

two such articles, but there are many others. Each reader will find his or her own favourite passages and articles.

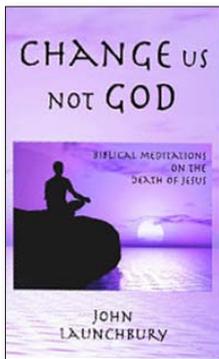
A Word for the Ambassadors for Christ is a delightful volume for casual yet inspiring reading. It would make a lovely gift. The author's expo-

sitional insights will appeal to students at all levels, and his lucid, readable style will ensure that the book is accessible and enjoyed by readers of all backgrounds. The book, available from the Christadelphian Scripture Study Service, is heartily recommended.

Review

An easy, yet uneasy, read

Reg Carr



***Change Us, Not God—
Biblical meditations on
the death of Jesus.***

**John Launchbury, WCF
Publishing, 2009.**

200 pages, paperback.

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**Available from
the Williamsburg
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price \$11.95.**

THERE ARE many valuable and uplifting aspects to this book. The author writes in a clear and direct style and, given that he is dealing with some of the most difficult (and controversial) elements of Christian belief, he is to be complimented on his ability to 'keep things simple'. It really is a refreshing change to see such a complex issue as the Atonement handled in such an easily accessible manner.

Easy reading

Change Us, Not God is clearly the product of many years of careful thought and preparation. Readers of the *Christadelphian Tidings* will recognise the substance of the book as the reworking of a series of articles which first appeared in that North American magazine during 2006. Although the original material has been developed and supplemented, the author has still managed to present his ideas in bite-sized chapters, mostly on single aspects of this all-important subject, and this serves greatly to enhance the comprehensibility of his text.

There are twenty-six chapters, covering the principal elements of the death, resurrection and

saving work of Christ. With chapters on topics such as "Atonement theories", "Blood sacrifice", "Covering", "Righteousness and sin", "Humanity of Jesus", "Jesus as mediator", "Practical intercession" and "Jesus as priest", the book represents a concerted effort to provide an overview of the doctrine that lies right at the heart of the Christian faith.

Highlights of the book include an excellent chapter on "Mercy, not appeasement", where some interesting exposition of the various Greek words associated with the term 'propitiation' adds worthwhile substance to the reasons for rejecting the orthodox view of the Atonement. A sequence of chapters on "Humanity of Jesus", "Temptations in life" and "In the image of God" contributes some really helpful insights into the life of the Lord Jesus. "Jesus as mediator", "Jesus as priest", "Book of life" and "Confidence in the judgment" all contain interesting points well made, including the unusual (but hard-to-refute) idea that Christ is God's mediator to us, rather than ours to God. There is a great deal to enjoy, and to benefit from, in these pages.

Compliments apart, however, it has also to be said that the book, despite its attractive appearance and its readability, turns out on a closer scrutiny to be something of a proverbial 'curate's egg'—excellent in parts, but less than good in others.

The basic premise

There is a great deal of truth in the author's basic premise, that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus was designed by God as a powerful appeal to men and women to change their outlook and to mend their sinful ways. 'Change us, not God' is the author's mantra as he makes a sustained effort to exclude from our understanding of the Atonement every

element other than God's love and His readiness to forgive on the basis of our willingness to be affected and changed by the perfect example of His Son.

There can be no doubt that the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus—at the end of his perfect life—was intended by God to act as a powerful moral incentive for bringing about change in His erring creatures; and, in that, the author is right to contrast this basic premise with some of the wildly erroneous 'explanations' of the Atonement. The death of Jesus is not about the appeasement of an angry God; and the author easily refutes, for example, Origen's third-century 'ransom' theory, in which the life of Jesus is said to have been offered by God to the Devil as the price for buying back our lives, forfeited by sin. Summarily dismissed, also, is the twelfth-century 'substitution' (or 'penal') theory of Aquinas, in which our *legal* debt to God is said to have been cancelled by Jesus, with his death being accepted by God in place of ours—a 'transaction' by which God's honour is somehow said to be 'satisfied'.

Such theories, as the author rightly argues, are deeply flawed, on several grounds. It would be unjust of God, for example, to punish the innocent in place of the guilty; if the death of Jesus was a legal transaction by which he paid the penalty instead of us, then he should have remained dead; if our debt has been paid by Jesus, then there ought to be no need for us to seek forgiveness: salvation ought to be universal and unconditional (which it plainly is not); and so on. All this is well argued by Brother Launchbury, and the scene seems set for a helpful analysis of the true meaning of the Atonement.

So far, so good?

Yet no sooner has the author further defined his basic premise ('Change us, not God') to signify that the salvation of mankind from sin is *our* problem, not God's, than the reviewer begins to feel some uneasiness at what the author is saying. But the book is so enjoyable to read that it is hard, at first, to identify the source of the discomfort. Is our sinfulness really our problem alone, and not God's also? Is it really a balanced view of the Atonement to stress two things only—God's love and our need for personal change—to *the exclusion of all other considerations*, whether Divine or human?

