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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Gospel Meaning of the Secular: Reflections on Hebrews 13:10-13

by L. Paul Trudinger

Professor Trudinger here presents another of his brief, suggestive studies of New Testament passages.

Under the impact of secularization, some Biblical theologians gave attention to interpreting the Bible's message according to canons of secular criticism and in categories which held wide secular currency. We had books like Paul Van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*,¹ which for many readers contained refreshing insights into the significance of the Bible's language and teaching. From the Biblical perspective, however, the whole enterprise was putting the cart before the horse. It is not that the Bible's over-arching viewpoint is opposed to the secular. Some theologians even argued that the process of secularization (though indeed not *secularism*) was the outcome of Biblical assertions about God's relationship to this world; that it was 'the fruit of the gospel'.² It is *this* world which 'God so loved that he gave his Son' (John 3:16), and in the incarnation 'the Word was made flesh', the 'most *secular* event of all time', as Karl Barth once put it.³ No, it is rather that secular norms do not determine the significance of the Gospel; the Gospel gives significance to this secular world. It is not, therefore, 'the secular meaning of the gospel' to which we should attend, but rather, 'the gospel meaning of the secular'!

235

Now if one were to suggest that of all the books in the New Testament, it is the Epistle to the Hebrews which makes the strongest case for, and sets out most clearly the theological and scriptural groundwork of, a '*this-worldly*' orientation to the Christian faith, it would seem at first glance to be an absurd claim. For this book seems weighted down by the intricacies of ancient rituals and the remote details of religious history. What can the shadowy figure of Melchizedek have to do with the real world of today? Of what interest is 'the blood of bulls and goats or the ashes of a heifer', or 'scarlet wool and hyssop' (Heb. 9:13, 19) to the busy, involved man or woman in the twentieth century? Yet, through all its minute and subtle comparisons and contrasts with the religious life of a far-gone past, this treatise is seeking to make clear the presence of Jesus in the real world of secular living.

¹ (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968)

² See, for example, Harvey G. Cox in *The Secular City*, and Colin W. Williams in *Faith in a Secular Age*.

³ In his Princeton lectures, 'Evangelical Theology', April, 1962.

Let us follow the author's train of thought with patience, one of his (her?)⁴ favourite virtues!

'We have an altar,' the writer says, 'from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat' (Heb. 13:10). A lot of fog has been created by misunderstanding (so I suggest) what the writer means by 'altar' here.⁵ Following Bishop Westcott many commentators have argued that the author is referring here to the Christian eucharist, which was closed to the non-Christian Jew. By this interpretation the Christian altar is *contrasted* with the Jewish altar; but this is *not*, I believe, the writer's intention. We need to read the words 'from-which-those-who-serve-the-tabernacle-have-no-right-to-eat', as a kind of long, spelled-out adjective describing the particular kind of sacrificial altar the author is speaking of. If we do this, we see that he is making as much a *comparison* as a contrast between the Christian and Jewish altars.

236

In the case of most Jewish ritual sacrifices, the priest, namely the 'one-who-served-the-tabernacle', identified himself (and the people) with the sacrifice by eating part of the sacrificial animal. There was, however, one major exception to this practice; one sacrifice which the priest was forbidden to eat: that of the Day of Atonement, the rituals for which are set out in Leviticus 16. This, then, was a sacrifice, an 'altar from which those who serve the tabernacle had no right to eat.' The writer is saying in effect: 'we Christians also have an "Atonement Day" sacrifice; namely Calvary.' From here the writer to the Hebrews goes on to show, in some part, the comparisons between the old atonement sacrifice and the new. His chief aim, however, is to show the radical difference between the two.

