provided, and share with all who cross my path. I bear witness to the truth as I have come to know it. I am a child of God.

This, I believe, is the Gospel.

So you, my readers, may say, “What you have written isn’t any different from what you have been writing all the time.” And I suppose it isn’t. Only, this time, I am a little more explicit in saying that the Gospel as I once believed it was leading me down the garden path. While losing my life now for Jesus’ sake may result in heaven for me after I die, and does result in my experiencing the fullness of life while I live, I remind myself that neither heaven nor gaining my life now is my reason for losing my life for Jesus’ sake. Using up my life for Jesus’ sake is my response in gratitude to God who gave it to me in the first place.

This is the Gospel.