



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Accountable to God???

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No question about it. Jo was ready to talk again. “I’m confused,” he said. “What is the problem about eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?”

“That makes two of us, Jo,” I responded. “Unconfuse me by telling me what you mean by that question.”

“You keep telling me,” Jo replied, “that when I decide to eat the fruit of that Tree, I have chosen against relationship with God, and so I have chosen death instead of life. Why is it death? Why is choosing to eat het fruit such a bad decision?”

I had to ponder Jo’s questions. I thought it had been pretty clear with him about what was involved. And maybe I had been up to a point, but, as I thought about it, I realized that I hadn’t been at all clear about the “Why?” of it.

Why does choosing to and eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil mean death instead of life? How is it a choice against relationship with God?

“Jo,” I said, “You challenge me, and I’m glad. You make me think, and that’s good. You really push me to be clear with myself, and I want to be.”

OK,” Jo responded, “only don’t leave me out while you are sorting it out for yourself.”

“Don’t worry, Jo,” I answered. “I need you to keep pressing me with your questions and comments. However, to address the issues you raise, I have to talk more about the Garden of Eden story even at the risk of seeming to be repetitious.”

“Be repetitious, then,” Jo said. “I don’t have it straight yet anyway.”

”The Garden of Eden story,” I said. “A typical interpretation is that the man and the woman disobeyed God when they ate the forbidden fruit, and that, according to what God had said, death was their punishment. Only they didn’t die. They were thrown out of the Garden.”

“In other words, Jo,” I continued, “they had to answer to God for their disobedience. They were accountable to God as, according to this interpretation, all people have been ever since. This is the source of the concept of ‘original sin’ that is central to our Fall-Redemption Theology.”

“Fall-Redemption Theology?” Jo questioned. “What do you mean by Fall-Redemption Theology?”

“Let me personalize my response, Jo,” I replied. “God commands me not to eat the forbidden fruit (anything God commands me not to do), and tells me what God will do if I disobey. So I disobey God’s command. That is, as we usually say it, I fall from

grace. God holds me to account – or else.”

“Having disobeyed God’s expressed command, I am a fallen person. I am a sinner. More than that, because the first man and the first woman sinned (disobeyed), all of us are born in sin and in need of redemption.”

“Born in sin, I can’t redeem myself. I can’t get back into God’s good favor – not on my own. I have to accept God’s action through Jesus Christ to be redeemed. I am accountable to God. I am answerable to God. I am at God’s mercy. When I realize all this, I am distraught and afraid and anxious. I condemn myself. I discount myself. I devalue myself. I plead for God to save me. And I worry that, no matter what I do or say, I may not have succeeded in getting back into God’s good favor.”

“All that sounds very familiar,” Jo said, “But what does it have to do with why I shouldn’t eat of the forbidden fruit?”

Good for Jo. Again he called me to account. “All right, Jo. I’ll go back to the Garden of Eden story. In that story – according to this interpretation – the man and the woman deliberately ate of the forbidden fruit. Things happened. Their eyes were opened. They saw that they were naked (unprotected). They tried to protect themselves in several ways, the most significant one being that they denied their own responsibility and blamed God for their predicament. They saw it that they were accountable to God, not that they had any responsibility for what happened to them. They disobeyed God. They sinned. God was angry. God punished them. They were the poor victims. Oh my! Oh my!”

“But why,” Jo asked, “can’t I eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? It looks pretty attractive. Isn’t it desirable to try to know as much as you possibly can?”

“Of course it is, Jo,” I said. “The more you know and understand, the better you are equipped to cope with whatever life brings. Suppose we look at another interpretation of the Garden of Eden story.”

“Another interpretation?” Jo challenged. “There can be another interpretation?”

I let Jo ponder his own question. “How about it, Jo? Can there be another interpretation?”

Clearly, Jo continued to feel confused and was afraid to commit himself. “Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know. How can I know?”

“Let’s give it a try,” I said.

“OK,” Jo replied, but it was a very hesitant OK. “Is it really safe to think about other interpretations of Scripture?”

“Is it, Jo?” I turned his question back to him.

Jo was silent for several minutes. Finally he said, “I don’t know if it is safe or not, but I want to give it a try.”

“All right, Jo,” I said. “I’ll try to retell the story. Suppose we start with the premise that God had, indeed, created humans in God’s image – OK, valuable – certainly not sinners nor fallen – and equipped to experience the fullness of the life God had breathed into them – God’s own people whom God loved without any restrictions at all. (This is the basis of the Grace Theology that I believe).

“Now suppose that God created a dwelling place for the people in God’s own image in which they had everything they need for them to have a full and satisfying life.

“Notice how I said that. ‘Everything they needed to have a full and satisfying life’ I didn’t say that they were given that life. They weren’t just receivers. They were participants. They were responsible deciders. They would decide how to use what they had been given, and why.”

“Wait a minute,” Jo interrupted, “you’re going too fast for me. What do you mean ‘responsible deciders’?”

“Good question, Jo,” I said. “Suppose that, when God gives me everything I need, the most significant and important of those gifts is for me to be a decider and for me to be responsible for the outcome of my actions implementing those decisions. In other words, if that is the case, I am a responsible decider.

“God is wise enough, and God loves me enough, to have created me a responsible decider. That means, among other things, that I am not accountable to God, but I am accountable to me.”

“Not accountable to God,” Jo exclaimed. “Of course I’m accountable to God. I’ve known that all my life. That’s the big deal – to live so that God is pleased and so that God will grant me eternal life.”