On the surface the similarities between the Jewish Day of Atonement rituals and Jesus' sacrifice seem to centre around the phrase 'outside the camp'. The ancient sacrifice for sin was taken 'outside the camp' and burned; Jesus, too, suffered 'outside the camp' and we must go to him 'outside the camp' (Heb. 13:13). To the Jew, however, the phrase 'outside the camp' had a decidedly distasteful meaning. It meant to be cut off from the security and salvation of the sacred community; it meant being an outcast, 'beyond the pale'. This was the place where

⁴ We do well to recall that a woman author (Priscilla) was suggested by no less a critic than Harnack. More recently, intriguingly rich arguments have been advanced by Josephine Massyngberde Ford in support of the book's authorship by Mary, the mother of our Lord. See 'The Mother of Jesus and the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Bible Today*, February, 1976.

⁵ See especially, Antony Snell, *New and Living Way* (London: The Faith Press, 1959), 159-160, and also his article 'We Have An Altar', in *The Reformed Theological Review*, 23, 1964, 16-23. See also Helmut Koester's seminal exegetical article, 'Outside the Camp' *The Harvard Theological Review*, 55, 1963, 299-315.

blasphemers and other grievous sinners were stoned to death.⁶ It is precisely in his use of the phrase 'outside the camp' that our author makes a subtle but most powerful contrast between the ancient Atonement Day rituals and the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. For the person appointed to take the body of the sacrificial animal 'outside the camp' made himself unholy, polluted, unsanctified, by doing so; he cut himself off from the sacred precincts of the camp. He therefore could not return into the sacred area until he had purified himself by ritual washings. Since he had been 'outside the camp' with the sacrificed body, he was tainted with the unholiness of the world.

Jesus, on the other hand, says this writer, '*in order to sanctify us*, went "outside the camp".' Then the passage calls on us to 'go forth unto him, outside the camp', never to return to the safety of the sacred place, for 'here we have no permanent place'. By contrast then, we are made clean, we are sanctified, not polluted, by leaving the sacred sanctuary and going outside the gate with Jesus. The 'holy of holies', the place of God's presence, is no longer within the sacred city; it is outside the gate, in the secular world, where and for which Christ died, and once thought of as the unholy place!

237

To strengthen and underscore the thrust of this contrast, the writer goes on to say that in ranging ourselves with Jesus 'outside the camp' we must also bear the abuse which was heaped on him. And what was the abuse he bore, the reproach of his accusers? That he was a blasphemer and an irreligious man? The contrast here, then, is not between true and false forms of religion, but between a religious, sanctuary-centred attitude and a faith which comes alive in the midst of the realities of the secular situation. Just as the event of our Lord's birth was secular, that is, concerned with *this* world ('the Word became *flesh*'), so the death of Jesus is not 'mystically religious, but the stark, secular fact of Golgotha'. Don Benedict, one of the founders of the East Harlem Parish, is reported to have said that one of the biggest problems facing us Christians today is not how to get more people into the Church, but how to get those who are in, *out* of it, and into the world as witnesses to the saving power of Jesus' death. 'Let us go out to him', says the writer to the Hebrews. Jesus' presence in the world is God's good word for this world: the Gospel meaning of the secular!

⁶ Leviticus 10:1-5; 24:14, 23.

⁷ Matthew 26:65.

Notices

We are sorry to record the death of Dr. William Hendriksen in January of this year at the age of 81. In 1962 the Tyndale Press took a step of faith in issuing the British edition of a book entitled *More than Conquerors* which had first been published twenty-two years previously in the USA. It was our first introduction to the work of this amazing commentator, and in our review in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY we commented that it offered 'a view of Revelation which is of considerable interest and attractiveness'. Meanwhile the author had not been idle and had commenced the production of a steady stream of full-length commentaries which bade fair to cover the whole of the New Testament — and all this amid a busy teaching and preaching ministry. Dr. Hendriksen's work was marked by a combination of careful exegesis and practical exposition, a balance not always found in commentaries, and his works have proved highly valuable to many students and expositors of the New Testament.

Our April number contained an account of the work of the distinguished German New Testament scholar, Prof. P. Stuhlmacher. Reference was made to his book *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, published in the USA by Fortress Press of Philadelphia. We regret that we omitted to inform our readers that a British edition of this book, with an introduction by Prof. James Barr was published by SPCK in 1979, and costs £2.95.