Perhaps, as Christadelphians, we may have wondered quite what the author meant, early on in the book, by saying that when he was "learn-

ing the gospel" he found no explanation of the death of Christ that seemed to have "a really solid foundation" (p. 2). And, given that the author was brought up in a Christadelphian context, we may also have felt vaguely puzzled when he said that "as a young Christian" he found the substitutionary theory of the Atonement "an explanation of the process of salvation that made some sense [to him]" (p. 10). We may also have lifted just half an eyebrow when he stated (p. 14) that "for many years" he had thought the death of Christ involved some kind of transaction with God. But the penny begins at last to drop when he quite disarmingly gives a name to his 'new' approach, calling it 'the moral interpretation', and crediting it, briefly, to the twelfth-century French monk and religious philosopher Peter Abelard (p. 15).

The main issue clarified

Like Abelard, the author believes that "the problem of salvation is not in heaven with God—the real problem is here with us; it is with me and with you . . . God doesn't need to change *His* situation. It is *our* hearts and minds that need to be different" (p. 17). Here then, at last, the author makes his position clear, and the reader can either follow or take issue with the thesis that is built on this foundational statement.

The reviewer, however, takes issue with both the premise and the thesis. For, surely, "the problem of salvation" is not exclusively a human problem. Granted, it was Adam and Eve who first brought the problem of sin into the world. But in no sense can it be said that this did not create a problem for God as well as for man. If the problem had not been shared with God—if the problem had been ours, solely (as Brother Launchbury insists, with Abelard)—then the problem would have remained unsolved until this day. Instead of which, we see that God's plan of salvation was conceived and implemented by Him, not simply to overcome our helplessness, but also to put right, ultimately, what had 'gone wrong' with His creation. So why not recognise that God Himself, in His mercy, has solved both our problem and His?

Sufficient reasons for the death of Christ?

But the author is determined to press his point; and he seeks to do so by proposing that there were only two reasons for the death of Christ, the first being the need to change us, and the second being the need to perfect Jesus himself. But are these two reasons really sufficient on their own

to define the Atonement? Is it really possible to boil down the explanation of the death of Christ to these two issues alone? And if not, just where does the author's otherwise attractive thesis fail to hold water?

As a means of pursuing answers to these important questions, the reviewer offers the following personal observations on the author's presentation of the 'moral theory' thesis:

1 The first four chapters are devoted to knocking down false theories of the Atonement, and the author is especially dismissive of those which involve some kind of 'transaction' designed to change things in heaven. Yet it is puzzling to note that at no time, either in these chapters or elsewhere in the book, does he mention (let alone offer any support for) the Christadelphian view of the Atonement, in which the Lord Jesus suffers a representative death (as one of us), and where we are called on to believe in the power of Christ's sacrifice as a condition of having our sins forgiven and being saved from eternal death. This lack of reference to our community's distinctive view of the death of Christ is worrying, to say the least.

2 In spending so much effort arguing against the view that the death of Christ 'solves' God's problem through some kind of 'transaction', the author gives the impression of 'tilting at windmills', or at least of knocking down targets which hardly deserve such persistent attention. But it is precisely this monochrome approach that enables him to make a number of statements about the 'moral power' of Christ's death that appear to be both reasonable and Scriptural, even though these are statements which, on closer analysis, are actually quite one-sided in their failure to represent other key aspects of the death of Jesus. Here, for illustration, are a number of these statements, with a commentary by the reviewer, which readers should weigh very carefully for themselves:

- **pp. 18-19:** The author concludes from Colossians 1:21-23 that "whatever the death of Christ accomplishes, it does so only with our participation". [*Reviewer's comment:* This is true; but only up to a point. The death of Christ actually accomplished a great deal over and above our personal association with it (see next comment). To make the death of Christ depend for its success on our involvement with it is a

serious limitation on what the Lord Jesus achieved by his sacrifice.]

- **p. 20:** "Without our response and participation, the death of Christ is irrelevant and useless". [*Reviewer:* This is an overstatement, and goes much too far in a single direction. Whether any of us responds personally to the death of Christ or not, the Lord's sacrifice was far from 'useless'. It still achieved many important outcomes, such as: proving human wickedness (in the killing of a perfect man); demonstrating the justice and the righteousness of God (in raising a perfect man to eternal life); and enabling the Lord Jesus to obtain everlasting life for himself (which he could only do by dying).]
- **pp. 20-21:** "The actual physical death of Christ released no metaphysical principle of salvation . . . [no] change took place as far as God was concerned". [*Reviewer:* To say, in effect, that 'nothing changed' for God because of the crucifixion is surely going too far in pursuing the single basic premise of the book. The death of Jesus actually *changed many things*, both in heaven and on earth: God's relationship with men was altered; the permanent forgiveness of sins was introduced into the world; the curse made in Eden was reversed; and God proved—conclusively—that He "so loved the world . . .".]
- **p. 21:** ". . . the perfecting of Christ . . . may be an even more challenging idea . . . but it turns out to be a critical dimension of Golgotha". [*Reviewer:* Such an idea ought not to be at all challenging for Christadelphians. It only becomes challenging when presented as one of the two sole reasons why Jesus died.]