“Jo, think about it,” I said. “Suppose that God, from the beginning, has already given me everything I need to have eternal life (a fulfilled and satisfying life here and now). And suppose that I decide that God hasn’t given me eternal life, but that I must spend this life trying to gain it. In other words, it is as if I am dead, and I believe I must use my resources (knowledge and wisdom) to gain my life. Only I can’t be wise enough, or get enough power, or accumulate enough to gain and keep my life.”

“You mean,” Jo said, “that, when I choose to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which you said meant “all knowledge”, I have chosen to believe that God has not given me life to experience and enjoy, and that I have to use my

resources – my knowledge of Good and Evil – to obtain life? And that I am not accountable to God in order to get it?”

“You went a step too far, Jo,” I pointed out. “When I choose to eat the ‘forbidden fruit’, my very attitude, as well as my belief, tells me I am accountable to God. It means that I have disobeyed God and God will punish me if I can’t figure out some way to get around God’s displeasure and anger. That typical interpretation of the Garden of Eden story really stays with us, doesn’t it?”

“Isn’t that the way it is,” Jo asked? “God is God. God is sovereign. I am supposed to obey God. If I don’t, I’m in trouble with God. I am accountable to God. God can bar me from heaven and send me to hell.”

“God is sovereign, and God can do that, Jo,” I replied. “But suppose God doesn’t do it that way. Suppose God says, ‘I have given you life. I have made you responsible to yourself for what you do with it. I have released you from accountability to me. I have given you instructions to guide you so that you can experience the completeness of the life I have given you. I have done this so that you live out being in my image – so that you can know that you are not a slave, or a poor victim fearing for your very life.’”

“God would do that for me? God would give me that much freedom?” Clearly Jo was having some trouble taking in what I had said. I could understand that, for nothing much in our experience encourages us to think and believe in this way.

“Yes, Jo,” I suggested. “I believe God cares that much and has given each of us that much freedom. Maybe I can draw a parallel that will help you to understand.”

“Do that,” Jo said. “Draw a parallel. I need something to help me let what you are saying make sense to me.”

“Jo,” I said, “As you know, I am a parent. Early on, my wife and I decided what we believed the role and responsibility of parenting really was. In a nutshell, we believed that our task was to provide for and train our children so that, when they became adults, they were equipped to take on the full responsibilities of their lives, and to be accountable to themselves – their own values and their own beliefs – more than to anything or anybody else. We wanted them to decide for themselves, and to live out those decisions responsibly. We didn’t want them to be accountable to us. We certainly didn’t want them to be accountable to us for their security and well-being. We didn’t want to cripple them in such a way.

“Sometimes, when we were a bit anxious or fearful for them, it was a temptation to try to control them by giving and withholding approval. Maybe we even did that sometimes, even though we knew it was not wise. Sure, when they were children, we exercised considerable control over them. But it was always our intention to provide instruction and guidance so that they were equipped to live free and independent lives. That meant, among other things, that we could not, and would not, hold them accountable

to us – nor allow them the doubtful luxury of being able to shift blame over to us for the result of what they themselves decided and did.

“How well did we succeed in our endeavors? I don’t know that I can answer that. I just know that we were clear with ourselves all along that it was highly important not to tie them to us with our demands and requirements of them. To do so would destroy them, not give them life.”

Jo was silent for a long time. Then he said, “I wish my parents had had those same goals for me.”

“If they didn’t, I wish they had too, Jo,” I responded, “And I really believe that God has that goal in mind for all God’s children, including you and me. Further, I believe this is what the Bible teaches us about God.”

“What the Bible teaches us about God!” Jo echoed my words. “There’s an awful lot in the Bible about God commanding, and God being angry; and God punishing. How can you say that God doesn’t hold us accountable to God? The Bible is full of stories of people having to answer to God.”

“Yes, Jo, that’s true,” I said. “That is, it’s true if it is the interpretation I give the stories.”

“It’s true all right,” Jo muttered. “The words are pretty plain.

“Of course they are, Jo,” I replied, “if I choose that interpretation. But if I believe that God has created me a free and independent – and responsible – person whom God loves unconditionally, I also believe God frees me from accountability to God so that I am fully accountable to myself.”

“Since I believe as I do, I interpret the Garden of Eden story (and the other Bible stories) accordingly. God said, ‘You are free to choose and do whatever you will, including ignoring all that I have made it possible for you to know (eat the fruit, that is). You are not free to avoid the consequences of your own decisions and actions. I love you too much to hem you in or cripple you in that way, and I certainly love you too much to make you accountable to me instead of to yourself.’ God won’t let me escape being responsible for myself to myself. If God did, I would die.”

“You make a strong case,” Jo said. “What you are saying is that I am a responsible decider. Being that, I am not accountable to God. I am accountable to myself. I am if I really want to know what it means for this life – my here and now – to be satisfying and fulfilling.”

“Yes, Jo,” I said. “You have summarized what I have said quite accurately.”

Jo seemed pleased, but I could tell that he wasn’t satisfied yet. “Go on, Jo, say

what you are thinking.”

Jo hesitated. Then he said, “I don’t know if I can. What you’ve said sounds like it is just between you and God. What about other people? What about the influence you have on them? Don’t they have to be taken into account?”

“Of course, they do, Jo,” I replied, “and I need to try to respond to your questions. I will the next time we talk, if you want. I am keenly aware that we never say all that could be said about the issues we are discussing. We don’t ever really finish a conversation. We just run out of time and have to stop until we have another opportunity to talk. You will be back, won’t you?”

I don’t have to ask Jo that question. I already knew his answer.