A step too far?

The reviewer's uneasiness about the overemphasis on the moral premise 'Change us, not God', and the claim that Christ died for two reasons only (to change us, and to perfect himself), is increased by the reading of subsequent chapters. In "Bore our sins", "Resurrection" and "Blood sacrifice", Brother Launchbury argues not only against all the 'orthodox' (and erroneous) views of the Atonement, but also against any view of the death of Christ that places significance on the shedding of Christ's blood as a means by which the forgiveness of sins is achieved. The reviewer

will not be alone in seeing this argument as a step too far.

Brother Launchbury understands the blood of Christ as a token of Christ's perfect life, designed to influence us morally, rather than as the emblem of his sacrificial death, by means of which our sins can be remitted. For this reason, he argues against the standard exposition of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 as a type of the Lord Jesus. In support of this he claims that God's 'laying' of sins on the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:6 has no direct reference back to the scapegoat ritual. Consistent with his basic premise, the author claims that the significance of the scapegoat ritual was not 'No goat, no forgiveness', but that it was "the only way God could convey to the people of the time the seriousness of sin" (p. 27). But this is a misunderstanding of the true purpose of the scapegoat ritual, which was meant, above all, to be seen as *a lesson in the availability of Divine forgiveness through the medium of sacrifice*. It was the Mosaic Law's equivalent of what the psalmist was later inspired to say; that God, in His mercy, would find a way to ensure that men could be permanently forgiven: "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12).

Furthermore, the author's exposition of Isaiah 53:6 is also flawed. He points out (p. 27) that the Hebrew word *paga* (translated "laid", in the phrase "the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all") is not the same as the word used when Aaron 'laid' his hands on the head of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21, and claims that the expression in Isaiah should be translated "*encounter*"—the idea being that the Lord Jesus 'encountered' human sinfulness rather than having actual collective sins figuratively 'laid' on his head as the scapegoat did. But there are two deficiencies in this exposition: first, the grammar of Isaiah 53:6 requires *paga* to be understood as *something that God does* (i.e. 'causes our sins to meet, or be laid' on the head of Jesus), rather than *something that God causes Jesus to do* (as Brother Launchbury mistakenly suggests). And secondly, just a few verses on from Isaiah 53:6 (in verse 12 of the same Suffering Servant passage), it is written of Messiah that he "bare the sin of many". The Hebrew word translated "bare" here (*nasa*) is identical to the word used about the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:22 ("the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities"), giving us solid reason to conclude that Jesus, on the Cross, like the scapegoat, carried away for ever the sins that God had given him to bear. It is simply not

good enough for the author to seek, on the basis of faulty exposition, to change a key function of the Lord's sacrifice.

But Brother Launchbury persists, and continues by trying to prove a distinction between the rite of the scapegoat and the killing of Jesus at Golgotha. The former, he claims, was "an act of righteousness" (with Aaron doing as God commanded him), while the latter was "an act of sin". What is overlooked, however, is the fact that the death of Jesus was, according to the clear teaching of Scripture, planned and designed *by God Himself*; Peter, for example, says that Jesus was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). It was God Himself, not those who actually put Jesus to death, Who was fulfilling the type of the scapegoat when, as Isaiah plainly tells us, He "laid on him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all". Like Aaron, in type, with the two goats (one of which was sacrificed and the other let free), it was the Father Himself, with His willing Son, who made Golgotha the necessary preliminary to the banishment of our sins into the wilderness of oblivion.

Concluding thoughts

There is more—much more—that could be said about the weaknesses of Brother Launchbury's thesis. His chapter on "Covering" is a serious disappointment, with the work of Jesus being described as "to give us courage, to have us stand up", rather than to bring us forgiveness, and with very little being said about the true meaning of 'covering' in the Old Testament (the temporary forgiveness of sin which looked forward, albeit imperfectly, to the permanent forgiveness now available through Christ's complete sacrifice). The chapter on "Righteousness and sin" promises much, but ends up seeming to make the believer the arbiter of what is sin and what is not. "The salvation process" is an inadequate account of how God saves, with the all-important step of baptism receiving surprisingly scant attention. And the "Afterword" could be said to undermine the whole thesis of the book, since the author there belatedly introduces two additional reasons for the death of Jesus, namely: ". . . he died as a witness to us" (p. 180) and "he died to give up his flesh" (p. 181).

With so much more that ought to have been said about the many important reasons for the death of the Lord Jesus, it becomes all the more evident that, in limiting himself to the few 'moral influence' elements of the Atonement, Brother

Launchbury has given us an incomplete, and therefore an unbalanced, picture of this central teaching of the Christian gospel. This is most unfortunate, for in the final analysis the book, in spite of its many valuable insights, ends up

exemplifying what happens when a single aspect of a Biblical truth is taken and magnified to the exclusion of others: the truth becomes blurred, and the beauty of the complete picture is all the harder to see.